



CULTURAL TOURISM AS A TOOL OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN IRAQ AFTER 2003-A STUDY IN POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 14th March 2026</p>	<p>This study investigates the contribution of cultural tourism in Iraq as a tool of public diplomacy in the post-2003 era, paying particular attention to its ability to improve Iraq's image and increase the country's soft power in the international arena. In this study, a descriptive and analytical approach was used with a survey among visitors to find out the effect of cultural and religious tourism in creating positive perceptions and mutual understanding among people, besides discovering the main problems facing this industry. It can be concluded from the results of this study that the political and geographical importance of cultural tourism in Iraq since 2003 has played a very important role in the development of public diplomacy and building a positive national image. According to the survey results, 54.7% of the participants believe that cultural tourism is influential in improving Iraq's image. Also, there is a very solid base of cultural tourism in archaeology and Islamic areas (agreement 85-87%). The geographic distribution of cultural heritage in Iraq is in the middle, south, and north of Iraq. Nevertheless, despite the importance of cultural heritage in this country, there is still a gap between its capability and services offered</p>

Keywords: Cultural Tourism, Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, Iraq.

INTRODUCTION

There is a basic change in the nature of power and influence in the current international scene. Geopolitics has relied in the past on "hard" power, which can be demonstrated through military strength and economic might, but "soft" power has become the principal technique that countries use to enhance their influence on the global stage. As a result, public diplomacy has become a critical tool used by nations to ensure direct communication among people, without being constrained by bureaucracy and rigid politics.

Culture Tourism can be considered a vital manifestation of modern-day diplomacy. This type of tourism does not simply represent itself as a temporary economic activity but rather operates as a spatial and cultural exchange mechanism through which the state expresses its own history and culture to the outside world. As far as geopolitics are concerned, any tourist destination cannot simply be seen as a passive geographical location but, rather, as a political statement and imagery contributing to forming a certain geopolitical image of the state.

SECTION ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

First: The Research Problem

After 2003, Iraq had witnessed an easing in its external relations and an increase in foreign tourists, especially tourists who came for religion and culture. Yet, such an easing of relations has not been thoroughly analyzed from the point of view of geopolitics as an effective tool of public diplomacy

The problem lies in the absence of a clear scientific analysis that determines whether cultural tourism in Iraq has actually contributed to strengthening cultural understanding and international communication and building a positive image of Iraq, or whether it has remained a limited economic and service activity with limited political impact.

Therefore, the research problem can be defined by the following main question:

(Has cultural tourism in Iraq after 2003 contributed to activating public diplomacy and enhancing Iraq's geopolitical presence regionally and internationally?)

Second: Research Hypothesis: The following hypothesis can be formulated:

Cultural tourism in Iraq after 2003 has played an increasing role in activating public diplomacy and strengthening cultural communication between Iraq and the countries of the world. However, this role remains below the desired level due to security, organizational, structural, and media obstacles that limit its geopolitical utilization.

Third: Research Objectives

1. To analyze the concept of cultural tourism and its relationship to public diplomacy within the framework of geopolitics.

2. To study the reality of cultural tourism in Iraq after 2003 and its geographical distribution.
3. To reveal the role of cultural tourism in improving Iraq's image and strengthening international cultural communication.
4. To identify the challenges facing the use of cultural tourism as a tool for public diplomacy.
5. To offer proposals to enhance the geopolitical role of cultural tourism in Iraq.

Fourth: Significance of the Research

The Significance of This Study

The importance of this study is in its analysis of an important theme, which combines both geopolitical and cultural tourism as tools of soft power and public diplomacy. The study will help to clarify the role of cultural tourism in reshaping Iraq's global image after 2003. In addition, it offers an academic view that can assist policy-makers in utilizing cultural and tourist resources to enhance the global and regional presence of Iraq politically and culturally.

Fifth: Research Methodology

The paper utilizes the descriptive approach to explore the reality of cultural tourism in Iraq and the role that it plays in public diplomacy. A geopolitical perspective is employed to evaluate the relationship between the sites of tourism and their political and cultural implications. The research also employs a historical approach to trace the development of cultural tourism after 2003, in addition to an inductive approach to arrive at conclusions and recommendations.

Sixth: Scientific Concepts Used in the Research:

1. Political Geography: This is a branch of human geography that studies the state as a geographical (political) phenomenon in terms of its natural and human resources, its economic and social conditions, and the impact of all of this on its political power, international relations, problems, and interactions with other political entities (Dr. Mohamed Mahmoud Mohamedin, 2001).
2. Public Diplomacy: This is defined as the efforts made by a state to communicate with the people of other countries (not just governments) with the aim of influencing foreign public opinion, improving the state's image, and promoting its policies and national values through soft power tools such as culture, media, and education. The term emerged clearly in the mid-1960s (1965) at the hands of the American diplomat Edmund Gollion, as an alternative to the term "propaganda," which acquired a negative reputation after the two world wars. Public diplomacy is closely linked to the concept of "soft power," coined by Joseph Nye, as it relies on attraction and persuasion rather than military coercion or economic pressure (Ammar bin Fawzi Kanaan, 2017).
3. Cultural Tourism: Components and Spatial Features. Cultural tourism can be regarded as the oldest and most complex type of tourism. The major reason why people tend to visit various countries is to explore their cultures. Such kind of tourism presupposes visiting another country in order to see its monuments, buildings, and take part in cultural events. Furthermore, a person visits another country in order to learn about the history and culture of that place. Thus, it refers to movement from one's own home to other places because of the thirst of knowledge.
4. Soft Power: The notion of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, forms the basis of the analysis of the possibility of transforming the process of tourism, starting as an economic activity, into a political tool. More than just being a leisure pursuit, tourism acts as a medium for the transmission of the culture and values of a country, which helps shape the political identity of that nation. It is expected to:

Section Two: The Geographical Reality of Cultural Tourism in Iraq After 2003

An analysis of the geography of cultural tourism in Iraq after 2003 necessitates an appreciation of the dichotomy existing between the presence of abundant history in terms of archaeological, religious, and museum sites and the challenges posed by geopolitics and security that have limited their exploitation. This reality is characterized by Iraq's possession of a vast geographical distribution network of cultural resources (more than 12,000 registered archaeological sites). However, this reality has undergone radical transformations since 2003. Cultural tourism has shifted from neglect and vulnerability to vandalism and theft (as happened to the National Museum and the sites of Babylon and Nineveh) to attempts at rehabilitation and restoration (such as the inclusion of Babylon, the marshes, and the city of Ur on the UNESCO World Heritage List). This reality is characterized by its spatial concentration in the Tigris and Euphrates basins and suffers from a gap between the "historical value of the place" and the "infrastructure and services" that have been damaged as a result of wars and political instability. This has led to religious tourism (as a part of cultural tourism) becoming geographically dominant in Iraq. Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, and Samarra, at the expense of purely archaeological tourism (Geographical factors for tourism in Iraq and its future prospects (A study in economic geography, 2012).

First: The Cultural and Civilizational Resources of Tourism in Iraq.

The cultural and civilizational resources of tourism in Iraq are among the richest in the world, extending from the dawn of the Sumerian dynasties to the Islamic and modern eras. These resources can be divided into:

1. Archaeological Resources (Pre-Christian): These include the ziggurats and cities of Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, and Assyria (such as Ur, Nineveh, Nimrud, and Hatra). These sites represent the foundational identity of human civilization (writing, law, the wheel).
2. Islamic Architectural Resources: These include palaces, mosques, and historical schools (such as the Mustansiriya School in Baghdad, the Malwiya Minaret in Samarra, the Emir's Palace in Kufa, and the historical city walls).
3. Religious Attractions (Spiritual Tourism): The holy shrines in Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya, and Samarra, in addition to the ancient churches and monasteries in Mosul and Baghdad, are global cultural and religious destinations.

4. Living Heritage Attractions (Folklore): These include handicrafts, traditional markets (such as the Coppersmiths' Market and the Saray Market), music (Iraqi Maqam), and Iraqi cuisine, all of which constitute an attractive cultural identity.
5. Literary and Intellectual Components: Libraries and cultural centers (Al-Mutanabbi Street being a model) and cultural festivals (such as the Babylon International Festival Laith Shaker Mahmoud Al-Hiti, 2014).

Second: The Spatial Distribution of Cultural Tourism Areas.

Spatial distribution is the cornerstone of tourism geography studies. It is not merely a mapping of archaeological and historical sites, but rather an analysis of the complex relationship between a place, with its cultural heritage, and the human being seeking knowledge. Cultural tourism is characterized by the phenomenon of "geographical concentration," as cultural sites are often linked to areas of ancient human settlement, riverbanks, and historical urban centers. Understanding this distribution helps in identifying tourist sites and guiding spatial development plans. Cultural sites are characterized by stability and authenticity, which makes them central points of attraction that shape a country's visual and political identity before the world (Mohammed Khamis Al-Zouka, 2005).

1. The Geographical Location of Mesopotamia (Babylon, Karbala, and Najaf):

- A. Babylon: The global archaeological center of gravity (the ancient city of Babylon, Borsippa).
- B. Najaf and Karbala: Represent the peak of tourism. Islamic religious and architectural culture (Al-Rawda Al-Haydariya, Al-Rawda Al-Husayniya, Al-Abbasiya, and the Al-Ukhaidir archaeological palace).
- C. Diwaniyah: Includes the city of Nippur (Niffer), the religious center of the Sumerians.

2. Geographical location (Dhi Qar, Al-Muthanna, and Basra):

- A. Dhi Qar: The heart of Sumerian civilization (the city of Ur and its ziggurat, the city of Larsu, and Telloh).
- B. Al-Muthanna: Includes the city of Uruk, the oldest continuously inhabited city in history.
- C. Basra: Represents cultural and heritage tourism (traditional houses with balconies) and historical ports.

3. Geographical Location (Baghdad and Salah al-Din):

- A. Baghdad: Combines heritage tourism (Al-Mustansiriya School, Abbasid Palace) with modern cultural tourism (museums, Al-Mutanabbi Street, monuments).
- B. Salah al-Din: Includes the city of Samarra (the Malwiya Minaret, the Great Mosque, and the Caliph's Palace), a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

4. Geographical Location (Nineveh, Kirkuk, and the Kurdistan Region):

- A. Nineveh: The capital of the Assyrians (ancient Nineveh, Nimrud, and Hatra) and the mosques and churches of ancient Mosul.
- B. Erbil: At its heart lies the Erbil Citadel, the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the world.
- C. Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah: This area contains archaeological caves (such as Shanidar Cave), castles, and heritage villages (Nidal Muhammad Jawad Al-Araji, 2010).

Third: Development of Cultural Tourism since 2003

Iraq's cultural tourism witnessed a number of changes after 2003, shifting from being isolated internationally to openness and experiencing many security crises before reaching a state of stability..

1. The Shock and Stagnation Phase (2003-2010);

This era saw a substantial decline in archaeology and cultural tourism as a result of the site looting that took place, especially in cases involving the National Museum. During this period, there was a reduction in the tourism sector such that religion was the only form of tourism left, which was boosted because tourists came from all over the world due to a reduction in restrictions placed before.

2. The Recovery and Rebalancing Phase (2011-2014):

The Iraqi state began to restore its tourism sector, with some museums reopening and foreign delegations (albeit in small numbers) beginning to visit Ur and Babylon. This period was characterized by a focus on "cultural diplomacy" to recover stolen artifacts and to begin preparing nomination files for Iraqi sites to be inscribed on the World Heritage List.

3. The Setback and Resilience Phase (2014-2017):

The control of large parts of Nineveh and Salah al-Din by ISIS led to the systematic destruction of cultural identity (the destruction of the Nimrud and Hatra archaeological sites and the Mosul Museum). Cultural tourism in the north came to a complete halt, but it continued to grow in the central and southern regions, and public awareness of the importance of antiquities began to increase as part of cultural resistance.

4. The Phase of Openness and Relative Prosperity (2018 – Present):

This period has been dubbed the golden age of contemporary cultural tourism in Iraq. It was characterized by Iraq's success in having Babylon, the Marshes, and the city of Ur inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and by historic visits, including Pope Francis's visit to Ur in 2021, which gave a global boost to cultural tourism. The process of digitization greatly influenced the promotion of Iraqi landmarks using social media channels as a means of public diplomacy, and the engagement of foreign "travelers," i.e., bloggers, who helped change the common perception about Iraq (Ikhlas Abbas Mohammed Al-Hashemi, 2016).

SECTION THREE:

The Role of Cultural and Religious Tourism in Strengthening Public Diplomacy and Building a Positive Image of Iraq

First: The Role of Cultural Tourism in Public Diplomacy in Iraq:

Iraqi cultural tourism is one of the most critical components of public diplomacy that acts as a link between the Mesopotamian culture and the modern-day world, thus transcending strict political barriers. Cultural tourism provides foreign citizens with the chance to connect with the Iraqi identity, thus playing an important role in the elimination of negative stereotypes and ensuring mutual understanding among different nations. The role of archaeology sites and heritage festivals allows tourists to act as ambassadors, who promote the message of harmony and coexistence. Therefore, Iraqi cultural tourism plays an important role in strengthening soft power of the country.

1. Cultural Tourism and Building Iraq's Image:

Culture-based tourism plays a crucial role in rebuilding the political image of Iraq and giving it an attractive appearance, especially in light of the long-term effects of war, which have made it difficult for the country to project itself through any other positive attributes except those associated with war and destruction. Through the emphasis of its rich history (such as Babylon, Ur, and Nineveh), culture-based tourism can help dispel any unfavorable images and replace them with better ones, while tourists themselves can help do the same.

2. Enhancing Soft Power:

Utilizing cultural heritage as an instrument of attraction serves to solidify the position of Iraq as a "civilization creator." This in turn facilitates the generation of global empathy and contributes to building diplomatic and economic connections.

3. Building Trust and Security:

The coming of international visitors to cultural locations is a silent indicator of security in the world. When people see tourists walking on Al-Mutanabbi Street or looking at the Ziggurat of Ur, international observers make judgments about the security of the country.

4. National Identity and Internal Cohesion:

Cultural tourism not only builds a country's image abroad but also strengthens its image in the eyes of its citizens, fostering pride in national identity and mitigating internal divisions (Mahmoud Hashem Jassim, 2015).

Secondly: The Role of Religious and Cultural Visits in International Communication.

Religious and cultural visits are among the most powerful tools of public diplomacy (soft power), transcending official political boundaries to create direct channels of communication between peoples and serving as a bridge for global interaction (such as the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, the Arba'een pilgrimage to Karbala, or visits to the Vatican). These visits bring together millions of people of different nationalities and languages in one place, promoting the values of tolerance and coexistence, as well as providing living examples of international communication and bridging ethnic divides. They also have economic and political influence, acting as a catalyst for international cooperation in transportation, health, and security between host countries and countries sending visitors. This strengthens a shared identity, contributing to the building of a global network of transnational belonging, which reduces the intensity of national conflicts(World Tourism Organization,2023). (Table 1).

Table (1) The extent of the international impact of cultural sites and events in Iraq and their role in cross-border communication.

Visit type	location	annual number of visitors	international impact
Arbaeen Pilgrimage	Iraq	22-20million	The largest annual cross-border human gathering
Hajj and Umrah	Saudi Arabia	15-10million	A comprehensive global Islamic outreach platform
Vatican Museums	Vatican City	7-6million	A center for interfaith and cultural dialogue for Christianity
World Expo	Various countries	million 20-25	A global platform for innovation and cultural exchange

Source: World Tourism Organization. International Tourism Highlights: 2023 Edition. Madrid, Spain: UNWTO Publications. Page 14

Third: Cultural Tourism and Enhancing the Global Image

Cultural festivals, international exhibitions (such as Expo), and heritage sites contribute to correcting misconceptions and allow tourists to learn about other cultures beyond the stereotypical images portrayed in the media. They also facilitate knowledge exchange through seminars and conferences held alongside these events.

Fourth: The Impact of Tourism on Promoting Cultural Understanding and International Openness

1. Correcting the Global Image and Breaking Stereotypes

Cultural tourism," through trips to archaeological locations like Ur, Babylon, and Nineveh, and "religious tourism" through places such as Karbala, Najaf, and Kadhimiya, offer a far more realistic account of Iraq compared to what is portrayed through traditional forms of media. Additionally, interaction between tourists and the locals of Iraq allows for cultural exchange and the witnessing of tolerance and hospitality, hence decreasing any worries that one may have traveling to places of conflict.

2. External Openness and Diversity

The facilitation process through which 37 nations acquire visas electronically from airport entry points has caused an observable shift in terms of diversity in terms of nationality of the travelers visiting Iraq. For example, the nation received more than 9 million tourists in the year 2024, who were made up of Europeans, Americans, and Asians.

3. Tourism as Soft Power

Tourism helps develop the concept of "peace economy". Exploring the marshes and Erbil Citadel makes it possible to establish an emotional connection with the destination country, thus encouraging international collaboration in various fields such as trade and investments.

Section Four: The Practical Aspect (Questionnaire Form)

This study relied on results collected through a survey conducted on 150 tourists, visitors, and scholars who were selected randomly. For data analysis, the following techniques were used: percentages, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, coefficient of variation (CV%), and index of dispersion, as follows:

First Axis: Characteristics of the Research Sample:

The findings indicated that a larger portion of the participants were tourists (68.7%), compared to academics (31.3%). This composition strengthens the reliability of evaluating the influence of cultural tourism on mental imaging and cultural interactions. (Table 2).

Table (2) Distribution of the Research Sample According to the Target Group

Category	Number	Ratio
Tourists and visitors	103	68.7%
Academics	47	31.3%
Total	150	100%

Source: Results of the first section of the questionnaire.

There was 30% Iraqi nationality, 47% Arab nationality, and 23% foreign nationality. This implies that tourism to Iraq is regionally-based, an inference that can be made based on geographical and religious similarities. Nationality diversity plays an important role in studying cultural tourism in the context of public diplomacy since it allows for measuring the impressions of various cultures. Table 3

Table (3) Nationality of the Research Sample

Nationality,	Number	Percentage
Iraqi	45	30%
Arab	70	47%
Foreign	35	23%
Total	150	100%

Source: Results of the first section of the questionnaire.

The information reveals that the main motivating force behind the visits was religious tourism, which was at 45%. Cultural and scientific tourism followed after with 21% and 19% respectively. This shows that Iraq still has a role to play as a destination of cultural and religious significance that can attract tourists as well as foster cultural exchanges. Table (4).

Heterogeneity among the respondents suggests that Iraq acts as a geographical point of contact between different cultures and civilizations, and this can be capitalized on using the tools of soft power and public diplomacy to increase the country's visibility abroad.

Table (4): Purpose of Visit for the Research Sample

Purpose	Number ratio	Number ratio
Religious	68	45%
Cultural/Heritage	32	21%
Scientific/Conferences	28	19%
Media	9	6%
Other	13	9%
Total	150	100%

Source: Results of the first section of the questionnaire.

Second section: The impact of cultural tourism on Iraq's image

As per the statistical results, it can be seen that there is an evident contribution of cultural tourism towards improving the image of Iraq. As per the results, the percentages have been observed as high at 54.7%, moderate at 32%, and weak at 13.3%. Moreover, the weighted average of these responses comes to 2.41. (Table 5) (Table 5)

As per the findings, the direct interaction experiences of tourists within Iraq influence their prior beliefs. In addition, prior beliefs regarding safety and media perception are changed because of the on-ground experiences during the period of time when Iraq was not considered safe for travel. Interaction with locals as well as the tour to cultural heritage places helps tourists have a better understanding and image of the place. As a result, when comparing tourists to scholars, there was a statistically significant difference, as seen from the chi-square value. This implies that tourists are more likely to report higher influence on the image of the country than scholars.

Such a difference occurs due to the fact that tourists rely on direct experience, while scholars base their perceptions on critical thinking, taking into consideration larger databases..

Table (5) Purpose of Travel to Iraq

Purpose	Number	ratio
Religious	68	45%
Cultural/Heritage	32	21%

Scientific/Conferences	28	19%
Media	9	6%
Other	13	9%
Total	150	100%

Source: Results of the first section of the questionnaire.

Second Axis: Evaluating the Reality of Cultural Tourism in Iraq

From the findings provided in Table (6), it becomes clear that Iraq enjoys significant cultural potential and historical sites of global importance. About 85-87% of respondents expressed their agreement or strong agreement with the respective statements, indicating a wide spread consensus among tourists and scholars in regard to the importance of cultural and historical heritage as one of the main advantages of Iraq, creating the base for further cultural and diplomatic progress.

Tourism services and infrastructure, as well as the governmental support for this sphere were moderately evaluated; about 47-58% of participants approved of these spheres. One should note that there was some contradiction among respondents' answers in regard to the above-mentioned spheres. While some participants considered tourism services and infrastructure satisfactory, other individuals had a negative opinion concerning these elements. It may be concluded that the government pays insufficient attention to this issue.

Availability of information and media support attracted even lower ratings – only about 33-45% of individuals regarded these spheres positively. This result is tightly related to the lack of information available to tourists and the absence of any media campaign that could present positive image of Iraq as a tourist destination. It means that developing tourism will be very challenging because it is extremely difficult to enhance the image of Iraq.

However, there is one item that received relatively high rating – it refers to the level of security, which is about 73%. Obviously, the overwhelming majority of tourists feels safe, and this fact helps to increase their confidence. An analysis of the variability shows that items associated with the cultural potential and resources attract the lowest level of dispersion – all these statements have been universally accepted by all respondents. However, operational and organizational items are characterized by higher level of dispersion, which indicates a high degree of influence exerted by the individual perception of tourists. These results mean that despite Iraq's strong cultural potential, the country does not take advantage of it efficiently due to inadequate policies and strategies.

One can say that there is a noticeable discrepancy between Iraq's cultural potential and the state of tourism services, governmental and media support. Cultural resources create the stable base for further tourism activity, but there are many weaknesses in operational and organizational aspects that should be eliminated to ensure efficient work.

Table (6) Assessment of the Reality of Cultural Tourism in Iraq

Question:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Iraq possesses significant cultural assets.	82	46	12	7	3
Heritage sites of global value.	90	40	10	6	4
Tourist services are acceptable.	35	52	30	22	11
Tourist information is available.	28	40	35	30	17
There is a sense of security.	60	50	18	15	7
The government is interested in tourism.	25	45	40	28	12
The infrastructure is adequate.	30	48	33	26	13
Media promotion is sufficient.	18	32	28	44	28

Source: Results of the questionnaire, Section Two.

1. Cultural and Heritage Resources

There are many cultural elements within Iraq. The mean of these elements comes to 4.31 and the standard deviation and coefficient of variation are 1 and 23.3% respectively; all of which suggest a low degree of dispersion. With respect to heritage elements of international significance, the mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variation are 4.37, 0.99 and 22.6% respectively, again suggesting low dispersion. The low standard deviation along with the coefficient of variation less than 25% denotes a high level of agreement among survey respondents about the strength of cultural elements. All these elements together provide a strong platform for marketing culture based tourism and public diplomacy (Table 7).

Tourist Services

The provision of tourist services is seen as acceptable, given the average rating of 3.52, with a standard deviation of 1.11 and a coefficient of variation of 31.6%. This shows variance in perceptions among tourists in terms of their evaluation of the services provided to them; some find them satisfactory while others view them as unsatisfactory.

2. Availability of Tourist Information

Mean Value = 3.21 Standard Deviation = 1.21 Coefficient of Variation = 37.6% This indicates that there is significant dispersion. Analysis: Due to the lower mean value and high dispersion, we can conclude that there is no agreement between the respondents about the availability of tourist information. This indicates that there is inadequate guidance provided to tourists and insufficient media coverage of the issue, which is a major flaw in managing cultural tourism..

Table (7)

Meaning, Standard Deviation, Coefficient of Variation, and Level of Dispersion for Evaluating the Reality of Tourism in Iraq

Paragraph	Arithmetic mean	standard deviation	coefficient of variation (CV%)	Level of dispersion
Iraq possesses significant cultural assets.	4.31	1	23.30%	Low
Heritage sites are of global value.	4.37	0.99	22.60%	Low
Tourist services are acceptable.	3.52	1.11	31.60%	Medium
Tourist information is available.	3.21	1.21	37.60%	Relatively high
There is a sense of security.	3.94	1.13	28.70%	Medium
Governmental interest in tourism exists.	3.29	1.15	35.00%	Relatively high
Infrastructure is adequate.	3.37	1.13	33.50%	Medium tending towards high
Media promotion is sufficient.	2.79	1.28	45.80%	Very high

Source: Results in Table (6).

Feeling of Safety: The mean score was 3.94, while the standard deviation is at 1.13, and the coefficient of variation (CV) is at 28.7%. This shows some level of dispersion within the scores. From the fact that the mean score is quite high coupled with some level of dispersion, it means most visitors feel safe. However, there is also a percentage that feels uncertain about their safety.

Government's Interest in Tourism: The output reflects that the average is 3.29, the standard deviation is 1.15, and the coefficient of variation (CV) is 35%, which shows relatively high variance. Such high variance is an indicator of varied opinions of visitors about the level of commitment by the government towards tourism.

Infrastructure: Mean=3.37, Standard Deviation=1.13, Coefficient of Variation=33.5%

The above statistical values indicate that there is dispersion in the distribution of scores in the data set with a greater tendency towards higher scores. It can be observed from the value of standard deviation and coefficient of variation that there is some variability in infrastructure appraisals of tourist sites.

Media Promotion: Mean = 2.79, Standard Deviation = 1.28, Coefficient of Variation = 45.8 %. This high variability implies that this factor is the least among all factors considered, owing to the fact that a lower mean represents an unfavorable judgment while a higher coefficient of variation signifies varied opinions regarding the effectiveness of media in promoting tourism.

Third Axis: The Relationship Between Cultural Tourism and Public Diplomacy

The statistical analysis proves that the variable characterizing the aspect of public diplomacy has a predominantly positive estimation, showing stable arithmetic means varying from 2.39 to 2.67 on a three-point scale. That denotes a prevalent inclination towards choosing positive response variants in preference to other alternatives. Additionally, a high concentration of the arithmetic means proves that the experience of tourism in Iraq makes certain changes in the visitors' views, contributing significantly to reformation of the corresponding mental image (Table 8).

In this respect, the item "promotes understanding between peoples" received the maximum mean value equaling 2.67 and minimal coefficient of variation of 22%, suggesting high attitudinal homogeneity and minimal variations of response. This result proves the presence of cognitive stability among the respondents concerning the civilizational aspect of tourism that directly serves as a tool for cultural communication and exchange of experiences. The minimum dispersion implies that this variable does not become a subject of disputes, being almost unanimously agreed upon, and thus emphasizes the communicative function of tourism beyond its purely economic and leisure-oriented nature (Table 9). Likewise, the item concerning the sharing of experiences and the improvement of Iraq's image had a high level of mean value and low dispersion of results, implying a stable opinion about the fact that personal experience becomes a crucial factor in overcoming stereotypical perception of the country. This is explained by the higher validity of personal experience in comparison to any kind of mass media discourse, and thus increasing its effectiveness as a tool of changing external perceptions. Stable results show that the informal communication is effective in improving the image in the eyes of the public.

Finally, the items dealing with positively changing the image, improving the perception of Iraqi society, and reducing the negative image in the international context showed quite stable means ranging from 2.46 to 2.53, whereas coefficients of variation remained moderate. Such values indicate that while opinions were generally positive, the total consensus is yet to be reached. Moderate dispersion shows that part of respondents still holds to the initial beliefs, perceiving the effect as minor. This variation may arise from differences in experiences as well as historically formed image that needs more time to be changed.

As for tourism being used as an efficient tool of public diplomacy, the findings suggest a rather high average with low to moderate spread, which shows the generally acknowledged efficiency of this tool, though with some reservations.

What can be concluded from this result is that tourism is seen as a second tool of diplomacy, yet its efficiency depends on how well organized and planned it is.

Table (8) The Role of Cultural Tourism in Public Diplomacy in Iraq

Question	Yes	to some extent	no
The visit positively changed Iraq's image.	88	44	18
It enhanced understanding between peoples.	110	30	10
It improved the perception of Iraqi society.	95	40	15
It strengthened relations between countries.	92	42	16
Sharing experiences improves Iraq's image.	104	33	13
It is an effective tool for public diplomacy.	98	37	15
Iraq is capable of improving its image as a tourist destination.	90	41	19
I intend to visit again.	85	38	27
I recommend the visit to others.	93	36	21
It reduces the negative image globally.	87	45	18

Source: Results of the third axis questionnaire.

Table (9)

Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation, Coefficient of Variation, and Level of Dispersion For measuring cultural tourism in public diplomacy in Iraq

Paragraph	Arithmetic mean	standard deviation	coefficient of variation (CV%)	level of dispersion
The visit positively changed Iraq's image.	2.47	0.69	28%	Average
It fostered understanding between peoples.	2.67	0.6	22%	Low
It improved perceptions of Iraqi society.	2.53	0.67	26%	Low Average
It strengthened relations between countries.	2.51	0.68	27%	Average
Sharing experiences enhances Iraq's image.	2.61	0.63	24%	Low Average
It is an effective tool of public diplomacy.	2.55	0.67	26%	Low Average
Iraq is capable of improving its image as a tourist destination.	2.47	0.72	29%	Average tending towards high
I intend to visit again.	2.39	0.77	32%	Relatively high
I recommend the visit to others.	2.48	0.74	30%	High Average
It reduces the negative image globally.	2.46	0.69	28%	Average

Source: Results in Table (6).

What is striking about the results is that the items "Intention to Revisit" and "Recommend to Others" recorded the highest coefficients of variation compared to the other items. The coefficient of variation for "Intention to Revisit" reached approximately 32%, the highest level of dispersion in the table. This result has significant analytical implications; it indicates that a positive perception does not necessarily translate into stable future behavior. In other words, an individual may acknowledge an improved image or the importance of tourism's cultural role, but hesitate to make the decision to return or recommend a visit. This decision is usually linked to practical factors such as service quality, infrastructure efficiency, ease of procedures, and organizational level. The high dispersion in this dimension reflects the diversity of real-life experiences or varying levels of satisfaction with operational aspects.

Regarding Iraq's ability to improve its tourism image, the relatively high coefficient of variation (29%) indicates that confidence in institutional performance is not entirely stable. While the relatively high average reflects a belief in the available potential, the degree of variation suggests doubts about the effectiveness of implementation mechanisms or the sustainability of development policies. This reflects a gap between the perception of theoretical potential and confidence in its practical application.

It can be said that tourism in Iraq plays a tangible role in improving the country's image and fostering rapprochement between peoples. However, translating this intangible impact into frequent and sustainable tourist behavior requires strengthening the organizational and service factors that influence the visitor's decision, thus ensuring the impact moves from the cognitive level to the long-term behavioral level.

Table (10) shows that the sample demonstrated a clear awareness of a range of obstacles facing cultural tourism in Iraq. The most agreed-upon factor among respondents was the aforementioned security situation, with approximately 73% agreeing that the security background continues to affect the overall impression of tourism.

The data also revealed that the lack of international cultural events represents a significant challenge, with about 70% of the sample agreeing. This indicates the importance of international events in promoting cultural exchange and international interaction. Meanwhile, weak media promotion and the absence of tourism investment received high ratings as obstacles, reflecting a general awareness of the weakness of marketing and institutional development efforts. Regarding administrative procedures and the lack of tourism services, the survey results showed a greater disparity in assessments, with approval rates ranging from 59% to 63%, indicating varying levels of individual experience and field observations.

This pattern reflects a gap between available cultural resources and management and organization. While cultural and heritage resources are strong and stable, administrative and service processes still need improvement and standardization to enable cultural tourism to become a sustainable tool for public diplomacy and to enhance Iraq's international image.

Table (10) Challenges and Obstacles to Cultural Tourism in Iraq

Question	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Weak media promotion	102	28	20
Administrative procedures	88	34	28
Lack of tourist services	95	30	25
Previous security impact	110	22	18
Weak tourism investment	97	31	22
Few international cultural events	105	25	20

Source: Results of the questionnaire, Section Four.

The statistical analysis of the challenges accurately reflects the sample's assessment of the obstacles to cultural tourism in Iraq from a cognitive and methodological perspective. It shows that the impact of past security concerns registered the highest mean (2.61) and the lowest standard deviation (0.64), with a relatively low coefficient of variation (24.5%). This indicates near-universal agreement and high cognitive stability regarding the impact of past security concerns on the tourism experience in Iraq. Conversely, administrative procedures registered the lowest mean (2.40) and the highest coefficient of variation (32.9%), reflecting a relatively high degree of cognitive variation among respondents regarding the impact of bureaucracy on tourism. This indicates differences in individual experiences and varying approaches to official procedures. Table (11). The lack of tourism services, weak tourism investment, and inadequate media promotion all registered average scores ranging from 2.47 to 2.55, with moderate to high variance (CV ≈ 28–30%). This indicates a general awareness of shortcomings in these operational elements, with clear variations in their evaluation among visitors due to differing field experiences. The scarcity of international cultural events also registered an average score of 2.57 and a standard deviation of 0.68, with a low average coefficient of variation (26.5%). This suggests a relative consensus among respondents regarding its importance as a potential obstacle, though to a lesser degree than the impact of security or administrative procedures.

Table (11) Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation, Coefficient of Variation, and Level of Dispersion for the Challenges Facing Cultural Tourism in Iraq

Paragraph	Arithmetic mean (Mean)	Standard deviation (SD)	Coefficient of variation (CV%)	Level of dispersion
Weak media promotion	2.55	0.73	28.60%	Average
Administrative procedures	2.4	0.79	32.90%	Relatively high
Lack of tourist services	2.47	0.74	30.00%	High average
Previous security impact	2.61	0.64	24.50%	Low
Weak tourism investment	2.5	0.72	28.80%	Average
Few international cultural events	2.57	0.68	26.50%	Low average

Source: Table (10) Results.

FIRST: CONCLUSIONS

1. The role of cultural tourism in Iraq has become increasingly geopolitically important from 2003 onwards and plays an important part in promoting public diplomacy and developing the national image.
2. Results from the survey show that 54.7% of the participants believe that cultural tourism has a great influence on improving the image of Iraq, showing that tourism is indeed a good source of soft power.
3. Iraq is blessed with a variety of culture and heritage resources such as archaeology, Islamic, religious, heritage, and folklore tourism attractions that can form a strong basis for cultural tourism (85–87%).

4. Geographical concentration of cultural and heritage resources takes place in the central, south, and northern parts (Babylon, Najaf, Karbala, Ur, Mosul, Erbil) of the country, which helps these locations act as effective tools of international engagement.
5. Religious tourism makes up a significant portion of public diplomacy efforts in terms of motivations for the sample. It becomes an important part of cultural and diplomatic interactions including the Arba'een pilgrimage and visiting religious shrines.
6. The significance of tourism in terms of increasing the nation's soft power and perception is important. The mean values of the variables reflecting perception improvement and mutual understanding enhancement fall within the range of 2.46–2.67, which indicates low to moderate variance.
7. Despite the strong position of cultural and heritage assets in Iraq, a discrepancy between their potential and provision remains. Services provided for tourists as well as media exposure demonstrate low levels of efficiency (mean for media promotion: 2.79; SD = 1.28; CV = 45.8%).
8. Key barriers cited in this regard include past security repercussions (73%), lack of cultural activities on an international level (70%), inadequate promotion through media channels, low investment in the tourism sector, and bureaucracy or administrative processes.
9. Proof of the efficiency of public diplomacy comes from the result that shows that 98% of respondents view tourism as a means of conducting public diplomacy

Second: Recommendations

1. Improving the tourism infrastructure includes improving hotel facilities, transportation facilities, tour guide services, facilities for physically challenged individuals, and the upkeep of the historic sites.
2. Improving the use of media diplomacy and conducting international campaigns highlighting cultural and religious heritage through traditional and digital media.
3. Conducting international events and organizing international exhibitions at Babylon, Erbil, and Baghdad.
4. Improvement in administrative procedures and tourism investments involves making travel easier through simplification of visa requirements, licensing for tourists who intend to invest in the tourism industry, and partnerships between the private and public sectors.
5. Increasing security in the tourist areas for improved satisfaction among tourists especially after security issues previously experienced by tourists. Providing ongoing training for security and tourism personnel on receiving and protecting tourists.
6. Design training programs for academic personnel and local employees about cultural tourism management as a tool of soft power.
7. Incorporate the principles of public diplomacy and cultural tourism within the educational programs of Iraqi universities.

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