Sacred Influence: Iran's Use of Shi'a Pilgrimage to Shape Post-2003 Iraq

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Chapter 1: Historical Context and Theoretical Foundations

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Analysis of Iranian Influence in Iraq Post-2003

Chapter 4: Case Study of the *Arbaeen* Pilgrimage

Conclusion

Bibliography/References

Abstract

This research project examines Iran's use of religious pilgrimages, most notably the *Arbaeen* pilgrimage (a Shi'a religious pilgrimage marking the end of a 40-day mourning period for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of Prophet Muhammed, at Karbala), as a soft power tool to influence the Iraqi geo-political scene and the broader region. Grounded in Joseph Nye's theory of soft power and utilizing post-colonial discourse, this research suggests that Iran uses the shared Shi'a identity between the two countries, framing them through the theory of anti-colonialism and anti-Western imperialism, to further the interests of the Iranian state. This study uncovers Iran's multifaceted approach by utilizing qualitative methods such as document and discourse analysis, secondary and primary sources, and case studies. Iran's Funding of pilgrimage infrastructure, fostering clerical networks between Qom and Najaf seminaries, and promoting cultural solidarity through rituals commemorating Imam Hussein's martyrdom. The findings reveal that Iran has strategically positioned itself as a promoter of Islamic values in the region against Western encroachment. It also challenges the common belief that sectarian divisions in the Middle East are ancient or natural. Instead, it highlights that these divisions are politically constructed and strategically utilized by Iran and other international players. This research argues that these religious pilgrimages are not solely expressions of faith or spiritual devotion; but rather, they also serve as political tools used by states and groups to exert influence locally and globally. Contributing to existing scholarship on the intersection of religious pilgrimages and soft power, this study highlights the intersection between religion and statecraft. It offers insights into how Iran has maintained its regional hegemony, and contributes to the broader literature on soft power and Middle Eastern politics.

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<u>Introduction</u>

Context and background

Islamic holy sites have been a fundamental aspect of the religion for centuries, as they provide us with a glimpse into the history of Islamic civilization and the continuity of Islam in modern society. Most notably, Mecca and Medina, both located in Saudi Arabia, have been a central piece of this civilization as it is the holiest sites for Muslims, both from the majority Sunni sect and the minority Shi'a sect. However, cities located in modern-day Iraq hold essential significance to Shi'as, and they have been a subject of much debate in the Islamic community. A small subset of Sunni Muslims, known as Wahhabis, believe these sites are a source of disbelief and 'Shirk,' which translates to "association" or "idolatry." Consequently, this affects sectarian relations and political dynamics in the region.

However, these sites have been of significant importance to Shi'a communities and Iraq itself, as they bring in billions of dollars yearly in tourism revenue from all over the world; the second largest source of income after oil. Furthermore, these sites have been used as a negotiating tool to influence the region. The relationship between Iraq and Iran has been highly complex and has undergone a transformation since the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Iran, which holds the largest population of Shi'as in the world at over 90%, shares a border with Iraq, which is home to a slim majority of Shi'as and four of the holiest sites in Shi'a Islam, after Mecca and Medina. Iraq experienced a tense relationship with Iran during Saddam Hussein's reign, mainly due to his political ambitions and his antagonistic views toward Iran. Relationships were tense between the Saddam-led Iraqi government and the Khomeini-led Iranian government. This all built up to the Iran-Iraq war, an

8-year deadly war between the two countries that led to the estimated casualties (killed and wounded) of over 1 million people and no territorial gain by either nation. Shi'a religious cities such as Karbala, Najaf, Kadhimiya, and Samarra, along with the *Arbaeen* pilgrimage (a Shi'a religious pilgrimage marking the end of a 40-day mourning period for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of Prophet Muhammed, at Karbala)—the largest annual pilgrimage in the world—serve as powerful cultural and spiritual hubs, playing a significant role in shaping regional influence.

Iran has wisely positioned itself as a protector of these religious institutions and the region at large from foreign influence by the West and other states' influence from neighbouring countries. These religious pilgrimages are a unique aspect of Iran's foreign policy strategy.

Significance of the study

Soft power has long been critical for hegemons to extend their global influence. For instance, the United States has effectively used its pop culture to propagate the "ideal" American way of life, particularly in the Global South. However, soft power manifests in various forms, not all of which are intentional. Unlike hard power, which relies on coercion and manipulation, soft power leverages specific populations' inherent beliefs and values.

Religious pilgrimages to Shi'a holy sites in Iraq, such as Karbala and Najaf, serve as potent instruments of cultural diplomacy. These pilgrimages allow Iran to position itself as an ally to Iraq and foster "people-to-people" narratives rooted in shared history and religious identity. Through this religious soft power, Iran has deeply embedded itself in Iraq's political and social fabric, influencing alliances and policymaking. On a broader geopolitical scale, the

Iran-Iraq relationship can be seen as a counterweight to the dominance of Sunni-majority states in the region, such as Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, Iran's strategic use of religious narratives situates it as a defender of the region against Western imperial influence, contrasting with the United States' cooperative relationships with Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which are bolstered by military and financial support. This dynamic underscores the competing power structures within the region. This research aims to illuminate how religious pilgrimages serve as a mechanism for soft power, highlighting their role in shaping alliances, fostering influence, and altering the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. This analysis draws on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which emphasizes persuasion and attraction over coercion in international relations.

Existing research on the relationship between Iran and Iraq focuses on political, economic, and military dimensions. There has been limited research done on the role of religious diplomacy and pilgrimages in Iran's foreign policy. Religious diplomacy has been an undervalued aspect of international relations and could provide us with a rich dimension into Middle Eastern politics. Focusing on the period following the 2003 U.S. invasion is the most viable, as we see the influence of Iran coming forth. After the fall of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party, there was a power vacuum left in that region, which Iran attempted to fill. Additionally, a substantial number of pilgrims annually come from Iran due to the proximity of travel between the two neighbours and the ease and comfort provided by the Iraqi government, which is incentivized by the revenue generated. The annual Arabeen pilgrimage in Karbala requires millions of dollars in funding for preparation and security protection. Furthermore, millions more are being invested in providing pilgrims with accommodation and other

fundamental services. Other important pilgrimages to cities like Najaf and Samarra also attract

considerable attention and resources, underscoring their cultural and religious significance.

Research question

My research question for this paper is, "How has Iran utilized religious pilgrimages to

Shi'a holy sites in Iraq as a tool of soft power to influence Iraq's political landscape and regional

geopolitics in the period following the 2003 U.S. invasion?" Much of the academic discussion

revolves around hard power and influence through military strength. However, soft power tends

to be a much more discreet form of influence that is equally important, if not more. Iraq's

political landscape could further provide us with a rich dynamic into the intersectionality of

multiple differing factors. Iraq is one of the few countries globally where confessionalism plays a

significant role in its political system. Confessionalism refers to a form of sectarian-based

governance. Post-2003 Iraq saw policies that reserved power for Shi'a elite through a "twisted

patronage system where ministries are influence fragments reserved to a particular part of a

community" (Anamaria Lov and Marincean 2017, 37), which exacerbated Sunni alienation and

fueled sectarian conflict. Notably, this confessional structure was deeply institutionalized in the

aftermath of the 2003 invasion, with the United States embedding sectarian power-sharing

arrangements in the political structure of Iraq, which entrenched sectarian divisions which Iran

exploited. This further exemplifies the role of Iran in attempting to influence Iraqi elections in

favour of Shi'a candidates. This dynamic is further reinforced by Iraq's pivotal position in the

Middle East, where it serves as a crossroads for neighbouring countries with diverse and often

complex relationships, making it a focal point for regional influence and geopolitical

maneuvering.

Theoretical framework

This research will rely on two main theoretical approaches: **Soft Power Theor**y and **Post-Colonial Discourse**. Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory focuses on how states can influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force (Nye 2004, preface). This type of power is built on shared values, culture, and beliefs, making it especially effective in regions where religion plays a significant role in societal structure. Iran's use of religious pilgrimages to Shi'a holy sites in Iraq is a clear example of this. By portraying itself as the protector of Shi'a Islam and its most sacred places, Iran uses these pilgrimages to foster trust and create strong, long-lasting cultural and political ties with Iraqi Shi'as. This strategy allows Iran to advance its influence without overtly relying on military or economic dominance, which Iraqi citizens and the international community have previously criticized.

At the same time, Colonial Discourse helps to frame how Iran resists Western dominance and positions itself as a key regional player in a post-colonial context. This perspective highlights how religious and cultural tools are used to push back against the lingering effects of Western interference in the Middle East. Through religious pilgrimages, Iran presents itself as a defender of the region and an anti-imperialist force, challenging both Western powers and their allies like Saudi Arabia. This approach underscores Iran's ability to use its religious identity to craft a narrative that appeals not only to Iraqi Shi'as but also to the broader Shi'a population worldwide. Its effectiveness is amplified by the lingering trauma of the 2003 U.S. invasion, which left Iraqis feeling hopeless.

These theories will be central to later chapters. I will analyze how Iran strategically combines soft power and post-colonial tools to influence Iraq's political dynamics, reinforcing its position as a dominant regional power while promoting its ideological and geopolitical interests.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods to explore how Iran uses religious pilgrimages as a tool of soft power in Iraq. The research focuses on a case study of the Arbaeen pilgrimage and document/discourse analysis to achieve this. These methods are designed to provide a detailed and holistic understanding of Iran's cultural, political, and religious dimensions, relying heavily on both primary and secondary sources to inform the analysis.

The Arbaeen pilgrimage, the largest annual religious gathering in the world, serves as a central case study. By examining its logistics, funding mechanisms, and cultural significance, this research aims to uncover how Iran utilizes the event to reinforce its ties with Iraqi Shi'as and bolster its regional soft power. Primary sources such as firsthand accounts, official records, and media coverage of the pilgrimage will form the basis of this analysis, supplemented by secondary sources that provide historical and cultural context.

Document/discourse analysis is another key method, focusing on primary sources like speeches by Iranian and Iraqi leaders, government policy documents, and official publications. These materials will offer critical insights into the narratives and frameworks underpinning Iran's religious diplomacy. Secondary sources, including academic papers and analyses of these documents, will help contextualize and validate the findings.

A discourse analysis method helps examine religious rhetoric and political speeches that shape the perception of pilgrimages in Iran-Iraq relations. This will draw on primary sources,

such as transcripts of speeches, religious texts, and media reports, alongside secondary sources that critique and interpret the use of language in these contexts. By analyzing the recurring themes and language used, this method will highlight how Iran constructs narratives of unity, resistance, and leadership within the Shi'a Muslim community, positioning itself as a protector of Shi'a Islam and a counterbalance to Western influence. Post-colonial theory also reminds us that sectarianism isn't ancient but created. Both regional players and Western powers have used sectarian narratives to divide societies and advance their own agendas. This is a matter of realpolitik.

These qualitative methods will provide a comprehensive approach to addressing the research question. This study ensures a robust and multifaceted examination by integrating both primary sources, such as speeches, policies, and firsthand accounts, and secondary sources, such as academic critiques and media analyses. This will illuminate how religious pilgrimages are not only cultural and spiritual events but also strategic tools for Iran to shape Iraq's political landscape and influence regional geopolitics.

Chapter Breakdown

This thesis is organized into five chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive analysis of how Iran uses religious pilgrimages as a tool of soft power to influence Iraq's political landscape and regional geopolitics. Chapter 1 provides the historical context and theoretical foundations for the study. It begins with an exploration of Saddam Hussein's rise to power and his secular Ba'athist regime, contrasting it with Iran's governance following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This chapter also examines the Iran-Iraq War and the lasting ideological divisions it created, setting the stage for Iran's later influence. The chapter concludes by analyzing the power

vacuum created by the fall of Saddam in 2003, which allowed Iran to expand its influence in Iraq through religious diplomacy and clerical networks. Additionally, this chapter introduces the theoretical frameworks of soft power and post-colonial discourse, which will guide the analysis throughout the study.

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on soft power, religious diplomacy, and sectarian politics in the Middle East. It highlights key contributions to the field, including Joseph Nye's work on soft power, and examines how cultural and religious influence has been studied as a political tool. The chapter also highlights its contribution to the current scholarship, mainly the limited focus on religious soft power and pilgrimage diplomacy as mechanisms of influence in Iran-Iraq relations. This literature review positions the study within the broader academic discourse, emphasizing its contribution to understanding the intersection of religion and geopolitics.

Chapter 3 focuses on Iran's influence in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003. It explores how Iran has leveraged its relationships with Shi'a political parties, militias, and clerical networks to assert political and cultural influence. The chapter also examines Iran's economic investments in Iraq, particularly in the development of religious sites, and its role in shaping Iraq's post-2003 political landscape. This analysis provides a detailed understanding of how Iran's soft power initiatives have strengthened its position in Iraq and the broader region.

Chapter 4 presents a case study of the Arbaeen pilgrimage, one of the largest religious gatherings in the world, as a key example of Iran's use of religious soft power. The chapter explores the religious and cultural significance of the event, highlighting Iran's role in its organization and facilitation. It also analyzes how the pilgrimage serves as a platform for Iran to

project unity and legitimacy within the Shi'a Muslim community while enhancing its influence in Iraq.

The research concludes with Chapter 5, which summarizes the key findings and reflects on how Iran has effectively utilized religious pilgrimages as a tool of soft power. This chapter discusses the broader implications of Iran's religious diplomacy for Iraq's sovereignty and stability, as well as its impact on regional geopolitics. It also provides recommendations for future research on the role of religion in international relations, with a focus on the Middle East, and offers suggestions for policymakers on navigating the complexities of Iran's influence in Iraq.

<u>Chapter 1: Historical Context and Theoretical Foundations</u>

Saddam Hussein's Rise to Power (1968 onward)

The rise of Saddam Hussein should be examined within the broader context of the failure of top-down authoritarian regimes that attempted to 'modernize' Iraq through illegitimate and colonial means. Following World War 1, there was massive dissent against the British mandate of Iraq, which led to the creation of the Kingdom of Iraq, overseen by the British Empire. In 1932, Iraq gained formal independence; however, the British maintained control over oil and military bases, which heavily affected the morale of the Iraqi population and its ability to form an independent country. The first significant turning point came in 1936 with General Bakr Sidqi's coup, the Arab world's first military overthrow, which set a precedent for political intervention by the military. This was followed by the 1958 revolution led by Brigadier General Abdul Karim Qasim and Colonel Abdul Salam Arif, which ended the Hashemite monarchy and established a republic. However, Qasim's socialist-leaning government faced opposition, culminating in the 1963 Ba'athist coup that saw Qasim overthrown and executed. Although the Ba'athists initially struggled to maintain control, they regained power in the 1968 "July 17 Revolution," led by Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr with the support of Saddam Hussein. This marked the beginning of a new era of Ba'athist dominance, during which Saddam, initially a deputy, consolidated power behind the scenes, setting the foundation for his eventual takeover of Iraq.

Even though the Ba'ath took control of Iraq in 1968, "Hussein Ba'athism" was unique; it combined traditional slogans with Hussein's personality cult (Faust 2015, 29-30). This ideology allowed Hussein to restructure the party according to contemporary needs. The ideology and structure of the Ba'ath Party under Saddam mirrored the Soviet Union. Surveillance of the

general public was extreme, and control over various aspects of daily life was a new reality. Millions of pages have been declassified detailing the policy directives, regulations, reports, memoranda, statistics, ideological materials, membership files, investigations, correspondence, plans, and directives of the Ba'ath regime (Faust 2015, XVI). Saddam's distrust of the public and his close affiliates led him to strengthen the intelligence services, including the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) and the Special Security Organization (SSO), to monitor and suppress dissent and opposition (Faust 2015, 22). This all culminated and was further displayed with the Iranian revolution and the emergence of Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Several recordings have been released to the public involving Saddam Hussein and other high-ranking officials discussing the situation in Iran. Contrary to popular belief, Saddam initially, even though he expressed concern about the instability of post-revolutionary Iran, he maintained that he would deal with Khomeini on the principle of non-interference and mutual respect (CRRC record number [SH-SHTP-A-000-851] 1979, 2). Furthermore, he could be heard praising the Iranian military and their training, which was supported by the American government at the time before the revolution.

However, these initial words of wisdom stopped in 1980 with the start of the Iran-Iraq war. Iran was seen as an unstable Islamic state, which did not coincide with Saddam's secular-Arab views. Western nations at the time, and even Arab nations, supported Iraq initially against Iran, as Iraq was seen as a bulwark against the spread of revolutionary Islam (Hunter 1988, 730-71). Saddam perceived revolutionary Iran as weak and believed this presented an opportunity for Iraq to achieve what it could not under the Shah, having been compelled to sign the Algiers Agreement in 1975. With the backing of conservative Arab states and Western powers, Saddam sought to contain revolutionary Iran and position himself as the new regional

gendarme in the Shah's absence. Inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's leadership viewed the

world in terms of oppressors (Western powers) and the oppressed (Third World nations,

including Muslims); Iran aimed to replace corrupt governments in Muslim countries with truly

Islamic ones and foster cooperation among revolutionary Islamic governments to challenge

global powers (Hunter 1988, 734) Understandably, this view did not coincide with the West or

Saddam Hussein.

Khomeini has attempted to establish cordial relationships with neighbouring countries;

however, this did not stop him from supporting Islamic activities in some neighbouring

countries, which created tension (Hunter 1988, 737), especially in Iraq and Lebanon, which have

received financial assistance and military training. Due to Saddam's antagonistic policies

towards the Shi'a population in Iraq, Iran positioned itself as a defender of Shi'a values and

established a foothold in the country. This regional involvement also extended to Lebanon,

particularly after the Israeli invasion in 1982, which gave Iran the incentive and opportunity to

establish a hold there.

Iran-Iraq War and Relations Under Saddam

The motives behind Saddam's invasion of Iran could be divided into two parts:

geopolitical gain and preventing revolutionary spillover. Saddam saw post-revolutionary Iran as

an opportunity to strike a weakened Iran and gain territorial advantage, especially in the

contested Shatt-al-Arab waterway (Irfani 1987, 39). Furthermore, Saddam believed that there

would be a revolutionary spillover to Iraq, which might inspire similar uprisings, especially

among the marginalized Shi'a communities. Based on extensive evidence such as "American

intelligence reports regarding Iraqi war preparations and interviews with former Iraqi generals"
(Nelson 2018, 247), Saddam's view of Iran deteriorated fast.

This was further perpetuated by speeches given by Ayatollah Khomeini on April 6, 1979.
Khomeini stated that the "unIslamic" regime of Iraq had to be overthrown, and this speech had
an immense influence on the Shi'a Iraqi population due to the standing of Khomeini as a "Grand
Ayatollah (Ayatollah al-Uzma)" (Irfani 1987, 39). Tehran portrayed this war as a battle between
"Islam and Kufr" in the sense that Iran had a transnational objective of liberating the world from
the beliefs of unbelievers. This also set the stage for tensions between Iran, the United States,
and Israel. This was further seen when the GCC (The Gulf Cooperation Council) countries,
Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, aimed to resolve
the conflict, which further invigorated Iranian authorities, as they deemed those countries agents
of the United States. Efforts at destabilizing the Iraqi regime were heightened further before the
war, as the Iranian regime attempted to rile up the Shi'a population of Iraq through radio
broadcasts, which were beamed in Arabic, encouraging the Iraqis to overthrow Saddam Hussein
(Nelson 2018, 248). This all culminated in the attempted assassination of Deputy Prime Minister
Tariq 'Aziz in 1980, a few months before the war. Saddam's regime responded by torturing and
executing a grand Ayatollah, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, as well as his activist sister Amina,
known as Bint al-Huda, in early April 1980. While scholarly sources confirm their execution and
secret burial (Aziz 1993, 218), graphic accounts of torture, including claims that an iron nail was
hammered into Al-Sadr's head and he was set on fire, circulate in journalistic and eyewitness
testimonies, rather than peer-reviewed literature. This only further agitated the majority Shi'a
population of Iraq while justifying the claims of Khomeini's Iran that Saddam was a brutal
dictator. Even though this is not to deny Saddam's ambitions for territorial expansion and control

of the oil-rich neighbouring cities of Iran, he claimed during his capture by the FBI that his reason for war was "to have Iran not interfere in our internal affairs" (Nelson 2018, 265). The decision to go to war with Iran could be summarized as an unfortunate geopolitical settling of the two countries. Iraq and Iran are neighbouring countries with differing political ideologies and ambitions on the global stage.

Post-2003 Vacuum and Iran's Influence in Iraq

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which was justified under the pretext of dismantling weapons of mass destruction, has since been widely condemned as illegal under international law and a catastrophic failure of modern geopolitics. Weapons of mass destruction were unfounded, and the intervention was conducted without prior authorization from the United Nations Security Council, violating principles of state sovereignty and the United Nations charter. Global figures and scholars have labelled the invasion as an act of aggression. UN Secretary-General at the time, Kofi Annan, famously stated that the war was "illegal and in breach of the UN charter." The invasion marked a turning point in U.S. foreign policy, in which American hegemony would override international norms and institutions.

Beyond the legal implications, the invasion had devastating effects on Iraq. Toppling Saddam Hussein dismantled existing state infrastructure, unleashed sectarian violence due to the confessional system that was created, and set up fertile grounds for foreign meddling. Decisions such as CPA orders 1 and 2 alienated thousands of skilled Iraqis, and the chaos gave rise to al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS. While the American invasion did remove a brutal dictator, it restructured the cultural and geopolitical structure of the country, often to the benefit of other regional hegemonies such as Iran.

A power vacuum was formed after the fall of Saddam and the Ba'ath regime. Various international players on the global stage attempted to fill that vacuum. Despite the commonality of Shi'a supremacy in both countries, differing political structures still played a major role. Unlike Iran, where 90-95% of the population are Shi'a Muslims, Iraq has a more diverse demographic. Approximately 65-70% of the population are Shi'as, while the rest are mainly Sunnis and other religious minorities—the three major players in the country were the Shi'as, Sunnis, and the Kurdish ethnic group. Even though the Kurds were majority Sunni, they identified more with their ethnic identity rather than their religious identity. This created a system of government where " various factions, particularly Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish groups, compete for political power" (Ahouie and Tefagh 2024, 624). While confessionalism was introduced as a practical solution to manage Iraq's sectarian identity, it quickly materialized into a problem, reinforcing Orientalists' readings of the region as inherently unsuited for democracy. However, as of 2025, it has left the country in disarray as those various factions battle for political power and influence. However, the Shi'as managed to maintain power and influence over the country due to the close alignment of Iraqi prime ministers with their Iranian and American counterparts. This was seen with the first Iraqi prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, and the second Iraqi prime minister, Noor Al Maliki (Ahouie and Tefagh 2024, 627-628). Both these prime ministers maintained close relations with Iranian authorities and were accused of corruption and of giving Iran advantageous deals in Iraq. The most significant ties between these two countries have been the religious ties. The seminaries of Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq are the most influential in the world, and the exchange of knowledge between these two countries has been tremendous. Nevertheless, they do differ ideologically, with the Najaf seminary maintaining a quietist stance, resisting Iran's doctrine of velayat-e faqih. These ties have

managed to solidify the bilateral relations between the countries and allowed Iran to set a foothold in Iraq (Ahouie and Tefagh 2024, 633).

The American invasion of Iraq was unwelcome to both Sunnis and Shi'as in Iraq. Even though initially, parts of the population were relieved by the fall of Saddam, reality set in quickly. The country's infrastructure was heavily damaged, political turmoil was high, there was fear of terrorist insurgencies, and the accusation of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was unfounded, which led the population to develop a deep sense of contempt for the United States. Furthermore, the United States' policy towards Iraq aimed to contain Tehran. The U.S. empowered Sunni and Kurdish factions in the hopes of countering the Iranian-supported Iraqi factions. However, this backfired into a civil war, and then, with the exit of U.S. forces in 2011, Iran developed a stronger hold (Ahouie and Tefagh 2024, 640). Iran's growing influence in Iraq was not only opportunistic but also defensive. Following the "Axis of Evil" speech by George W. Bush in 2002, in which Iran was named alongside Iraq and North Korea, Tehran feared it might become the next target of America's regime change agenda. In this context, Iranian involvement in Iraq was as much about securing its own sovereignty as it was about expanding regional influence. However, it is also essential to regard the historical reliance of Iraqi Shi'as on Iran. Before the formation of Iraq, the marja'iyya (sources of emulation) took refuge in Iran. Only through the negotiations between Iranian authorities and Iraqi authorities at the time were the marja allowed to return to Iraq and form the Najaf seminary.

Likewise, Iran has situated itself as a trading partner and a close neighbour of Iraq. Iranian trade with Iraq surpassed 12$ billion in 2012 (Granmayeh 2020, 212). Trade between the two countries also aims to counter any attacks by opposing nations, who claim that Iran is only using Iraq as a tool to export Islamic influence in the region. The relationship between the two

countries is multifaceted and supersedes purely religious lines. From Iran's perspective, this trade also carries historical weight. Iraq invaded Iran in the 1980s, causing hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides, yet no reparations were ever paid. In this regard, economic cooperation between the two countries is beneficial; however, it is also seen as a form of long-overdue compensation.

The Myth of Middle East Exceptionalism

Post-colonial theory critically examines the cultural, political, and historical impacts of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on how Western narratives have shaped and often distorted the understanding of non-Western societies. It critiques the imposition of Western values, knowledge systems, and power structures on colonized regions, arguing that these narratives serve to justify and maintain. Edward Said's "Orientalism" discusses how Western scholars and institutions have constructed the Orient as an object of study, often depicting it as exotic, backward, and in need of Western intervention. This construction serves to reinforce Western superiority and justify colonial rule. Said notes, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 1978, 2). Said critiques Essentialism and Binary Opposition, arguing that these binaries are not natural but constructed to serve imperial interests. The distinction between the intellectual and civilized "West" against the backward "East"; in that regard, there will always be a reinterpretation of subjects reaffirming the idea of "us" against "them" (Said 1978, 332). The Western-imposed narrative tends to be very limited and discounts indigenous voices. The Middle East, which has been the main subject of this sense of "othering," is made to be an "unruly" region that cannot be civilized.

The historical roots of this form of exceptionalism date back to World War 1 and the French and British mandates of the region. This binary opposition underpinned the colonial rationale for mandates. The Orient was seen as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different," and thus, they had to be mandated and overseen to maintain stability (Said 1978, 40). Figures like Balfour and Cromer viewed their roles in the Middle East as essential for the region's development. Balfour, for instance, argued that Western nations had a duty to govern the East: "We are in Egypt not merely for the sake of the Egyptians, though we are there for their sake; we are there also for the sake of Europe at large" (Said 1978, 33). The mandates also served the economic and strategic interests of the colonial powers. The colonial powers did not aim to genuinely support or help the Middle East but rather to exert control over the nation and its resources. The British and the French saw the Middle East as a place for strategic economic interest and entertainment. "The Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe... In time 'Oriental sex' was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture" (Said 1978, 190). The Middle East was seen as "exotic," which must be experienced. These views of the Middle East as backward and incompatible set the ground for future colonial projects. The invasion of Iraq, which was justified under the pretense of WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction), partly justified by the narrative of promoting democracy and combating extremism, led to a humanitarian disaster. Iraq was left with a power vacuum; millions were dead and were affected immensely.

In this context, the 'myth of Middle East exceptionalism refers to the idea that "culture is exceptionally immune to democratic movements, values, and institutions" (Mahdavi 2023, 2). This concept suggests that the region is fundamentally different from other parts of the world in ways that make it uniquely challenging or problematic. Three significant examples of

exceptionalism include policies, rhetoric, and media representation. Specifically, we see Western policies towards the Middle East as a region that requires extensive military intervention or stringent security measures (Mahdavi 2023, 112). Furthermore, rhetoric by Eurocentric Western scholars and intellectuals, such as Samuel Huntington and his infamous book, *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington 1996). Framing the MENA region as fundamentally incompatible with Western values of democracy and modernity.

In terms of new coverage, the media tends to overly focus on and exaggerate the acts of terrorism in the MENA region, overshadowing other significant events or positive developments. Stereotypical imagery tends to be a significant factor as well, frequently using images of conflict, such as bombed-out buildings, armed militants, and chaotic street scenes, to represent the MENA region; "mainstream western media continue to reduce the crisis to 'Arab-looking' men wielding beards and Kalashnikovs and spreading terror in a sectarian quagmire" (Georgis 2023, 113). The focus on extremism tends to be extreme; however, this does not deny the existence of a variety of Islamist or terroristic movements in the Middle East, but they tend to overshadow other, more positive movements. While also failing to recognize the multiplicity of cultures, religions, and ethnicities that live peacefully with each other. These exceptionalists' views ignore local agencies, histories, and complex political realities. Sectarianism in the Middle East isn't inherent to the region; it's often constructed. Both local regimes and foreign powers, like Iran and the United States, have used these divisions to advance their interests. Post-colonial theory helps us understand that politics, rather than some ancient hatreds, shape these identities.

Iran frames itself as the protector of Shi'a Islam by emphasizing its connection to key Shi'a holy sites in Iraq, such as Najaf and Karbala, which house the shrines of Imam Ali and Imam Hussein. Iran's religious leadership often references these sites to bolster their religious

legitimacy and authority. Additionally, Iran supports Shi'a groups and militias in various countries, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria, reinforcing its image as the defender of Shi'a interests (Georgis 2023, 124). However, these alliances are not purely sectarian. The Houthis, for instance, are Zaydis and differ theologically from the Twelver Shiism of Iran. Additionally, Iran has also supported Sunni groups like Hamas and strategic partners like Qatar and Oman that fall outside the Shi'a axis of influence. This reflects a multifaceted approach rather than a purely religious principle. Iran also engages in cultural and religious outreach through institutions like the Al-Mustafa International University, funding religious schools, mosques, and media outlets that promote Shi'a theology and perspectives. Iran positions itself as a counterbalance to Western imperialism by employing anti-imperialist rhetoric, particularly against the United States, and emphasizing resistance to Western political and cultural domination (Vahabzadeh 2023, 35). Iran criticizes Saudi Arabia's close ties with Western powers and its role in promoting a Sunni-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. To expand its influence in the Middle East, Iran supports governments and movements that align with its anti-imperialist and anti-Saudi stance, including backing the Assad regime in Syria and fostering alliances with Shi'a-majority or Shi'a-affiliated groups. Iran's support for Assad, a secular Baathist with Alawi religious roots that are distinct from the Twelver Shiism of Iran, highlights that the alliance was based more on geopolitical goals rather than religious ones. Iran also uses soft power strategies, such as media outlets like Press TV and Al-Alam, cultural diplomacy, and international organizations to promote its narrative of resistance and independence.

Iran has heavily invested in infrastructure projects in Iraq to support the influx of pilgrims. This includes building roads, rest areas, and medical facilities along the pilgrimage

routes. The Arbaeen pilgrimage, which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, attracts millions of Shi'a Muslims from around the world. Iran promotes this event to strengthen a sense of shared Shi'a identity and solidarity across national borders (Osman 2015, 62). The Arabian pilgrimage challenges Western narratives of chaos and disorganization. The pilgrimage showcases a large-scale, peaceful movement rooted in faith, demonstrating the capacity for organization and cooperation among Shi'a communities. The presence of Iranian religious leaders, the provision of services to pilgrims, and the promotion of Iranian cultural and spiritual values, while also accounting for Shi'a loyalty toward Ayatollah Khomeini.

Furthermore, these religious gatherings tend to reinforce a sense of solidarity between all groups of people rather than the "consociational arrangements" that "tend to reaffirm and deepen societal divisions" as was set up by the United States after the fall of Saddam Hussein (Osman 2015, 269). Solidarity between Iran and Iraq increased after the fall of Saddam. Solidarity between Iran and Iraq increased after the fall of Saddam. This overlap of anti-Persian xenophobia and anti-Shi'a sectarianism persisted even after Saddam's fall, as the two forms of hatred often blurred together rather than diminishing (Osman 2015, 227). Instead, due to the increase of Salafi rhetoric and anti-Shi'a movement, Iran and Iraq were more aligned than ever before.

Soft Power in International Relations

Joseph Nye defines power as "the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye 2004, 2). Nye coined the term soft power to describe a nation's ability to attract and persuade, not through military or economic might, but rather through "the attractiveness of its culture, political ideals, and policies" (Nye 2004, preface). Nye states that

soft power is the path forward for the United States in a multilateral society. Initially, he introduced the term in his book Bound to Lead (Nye 1991). Furthermore, even though he coined the term to discuss American power, it is not limited to the United States. Interestingly, in 2002, Nye discussed soft power with American Army generals, and it was not taken well, even by Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld. Only after the invasion of Iraq and the catastrophic failure of American hard power did the concept gain prominence.

Nye emphasized the importance of the information age and the rise of nonstate actors as influential forces in setting global standards and norms (Nye 2004, 90). This is especially important in understanding the changing nature of power, shifting from military might to cultural influence. According to Nye, power is context-dependent and varies from domain to domain, shaping preferences and setting the agenda differently in each case (Nye 2004, 7; 136). Nye also introduces the concept of smart power, in which both hard and soft power are utilized to influence outcomes (Nye 2004, 32). As an example, Nye highlights the United States as the most significant actor in terms of soft power. Through Hollywood and higher education, the U.S. has successfully shaped global perceptions and reinforced the image of the "American way of life." According to statistics, the U.S. has attracted more immigrants than any other country, six times more than the second-ranking country, Germany. Additionally, the U.S. is the world's leading exporter of movies and television (Nye 2004, 33).

According to Nye, the three primary sources of American soft power are culture, political values, and foreign policy. Cultural appeal comes from the entertainment industry, higher education, and technological innovation (Nye 2004, 11); political values include democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms (Nye 2004, 14); and foreign policy derives from perceived legitimacy and moral authority (Nye 2004, 32). However, Nye emphasizes that a

nation must maintain legitimacy through its actions for soft power to be effective. The United States has struggled with this, as its involvement in military interventions, coups, and human rights violations has damaged its image on the global stage. Nye also stresses that soft power alone is insufficient; instead, it must be combined with hard power to be truly effective.

Religious soft power is an underemphasized aspect of Nye's theory, yet it has had a profound impact throughout history. One of the most well-known examples is the Roman Catholic Church, an institutional organization with the ability to propagate soft power on a global scale (Nye 2004, 94). Similarly, religious influence has been spread through missionary efforts from various traditions, including Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. After the 9/11 attacks, views of Muslims and Muslim-majority countries in the West became significantly more negative. However, this shift in perception puzzled scholars, as studies showed that most Muslims shared values such as family, religious belief, and a desire for democracy (Nye 2004, 121). Despite this, negative views persisted, raising questions about why American perceptions of Muslims remained unfavourable.

Iran has managed to counter this imbalance by exerting soft power through various means. One key example is its promotion of the Persian language in Iraq, which serves both cultural and religious purposes. The Qalam Institute in Baghdad, a major Persian-language teaching center, collaborates with Iraqi universities to offer Persian courses, often targeting students in theology, literature, and political science (Akbar 2023, 434). Iran has also donated Persian-language textbooks to Iraqi universities and established Persian-language programs in key cities such as Karbala, Nasiriya, and Najaf (Akbar 2023, 435). Najaf, home to one of the most prestigious Shi'a seminaries in the world, has long been a center for Islamic scholarship. However, Iran's religious soft power strategy seeks to elevate Qom, Iran's own religious center,

as the dominant hub for Shi'a learning, gradually shifting theological and ideological influence away from Najaf and toward Iran (Akbar 2023, 436). By intertwining Persian-language education with religious institutions, Iran ensures that future Shi'a scholars, clerics, and political leaders remain ideologically aligned with Tehran, reinforcing its soft power reach in Iraq and beyond.

Conclusion

The relationship between Iran and Iraq has never been straightforward. From the rise of Saddam Hussein to the American invasion of 2003, both countries have undergone massive changes. What becomes clear is that the relationship between the countries isn't accidental but is a byproduct of geopolitical conflict and sectarian realities. This chapter also demonstrates that these sectarian conflicts did not exist thousands of years ago but are constructed and manipulated for geopolitical purposes. As Benedict Anderson proposed, these communities are "imagined" and are used by various actors for differing means. Whether that is Iran supporting Shi'a allies in the region or non-Shi'a allies such as Hamas. Iran's use of religion is often grounded in political realities rather than purely religious ones.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter critically engages with existing scholarship on Iran's deployment of religious pilgrimage as a soft power mechanism in Iraq, situating the study within broader debates on faith-driven geopolitics. It begins by interrogating the historical and conceptual foundations of religious diplomacy as a vehicle for states to legitimize ideological agendas and forge transnational networks. The analysis then shifts to sectarian politics, examining how Iran's post-2003 influence in Iraq has been mediated through shared Shi'a symbolism, patronage of political factions, and tensions between sectarian solidarity and Iraqi sovereignty. Finally, the chapter identifies gaps in current research, which predominantly prioritizes Iran's military or economic leverage over the understudied role of ritual practices like pilgrimage in advancing strategic interests. By foregrounding pilgrimage as both a devotional act and a calculated geopolitical tool, this chapter argues for a rethinking of religious soft power's centrality to Iran's foreign policy in Iraq, thereby addressing a critical gap in understanding the intersection of sacred mobility and statecraft.

Religious Diplomacy and Soft Power

Religion has historically played a significant role in international relations, though its influence waned with the rise of the secular state system post-Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Mandaville and Hoffman 2023, 5). Despite secularization, religion never fully disappeared from foreign policy, with examples like Britain's colonial missionary activities and America's "Manifest Destiny" (Mandaville and Hoffman 2023, 2). There has been a resurgence in religious diplomacy due to the late Cold War and the post-Cold War period, highlighted by events like the

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the 9/11 attacks. Religious soft power involves using religious symbols, narratives, and doctrines to influence foreign policy and international relations (Mandaville and Hoffman 2023, 6). A variety of countries have used religion as part of their foreign policy.

The United States has used religious rhetoric to combat communism during the Cold War period. They established grand narratives such as "Godless Communism" (Mandaville and Hoffman 2023, 8). Russia has used the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been institutionalized, as a tool of soft power to promote its narratives. This was also seen in India with the election of Modi in 2014. The party has shifted into a nationalist Hindu party. This is also seen in various other countries that have used religion to promote their interests in the country or region. More importantly, this is seen with Iran and its Shiism as they present themselves as the vanguard of revolutionary Islam and Shiism in the region. These examples demonstrate an increase in the use of religious languages and forms of outreach to influence the broader region.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has strategically harnessed its Shi'a religious identity to shape its foreign policy, blending ideological narratives of justice and resistance with pragmatic geopolitical objectives. Central to this approach is Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which fused religious and political authority, positioning Iran as a defender of the *mostazafin* (oppressed) against Western hegemony and regional rivals (Wastnidge 2023, 116). This vision is codified in Iran's constitution, which mandates support for global Muslim solidarity and resistance to tyranny (Articles 3.16 and 154), framing its foreign policy as a moral struggle against injustice (Wastnidge 2023, 117&119). Historical Shi'a symbolism, particularly the martyrdom of Imam

Ḥusayn at Karbala, is invoked to legitimize modern struggles, such as opposing the Shah or

Saddam Hussein, casting Iran as a modern-day arbiter of divine justice (Wastnidge 2023, 115).

Iran's religious soft power is operationalized through state organizations like the *Imam*

Khomeini Relief Foundation (Emdad) and the I*slamic Culture and Relations Organization*

(ICRO). While Emdad provides cross-sectarian humanitarian aid, its activities in Sunni-majority

states like Tajikistan and Comoros have been slowed by geopolitical tensions with Saudi Arabia

(Wastnidge 2023, 121-123). The ICRO, reporting directly to Iran's Supreme Leader, promotes

the Persian language, resistance narratives, and Shi'a solidarity through cultural diplomacy,

particularly in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq (Wastnidge 2023, 113, 124). Collaborating with

Hezbollah, the ICRO reinforces the "Axis of Resistance" narrative, an alliance against Israel and

the United States, by sponsoring art, theatre, and religious events that blend Shi'a rituals like

Ashura with anti-imperialist rhetoric (Wastnidge 2023, 126). Hezbollah's cultural arm, *Risalat*,

exemplifies this synergy, producing media that frames resistance as a sacred duty inspired by

Imam Husayn's legacy (Wastnidge 2023, 126).

Despite its ideological framing, Iran's foreign policy remains rooted in realpolitik. Its

military interventions in Syria and Iraq, seemingly to protect Shi'a shrines and counter Sunni

extremism, are driven by strategic interests to curb ISIS and counter Saudi influence (Wastnidge

2023, 119&120). Similarly, sectarian tensions with Saudi Arabia reflect geopolitical rivalry over

regional dominance rather than some irreconcilable religious divides. Even Hezbollah, once

viewed as a proxy, has evolved into an autonomous political force in Lebanon, challenging

simple "sponsor-proxy" narratives (Wastnidge 2023, 125).

Iran's foreign policy navigates a dual identity: it often leverages Shi'a symbolism to

legitimize its actions as a champion of justice while prioritizing pragmatic statecraft to secure

regional influence. Religious narratives serve as tools to mobilize domestic and transnational support, yet Tehran's decisions, from cultural diplomacy to military engagements, ultimately reflect calculated geopolitical imperatives. This duality underscores the enduring relevance of Shi'a identity in Iran's self-image, even as it adapts to the shifting dynamics of Middle Eastern power politics.

The Iran-Iraq War, rooted in territorial disputes, geopolitical interests, and ideological clashes (secular Pan-Arabism vs. Shi'a Islamism), left lasting animosity. Post-Saddam Iraq (2003) reopened religious tourism, enabling Iranians to participate in the Arbaeen Walk, which commemorates Imam Husayn's martyrdom (680 CE). The pilgrimage attracts millions annually and has built a sense of solidarity between the Shi'as of Iran and Iraq (Tari and Kadkhodaee 2022, 541-542).

Professors Zeinab Ghasemi Tari and Elham Kadkhodaee from the University of Tehran have shown us the extent of these relations. The researchers conducted 24 semi-structured interviews (14 women, 10 men; ages 14–57) during the 2019 pilgrimage. Participants were diverse in education and socioeconomic status:

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Research Sample

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Socio-Eco Status	Education	Number of Visits
P1	Female	31	Middle-High	Bachelor	5
P2	Male	41	Middle	*Diploma*	8
P3	Female	36	Middle	MA Student	2
P4	Male	51	Middle	*Diploma*	8
P5	Female	35	Low-Middle	Bachelor	4
P6	Female	55	Middle	*Diploma*	3
P7	Male	28	Middle	Bachelor	6
P8	Female	20	Middle	University Student	1
P9	Male	30	Low-Middle	Graduate School	5
P10	Female	33	Middle-High	University Student	2
P11	Female	54	Middle	*Upper-Secondary Education*	2
P12	Female	22	Middle	BA Student	4
P13	Female	14	Upper Middle	High School Student	2
P14	Female	17	Upper Middle	High School Student	2
P15	Female	23	Upper Middle	BS	1
P16	Male	24	Middle	MA Student	7
P17	Female	35	Middle	MA	4
P18	Male	19	Middle	*Diploma*	1
P19	Male	46	Low-Middle	*Diploma*	4
P20	Female	25	Middle	Bachelor	1
P21	Male	57	Upper Middle	PhD	5
P22	Male	22	Low-Middle	BA Student	2
P23	Male	48	Middle	*Upper-Secondary Education*	4
P24	Female	37	Middle	PhD	2

Source: Authors' Data

Based on this data, none of the participants (most of whom were Iranian pilgrims) viewed

post-Saddam Iraq as a threat to Iran. Instead, many described Iraq as a spiritual and cultural ally,

citing their united fight against ISIS. According to the participants, there was no clash of

cultures between the two countries due to the shared 'Shi'a' identity that transcends cultural

values. A 22 male participant stated that "Iran and Iraq collaborated in fighting ISIS, our

common enemy" (Tari and Kadkhodaee 2022, 553). In that regard, Iran has positioned itself as a key ally of Iraq, transcending traditional ethnic understandings of identity.

Sectarian Politics and Iran-Iraq Relations

"Iran and The Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities" by Kayhan Barzegar, published in 2008, explores the concept of the Shiite (Shi'a) Crescent and Iran's regional policies. The term "Shiite crescent" was popularized by King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004, suggesting an ideological alliance from Beirut to the Persian Gulf, which has since been a topic of debate regarding Iran's intentions (2008, 87). The idea of a Shi'a crescent is perceived by Arab Sunni elites (and the West) as Iran's attempt to engage the masses, build an ideological belt of sympathetic Shi'a governments, and expand its regional influence. Barzegar argues that these views are unrealistic and not aligned with Iran's actual aims and strategies (2008, 87-88). The ongoing conflict between Shia's and Sunnis in the region is more about inter-Arab power-sharing rather than an ideological rivalry between Iran and Arab states. The cultural and historical distinctions between Persians and Arabs hinder the formation of an ideology-dominated Shi'a crescent (2008, 88-89). Iran's engagement with Shi'a factions in Iraq is more about strategic alliances in response to security threats, particularly after the arrival of U.S. troops in the region.

Arab Sunni elites are concerned about their diminished power, the growing political demands of their Shi'a populations, and Iran's expanding role in Arab affairs. The revival of Shi'as in Iraq has unbalanced the power dynamics in the Middle East, causing anxiety among Sunni elites (2008, 90-91). The United States views Iran as a winner of the 2003 Iraq war and a potential threat to its national interests, the security of Israel, and the legitimacy of traditional Arab allies. The U.S. perceives Iran's empowerment as conflicting with its interests and has

stressed Iran's opportunistic ambitions (2008, 92-93). National identity, rather than religion or ideology, acts as a unifying force in the Middle East. The idea of a Shi'a crescent at the level of the masses is challenged by the strong sense of national identity among different groups in the region (200, 94-95). Barzegar also argues that the revival of the Shi'a ideology in Iraq is "the natural consequence of the country's political-societal realities following recent political developments" (2008, 97). However, it is essential to recognize that identification through a sense of national identity is important; however, this does not negate the sense of a shared "Shi'a identity." Iran's alliances, such as with Syria and Hezbollah, are based on common strategic threat perceptions rather than purely ideological reasons. Iran's support for Shi'a-dominated governments in Iraq is driven by the need to prevent the emergence of unfriendly regimes (2008, 96-97). Iran's regional role is more defensive, aimed at tackling security threats rather than expanding its influence. The portrayal of Iran as a spoiler regional power is a Western narrative adopted by Sunni elites (2008, 98-99). Barzegar argues that the sense of a shared religious identity between Iran and Iraq is oversimplified, even though it exists, but not to the extent adopted by other scholars and parties.

"Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide" by Afshon Ostovar, published in 2016, explores the complex interplay between Iran's strategic interests and sectarian identity in shaping its foreign policy. The paper, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, delves into how Iran's foreign policy is influenced by its self-interest, religious identity, and the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

Osotovar argues that Iranian foreign policy is mainly driven by self-interest, aiming to protect its Islamic theocracy from external global and regional threats. Despite Iran's pan-Islamic

aspirations, Iran's strategic approach has increasingly focused on supporting Shi'a armed groups since 2003, particularly in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen (2016, 1). The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the Arab Spring in 2010 were pivotal events that intensified sectarian divisions and influenced Iran's foreign policy (2016, 3). Furthermore, Iran's involvement in Syria, supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime, is a clear example of its sectarian behaviour despite official denials of a sectarian agenda (2016, 8). Iran has relied on forming relationships with nonstate groups to promote its strategic interests, supporting both Sunni and Shi'a organizations (2016, 1). The *Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (IRGC) plays a crucial role in managing Iran's relations with nonstate clients, often outside the government's purview (2016, 8). The 1979 revolution was a rejection of foreign dominion, particularly U.S. influence, and included a policy of exporting the revolution to other oppressed polities (2016, 11). The IRGC was instrumental in supporting nonstate groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and various Shi'a militias in Iraq. While Khomeini emphasized pan-Islamism and unity among Muslims, the particular Shi'a character of Iran's revolution limited its appeal to Sunni constituencies. Iran's support for Palestinian groups and other Sunni movements did not translate into broad Sunni support for Iran's cause (2016, 13). The Arab Spring initially garnered Iranian support, but the uprising in Syria posed a challenge as it threatened Iran's key ally, Bashar al-Assad (2016, 17). Iran's intervention in Syria, framed as a fight against foreign-backed terrorists, has deepened sectarian divides (2016, 2). The IRGC's efforts have led to the formation of a transnational Shi'a movement, with militant groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen operating under Iranian influence. This movement is seen as a unified Shi'a front with regional ambitions, further aggravating sectarian tensions (2016, 24).

Conclusion

Despite voluminous scholarship on Iran-Iraq relations, most of the available literature focuses on military, economic, and political interactions, while religious soft power requires further theoretical and empirical exploration. Most analyses look at Iran's influence in terms of its military presence, such as through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and affiliated militias or through economic investments, but few comprehensively examine how Iran leverages religious pilgrimages as a strategic tool of influence. Pilgrimage diplomacy is a mechanism of diplomacy that needs more exploration, particularly regarding Iran's role in organizing and facilitating the Arbaeen pilgrimage. While there is a great volume of research on religious tourism in the Middle East, much of this scholarship approaches pilgrimages as a spiritual or cultural event devoid of geopolitical and diplomatic import. While scholars have researched Iran-Iraq relations since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, their attention has often been on sectarian politics and Shi'a political factions rather than on the role that pilgrimage networks played in shaping Iraq's post-war political landscape.

Research on soft power in the Middle East has also tended to stress media, education, and economic investments at the expense of religious influence, highlighting the need for more exploration into how pilgrimage diplomacy compares against other soft power strategies, such as Saudi Arabia's management of the Hajj. Besides, most of the studies conducted on the soft power of Iran have been done in fragmentary ways, among which religious influence is considered independently from the analysis that covers political and economic dimensions. Hence, this research contributes to the understanding of how Iran uses religious pilgrimages as a variant of soft power in forming the political dynamics of Iraq and shaping regional geopolitics.

Chapter 3: Analysis of Iranian Influence in Iraq Post-2003

Iran's Political and Economic Influence

Iran has extended its political influence in Iraq through alliances with Shi'a political parties and militias. Furthermore, Iran has invested heavily in infrastructure around Iraq, especially around religious holy sites. Prior to the Invasion of Iraq by the United States and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's Shi'a majority faced systematic discrimination and repression. This led to the formation of clandestine political parties and underground movements aimed at preserving Shi'a identity and resisting Sunni rule.

Iran has built close relationships with key Shi'a political groups like SCIRI (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq)- (later ISCI- Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq). The historical ties between the ISCI and Iran go back to ISCI's founding in Iran and its military wing, the Badr Brigade, which was trained and equipped by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). The "SCIRI leadership regularly travelled back and forth between Iraq and Tehran, and many of SCIRI's actions carried unmistakably Iranian fingerprints" (Thurber 2014, 912). Iran provided financial and military support directly to militia units, bypassing central leadership to maintain leverage. "Iranian policy was to offer aid in the shape of financial support, modern weapons, and a good communication system" (Thurber 2014, 912-13). In that sense, these parties became reliant on Iranian Support. However, this does not mean these parties did not fragment and develop their own issues. Iran's involvement has sometimes led to fragmentation within these movements, such as the split between ISCI and the Badr Organization due to differing loyalties to Iran and domestic constituencies (Thurber 2014, 917). Regardless,

Iran has maintained an active role in mediating conflicts, as was seen in Qassem Suleimani's role during negotiations between the Sadrists and the Iraqi government (Thurber 2014, 915).

Furthermore, ISCI militants attempted to provide security in the holy sites following the American invasion in 2003 due to fear of chaos from terrorist attempts at the sites (Thurber 2014, 909). This indicates that Iran had a vested interest in securing Shi'a favour in Iraq. The ISCI was heavily influential and was one of Iran's most influential soft power moves. It was founded by Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim (son of the clerical leader Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim) during his exile to Iran. This also led to the formation of the Badr Brigades (A Shi'a military faction that was composed mainly of Iraqi Shi'as but trained and funded by Iran). After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the ISCI gained further influence. They managed to win key government positions, especially in the Ministry of Interior, and received the support of the grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani in Najaf (the highest recognized Shi'a clerical authority in the world) (Thurber 2014, 909). The ISCI Iranian ties became a political liability; in 2007, it rebranded as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and distanced itself from Iran's leaders. However, Iran retained its influence.

Furthermore, Iran managed to contain Shi'a groups within Iraqi factions that were more anti-Iranian. Most notably, the Sadrist Movement & Mahdi Army, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, a populist, nationalist leader with massive support among Iraq's lower-class Shi'a, managed to gain formidable power in Iraq. They were heavily against the U.S. involvement and ISCI in Iraq. They gained political power through the election but were also accused of Sunni cleansing after the 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari mosque (also called Al-Askari shrine in Samarra, Iraq, where the 10th and 11th Imams of Twelver Shiism are buried). However, Iran managed to co-opt and

contain certain groups within the Sadrist movements, such as the *Asa ib Ahl al-Ḥaqq* and Hezbollah Brigades, who eventually splintered from the Sadrists.

Iran wields its political power in Iraq principally through alliances it has formed with Shi'a political parties and militias such as the *Fatah Alliance* (linked to the IRGC & *Badr Organization*) (Badawi 2018). Success on the part of the Tehran-linked Fatah Alliance in the parliamentary elections of Iraq enables Iran, therefore, to exploit this leverage by inserting obedient Iraqi politicians in key positions. Iranian Major-General Qasem Soleimani (assassinated in 2020 in Baghdad by drone strikes, under the direct orders of President Donald Trump) of the IRGC was very active in forging a wide parliamentary coalition, which includes the Fatah Alliance, so as to increase Tehran's political influence in Iraq.

Economically, Iran seeks to continue to nurture and further develop this leverage by investing in infrastructure and holy site development. Tehran has invested in Iraq through contributions toward the reconstruction of several Iraqi cities, notably a pledge for a $3 billion credit line toward rebuilding Iraq (Badawi 2018). Even though this falls short of what Turkey pledged, it is still significantly larger than Saudi Arabia, a neighbouring Sunni country. The goal of that investment is to increase Iran's non-oil exports and economic presence in Iraq, especially given that Iran is suffering from tough economic sanctions imposed by the United States. Also, Iran boosts economic schemes which are linked with loyal paramilitary forces within the Popular Mobilization Forces, like *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* and *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba*. These attempts frankly aim to reproduce the Iranian model of *Basij*, where both military and economic roles have been combined to keep its influence intact. In that sense, these organizations and groups maintain loyalty toward Iran. Iran also looks to project its soft power through the provision of technical know-how and by increasing the economic engagement of Iraqi paramilitary groups.

This might involve infrastructure projects such as the construction of bridges and the rehabilitation of electricity and water services to bolster Iran's economic influence in Iraq (Badawi 2018).

Soft Power Through Religious Networks

The Shi'a clerical networks in Iraq and Iran are a heavily influential aspect of Shi'a Islam but are often forgotten. The development of the clerical hierarchy is traced back to the tenth century, when the last Twelver Shi'a imam (Muhammad al-Mahdi) went into occultation, leading to the emergence of religious scholars (Kalantari 2024, 45). An imam is considered a spiritual leader for Shi'as around the world, and according to the dominant (Twelver Shi'a sect), the last imam went into occultation. Due to this, a power vacuum developed in the Shi'a world, and a class of scholars emerged.

The current Shi'a religious leadership is occupied by several prominent Ayatollahs, a prestigious title bestowed upon high-ranking Shi'a clergy. The first is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who resides in Najaf, Iraq, and oversees the Najaf *Hawza* (seminary), one of the most influential centers of Shi'a scholarship. While there are several Ayatollahs in Iran who do not necessarily support the state and possess higher religious credentials than Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, he presented himself as the official representative of the Qom seminary, Iran's principal religious institution. These two figures represent distinct theological and political orientations within Shi'a Islam, with Najaf traditionally advocating a quietist approach to politics. At the same time, Qom aligns with Iran's *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) doctrine, encouraging the direct involvement of these religious figures in socio-political life. However, both of these leaders have maintained cordial relationships with each other.

For instance, Ayatollah Sistani, an Iranian by origin, maintains a degree of independence, but his influence and actions often align with broader Shi'a interests that Iran supports. For example, Sistani's call for Iraqis to participate in national elections and his advocacy for a policy of "one man, one vote" in 2005 helped consolidate Shi'a authority in Iraq (Kalantari 2024, 43), which indirectly benefited Iran by promoting a political environment favourable to Shi'a dominance. This is also seen as many Iraqi scholars have studied in Qom and vice versa, creating an interdependent linkage between those groups. This is seen with *Shaykh Nasrallah Khalkhali*, who at the time was in charge of Ayatollah Khomeini's office in Najaf and was known to have funded multiple seminaries and schools in the area, increasing the influence and prestige of Khomeini (Kalantari 2024, 51). Ayatollah Khomeini himself studied in Najaf between 1966 and 1978, where he taught students, some of whom became religious authorities (*maraji*). Even though not all adopted his political ideology, his teachings did influence a segment of the population. This form of "smart power," as theorized by Joseph Nye, allows Iran to combine its soft power with other forms of influence, such as economic leverage and coercive tactics. Iran's role in Iraq will likely come into sharper focus after Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's passing. According to the most common beliefs, the Najaf Hawza will maintain the quietest approach; however, this may change. The question of succession underscores these dynamics. Sistani's transnational religious authority (marja'iyya) hinges not only on scholarly credentials but also on institutional networks and political neutrality. His successor will inherit a system where soft power, rooted in seminaries, charitable foundations, and wakils (representatives), intersects with geopolitical rivalries. While Sistani's apolitical doctrine has preserved Najaf's independence from Tehran, Iran's Qom-based clergy and its velayat-e faqih model (rule by jurists) could exploit a leadership vacuum. Potential successors must balance Iraqi sovereignty with pressures from Iranian-aligned

factions, all while maintaining the financial and spiritual loyalty of millions of Shi'a adherents worldwide (Alrebh 2021).

However, due to the fragmented nature of Iraqi politics in 2025 and the aggressive attitudes of President Donald Trump toward the Middle East, Iran might be losing its grip on Iraq. This was seen with the 2019 protests in Iraq against government corruption and Iranian influence in Iraq. In a sense, there seems to be a dismay between Sistani's view on democratic ideals of a separation between religion and state in Iraq and Khomeini and Khamenei's velayat-e faqih, indicating direct involvement of religious authority in the everyday lives of citizens. (Rahimi 2024, 105).

Iraq's Political Landscape Post-2003

The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and anti-American sentiment at the time were on the rise. This allowed the Iranian regime to establish influence in Iraq and the broader region. This is not unique to Iraq as Iran attempted to increase its influence in several countries such as Bahrain (*Al-Ashtar Brigade*s in Bahrain), Yemen (*the Houthis*), Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Syria (support for the Syrian Ba'ath Party regime) (Namuq 2021, 40). Before this, Saddam allowed some loyal Shi'as to serve in the government, with a few even holding senior positions; however, they were subjected to heavy repression and were made to distance themselves from any Shi'a affiliations that would cause problems. Due to the fall of Saddam, Iran strategically leveraged Velayat-e Faqih's ideas, as Ayatollah Khomeini imagined, and employed religious and political soft power to shape Iraq's governance.

Iran has had an active hand in all of Iraq's elections from 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 (Jathoom 2024, 6) in the attempts to consolidate powers around the Shi'a factions of the

government. According to the Iranian view, holding sway in the Iraqi government will reduce the chances of the United States and its allies developing an anti-Iranian government (Jathoom 2024, 6). This was further exacerbated by the de-Ba'athification and the disbanding of Iraq's military by the United States, which allowed Iran to develop a foothold in the country without much resistance.

Paul Bremer, the de facto head of state and the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), further exacerbated these problems through *CPA Order 1* and *CPA Order 2*. Order 1 was about de-Ba'athification, removing top Ba'ath Party members and officials from government positions. This affected way more people than intended, including essential workers, leading to administrative collapse and fueling insurgency. Order 2 disbanded the Iraqi army, which left many unemployed and armed, contributing to insecurity and extremism (Pfiffner 2010).

CPA Order 1 affected 85,000–100,000 Iraqis, including teachers, engineers, and bureaucrats (Pfiffner 2010, 78). This crippled Iraq's administrative capacity in various ways. The majority of the ministries were heavily understaffed, as ⅓ of the health ministry was dismissed. Furthermore, this alienated several mid-level Ba'athists, who weren't as loyal to Saddam, into insurgency. This created a massive vacuum in many administrative positions, decapitating the ability of the government to function. Military leaders like Gen. Sanchez labelled it a "catastrophic failure" (Pfiffner 2010, 80).

CPA Order 2 dissolved Iraq's military, police, and security forces (~720,000 personnel), leaving them unemployed and armed (Pfiffner 2010, 80). This created a pool of disgruntled ex-soldiers who joined insurgent groups and further undermined post-invasion security, forcing reliance on inexperienced Iraqi recruits. Bremer's authority was heavily contested within

American circles. He was appointed as "Viceroy" by Bush without consulting Secretary of State Powell or NSC advisors (Pfiffner 2010, 77), which in turn caused frustration within the American government. Bush approved Bremer's decisions implicitly, despite earlier NSC consensus to retain the army (Bush later claimed ignorance: "I can't remember") (Pfiffner 2010, 84). This political mess and the lack of coordination among American leaders opened the door for Iran, which quickly stepped in to fill the vacuum.

Conclusion

Iran capitalized on the breakdown of the Iraqi political system to develop alliances with Shi'a political groups such as the SCIRI/ISCI, which was initially founded in Iran during Saddam's rule. Indicating that Iranian influence in Iraq traces back to Saddam-led Iraq. Additionally, Iran co-opted offshoots of rival groups, such as the Sadrists, to maintain internal unity.

Iranian success in Iraq has been prominent, such as the Fatah Alliance (linked to Iran), which gained electoral success in Iraq. Additionally, economic and religious investments in Iraq, worth billions of dollars, portray Iran not simply as a parasite but as a mutually beneficial trading partner. Furthermore, the soft power of the Qom seminary in Iraq could tilt the Najaf seminary in favour of Iran, depending on succession politics and pressure from Iranian-aligned factions. However, this is yet to be determined.

Chapter 4: Case Study of the *Arbaeen* Pilgrimage

Significance of Arbaeen in Shi'a Islam

Arbaeen, meaning "forty" in Arabic, marks the 40th day after Ashura, which is the day Husayn Ibn Ali (grandson of Prophet Muhammad) was martyred in Karbala (modern-day Iraq) in 680 CE. For Shi'a Muslims, this day is considered a mourning period and carries enormous religious significance. Pilgrims from all over the world gather in Karbala every year to pay their respects to Husayn as a symbol of a struggle against injustice (Nikjoo et al. 2020). In Shi'a theology, Husayn's martyrdom is seen not as an end but as the start of a movement against oppression that would shape Iraq for the years to come. Believers view the Arbaeen pilgrimage as an act of loyalty to Husayn's cause until the awaited Imam Mahdi (12th Shi'a Imam who is believed to be in a state of occultation and will reappear at the end of times to establish justice on earth) (Nikjoo et al. 2020). Therefore, visiting the shrine of Husayn is considered a meritorious act in the name of Islam to reaffirm the values of martyrdom, peace, and the struggle against injustice.

Arbaneen gatherings have been a cornerstone of Shi'a identity, even under hostile regimes. The gatherings were banned in Saddam Hussein's Iraq (1979-2003); however, they were revitalized after the overthrow of the regime by the United States (Nikjoo et al. 2020). Annually, around 17-25 million people gather in Karbala (making it the largest religious annual gathering) to commemorate the death of Husayn through various rituals and acts. *Ta'zieh,* a traditional Shi'a form of condolence and mourning street theatre, is often performed during these rituals. It dramatizes the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and other key figures, creating powerful emotional experiences that connect the participants to the historical suffering of Shi'a Islam. The

broader social tradition of providing hospitality through various means is also a major part of Arbaneen and has been recognized as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO (Nikjoo et al. 2020). These acts are used to emphasize the importance of this gathering and the fundamental impact it has on the psyche of Shi'a Muslims around the world.

Understanding the importance of Husayn Ibn Ali and the concepts of imams is essential to understanding the human psyche. Throughout a human's developmental stage, individuals attach themselves to different figurines, whether physical or non-physical. Initially, seeing family as the closest form of attachment, followed by God through aging, as a source of protection and comfort to believers. However, in Shi'a Islam, imams are seen as "divine" proxies who guide Muslims and are meant to be a source of emulation (Nikjoo et al. 2020). Due to their human nature, they hold even stronger significance to Shi'a Muslims, specifically Husayin Ibn Ali, due to his martyrdom and battle against injustice.

Iran's role in organizing Arbaeen

Since the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein, the Arbaeen pilgrimage has grown exponentially. While Arbaeen has been observed by Shi'a Muslims for nearly a thousand years following the martyrdom of Husayn, its scale and political utilization have significantly shifted after the post-revolutionary period in Iran. Furthermore, with the rise of the internet age, globalization, and world travel becoming more available, Arbaeen has become a major hub for Muslims around the world. Iran (home to the largest Shi'a population, consisting of 90-95% of the total population) and a major neighbour of Iraq, has had a prominent role in facilitating these gatherings. Iran's motivation is both religiously motivated and geopolitically substantial. At the religious level, Iranian authorities view supporting and promoting Arbaeen as a religious duty

and an opportunity to bolster Shi'a Islam. On the geopolitical level, it recognizes the pilgrimage's political values through extending Iran's influence in the region. Tehran provides logistical, financial and political support to organize Arbaneen each year.

Iran has established a dedicated government hand to manage the pilgrimages and their affairs. A central "Arbaeen headquarters" (*setad-e-arbaeen*) works within the Ministry of Interior in Iran (Masoudi and Nourian 2023, 12). This organization was established to direct the affairs of the pilgrimages and deal with various concerns relating to the pilgrimage, including visas, security, and public services. Furthermore, Iran holds an external branch in Iraq through the Iranian embassy, managed by the Iranian ambassador. Iranian authorities work closely with Iraqi authorities to maintain stability during the pilgrimage season and ensure that all aspects function accordingly. Additionally, these public institutions are used to legitimize Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs rather than simply using more obscure methods.

Iran has played a crucial role in infrastructure development in the shrine cities of Iraq. The Iranian *Setad-e-Bazsazy-e Atabat Aliyat* (headquarters for the reconstruction of the holy shrines) was established by General Qassem Soleimani, who aimed at modernizing the shrines (especially in Najaf and Karbala) by providing air conditioning, electricity and expanding them drastically to accommodate more pilgrims (Shams 2023, 89). Furthermore, Iran has organized cross-border travel between major cities in Iran and Iraq via land routes. During pilgrimage season, hundreds of buses go back and forth between the two countries. Service stations, or as they are called in Arabic (*Mowkeb*), are stations set up en route to Karbala, providing free food, medical aid, and much more. Even though these reflect grassroots organizing, they still reflect Iran's regional visibility (Shams 2023, 90-92).

The expansion of the shrines had been a significant point of conflict between pro-Iranian groups in Iraq and anti-interventionist groups. Shrine expansions have been contracted to outside groups linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), which has drawn heavy criticism. For example, 85% of the profits from the Najaf Plaza project went back to Iranian companies (Shams 2023, 89). By dominating these contracts, Iran has embedded itself in the Iraqi economy. Arbaeen allows Iran to position itself as a leader in the Shi'a Muslim world, reinforcing the narratives of "us against them" and reinforcing the narratives of Western hegemony in Iraq and the negative influence it has. This can be seen as pilgrims often carry symbols of Iran's "axis of resistance" (e.g. posters of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Qassem Soleimani, Ayatollah Khomeini, or Ayatollah Khamenei, etc). Pilgrims carrying posters of Iranian leaders and allies during Arbaeen amplify Tehran's 'axis of resistance' narrative, which frames Iraqi Shi'a solidarity as a vehicle for anti-Western defiance.

Soft Power Dynamics and Broader Implications of Arbaeen

The Arbaeen pilgrimage is the largest annual religious gathering in the world, accommodating over 20 million pilgrims yearly. Centred in Karbala, Iraq, centred between rival powerhouses such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran plays a supporting role in facilitating this pilgrimage. Iran's emphasis on Imam Husayn's universal message of justice and sacrifice resonates with populations between the two countries and regionally. Iranian pilgrims suffer physical hardships (e.g. walking 78 km) to mirror the suffering of Imam Hussein and his followers. This act of "redemptive suffering" (Nikjoo et al. 2020, 12) aligns with Shi'a eschatology, positioning Iran as a guardian of Shi'a identity and rituals. By promoting

participation in Arbaeen, Iran reinforces its role as the custodian of Shi'a martyrdom narratives, legitimizing its religious authority.

Building goodwill with the Iraqi community is essential to Iranian religious foreign policy. These people-to-people bonds are essential for Shi'a unity and community. The pilgrimage fosters a sense of community among Shi'as from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and beyond (Nikjoo et al. 2020, 11). Pilgrims' awe at the diversity of participants, including non-Shi'as, which Iran leverages to project an image of pan-Shi'a solidarity. Furthermore, Iranian pilgrims make up the majority of pilgrims to Arabeen every year, other than Iraq, hovering between 1.5 and 3 million, even surpassing at times. Additionally, these numbers show Iran's ability to mobilize pilgrims and the ease of travel between Iraq and Iran during the pilgrimage season, further reinforcing narratives of Iranian hegemony in the region. Pilgrims' suspension of materialism (e.g. free services, communal sleeping, free food > modern services such as hookah services, on-the-go massage parlours, etc.) Iran frames this as a rejection of Western consumerism, reinforcing its anti-imperialist ideology.

Arbaeen's peaceful, cooperative dimension challenges depictions of Iran purely as a "regional disruptor." As external threats or states have attempted to label Iran as expansionist and extremist while attempting to isolate them. Arabeen proves to be a counterweight, especially to extremist narratives and ISIS (ISIL) (Hashjin and Khanghahi 2019, 929). This allows Iran to pour more resources into economic investment, infrastructure, and religious affairs. This is most clearly reflected in the influence of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, widely recognized as the highest Shi'a authority, who, despite residing in Iraq, is of Iranian origin. His life exemplifies the deep interconnection between Iranian religious authority and regional Shi'a identity, reinforcing Iran's soft power through religious legitimacy and transnational ties in Iraq and the broader region.

Conclusion

Arbaeen has been a significant part of Shi'a Islam and has transcended purely religious lines into something much more substantial. What began as a traditional act of mourning has evolved into the largest annual religious gathering in the world. Through its logistical support, shrine investment and cultural symbolism, Iran has positioned itself as more than a simple facilitator. Understanding Arbaeen is key to understanding soft power through religious means in the Middle East.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Summary of Findings

This research addressed the central question: "How has Iran utilized religious pilgrimages to Shi'a holy sites in Iraq as a tool of soft power to influence Iraq's political landscape and regional geopolitics in the period following the 2003 U.S. invasion?" The findings reveal that Iran has adeptly leveraged religious pilgrimages, particularly the Arbaeen pilgrimage, as a sophisticated instrument of soft power to extend its influence over Iraq's political dynamics and the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Through a qualitative methodology encompassing a case study of the Arbaeen pilgrimage, document and discourse analysis, the research demonstrates that Iran's engagement in these pilgrimages serves dual purposes: reinforcing religious identity and advancing geopolitical objectives. Iran has positioned itself as the guardian of Shi'a Islam, using shared religious heritage to cultivate solidarity among Shi'a Muslims and assert its leadership within the Shi'a world. This is evidenced by Iran's substantial logistical and financial support for Arbaeen, which has grown into the world's largest annual religious gathering, attracting 17–25 million pilgrims, including 1.5–3 million from Iran alone. Investments in infrastructure, such as the modernization of shrines in Najaf and Karbala through entities like the *Setad-e-Bazsazy-e Atabat Aliyat*, further illustrate Iran's commitment to embedding itself in Iraq's religious and cultural spheres.

Moreover, Iran employs the pilgrimage to propagate narratives of resistance, anti-imperialism, and Shi'a unity, countering Western influence and the dominance of rival states like Saudi Arabia. The presence of symbols associated with Iran's "Axis of Resistance," such as

posters of Qassem Soleimani and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, during Arbaeen, underscores this ideological projection. Politically, Iran has strengthened its influence in Iraq by forging alliances with Shi'a political parties (e.g., SCIRI/ISCI and the Fatah Alliance) and militias (e.g., Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq), often facilitated through clerical networks linking Qom and Najaf. These efforts have shaped Iraq's post-2003 political landscape, aligning it more closely with Tehran's interests.

In essence, Iran's strategic use of religious pilgrimages has proven instrumental in enhancing its soft power, allowing it to influence Iraq's governance and regional standing through cultural, religious, and ideological channels rather than overt military or economic coercion. This dynamic must be understood in light of two critical turning points: the Iran-Iraq war, which entrenched sectarian distrust and legitimized Iran's claim as a Shi'a protector, and the 2003 American-led invasion, which dismantled Iraq's state structure and created the vacuum Iran filled.

Finally, this research challenges the idea that sectarian divisions are inherent to the region and ancient. Instead, it highlights how these divisions have been politically shaped and strategically utilized by Iran and other regional and international actors.

Implications for Iraq-Iran Relations:

Iran and Iraq relations have gone through multiple phases. The external facilitation by Iran, through shrine expansions and pilgrimage logistics, can blur the lines of authority for the Iraqi government, limiting transparency. These tensions are further exacerbated by the tensions between Iranian-backed institutions and Iraq's efforts to enforce its own governmental frameworks. This all culminated in the 2019-2021 Iraqi protests against the government, in

which thousands were killed, injured, or arrested. Part of the protests were caused by anti-Iranian sentiment to drive out Iranian influence in the government and the army. However, the response of the government was brutal, supported by Iranian-backed militias, which responded using live bullets and other methods. The impact on Iraqi electoral politics is also significant. As was discussed in the paper, the influence of Iran on Shi'a parties and the militia-affiliated blocs has heavily tilted government policy in favour of the Iranian government. However, it would be incomplete to place the blame solely on external actors. Iraq's internal dysfunction and corrupt politics, especially the role of corrupt local elites (who have siphoned millions of dollars illegally), weak institutions and infighting among different political factions, have made the state extremely vulnerable to foreign influence. A lack of Strong democratic institutions has led to a continuation of previous forms of political culture reliant on patronage and co-optation. Many of these problems are legacies of the post-2003 American-led intervention.

The role of the communal ties built through pilgrimages (people-to-people) diplomacy in solidifying Iran's position as a Shi'a powerhouse and as a regional defender of Islam against Western imperialism. Additionally, this affects the local communities' perceptions of Iranian involvement in Iraqi internal affairs. This also raises the question of the hierarchy of identities. Does Iran's involvement in Arbaeen and in Iraqi religious affairs strengthen Iraqi national identity, or does it marginalize it against other minorities, such as Sunnis and Kurds?

This is further exacerbated by the security apparatus involved in defending and protecting the shrines in the holy cities. Certain shrines are protected by militias, some backed by Iran, which could affect the long-term stability of the country. This concern is not abstract, as ISIS and other terrorist organizations have targeted Shi'a shrines and pilgrims, inducing the mobilization of militias for protection due to the failure of the central government to provide security.

However, some have since been institutionalized into the state apparatus or backed by Iran. Similarly, economic contracts and infrastructure projects given to Iranian companies raise questions about fair competition and corruption in the distribution of such agreements. As Iraq attempts to stabilize and democratize while also maintaining good relations with other regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, while Iran attempts to extend its soft power reach. This could result in potential for external pressure from rival states if they perceive Iran's religious diplomacy as expansionist, which could cause Iraq to become a battleground for neighbouring countries with rival ideologies.

Future Research and Policy Recommendations

Further research is needed to investigate other state actors' attempts at soft power comparatively. Saudi Arabia, Iran's biggest adversary, could offer fascinating insights into the similarities and differences between different forms of soft power. Additionally, research on Shi'a communities in Bahrain, Pakistan and Lebanon could be beneficial in highlighting the constraints of various cultures and geopolitical constraints. Longitudinal studies on the effects of Iran's religious diplomacy through a multi-year timeframe could provide a much-needed analysis of the shifts in attitudes of the Iraqi population throughout the years while also accounting for the change in variables.

Balancing autonomy and cooperation does not have to be an ideological battle but rather a framework for a flourishing Middle East. It is difficult to understand the geopolitical intentions of the Iranian state without making assumptions. Through a realpolitik lens, Iranian inclusion in Iraqi internal affairs is essential for the survival of the Iranian state. Utilizing the value of the Shrines provides Iran with a hold on Iraq. However, diversifying partnerships should be a

priority for the Iraqi government. This could be further perpetuated by developing

anti-corruption measures and strengthening the judicial committees in Iraq; non-interventionist

policies should be a framework for the world and for the sake of international cooperation.

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