Arbaeen March and Its Effect on Iran's Soft Power in Iraq:Practice Theory

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Abstract

The Arbaeen March has gradually become an influential cultural and social practice on Iran-Iraq relations. Every year, millions of Iranians make their way to the Holy Shrines in Iraq and showcase the remarkable manifestations of religious, cultural and social interactions between the two countries. The influence of these interactions on Iran's soft power in Iraq has not been properly analyzed so far. Accordingly, the article mainly asks 'What effect has the Arbaeen March had on Iran's soft power in Iraq?' The study of 'practice' has long been of interest to some International Relations scholars such as Iver Neumann and Emmanuel Adler. In recent years, however, there was "Practice Turn" in International Relations that emphasizes the priority of practice versus discourse elements in analyzing countries' international actions. The present study aims to survey the practice dimensions of Arbaeen March and its impact on Iran's soft power in Iraq by using the practice conceptual framework in International Relations. To this aim, in addition to the books, reports and articles, first-hand data have been collected and analyzed through interviews with Iranian and Iraqi elites related to the Arbaeen March. The results indicates that the Arbaeen March has led to the strengthening of Iran's soft power in Iraq by creating a context of social convergence between Iran and Iraq, as well as strengthening cooperation with some Iraqi Shia groups to manage the event.

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Introduction

The Arbaeen March has gradually become an important practice in Iran-Iraq relations. Every year, millions of people from both countries attend this event. The presence of this large Iranian and Iraqi population at this event has provided the basis for the formation and expansion of social, cultural, economic and political interactions between the two countries. The presence of this large crowd is an important discursive phenomenon, but the significance of such events cannot be limited to the discursive sphere, as the annual event seems to have turned it into a field of social and political action that can also affect the objective trends in Iran-Iraq relations. Theoretically, although the world is the product of discourses and social phenomena are meaningful through discourses, mere discursive analysis cannot lead to the recognition of the realities constructed in relations between countries, and hence practices and their impacts on this event should also be examined (Neumann, 2002 AD: 628).

Thus, in order to investigate the dynamics of Iran's soft power in Iraq, in addition to the discourses, we should also consider the practices which have been possible in the context of the annual Arbaeen March. Cultural proximity, geographical connection and strategic necessities of Iran and Iraq have paved the way for extensive and profound interactions between the two countries in contemporary history. Before the Islamic Revolution, Iran had strong ties with some Iraqi groups, especially Kords, and used them in its own interests (Reisinezhad, 2018 AD: 281-289).

But after the revolution, although official relations between Iran and Iraq were formed on the basis of hostility and enmity due to eight-year imposed war (Blight, Lang, Banai, Byrne, and Tirman, 2014 AD), after the fall of Saddam in 2003, Iran tried to shape a regular and stable interaction with various political groups, including Shias, Kords and Sunnis in Iraq, as well as the Iraqi authority despite the greater intellectual affinity with the Shia groups (Shabani, 2015 AD).

The achievement of this interaction has been greater for Iran in some periods and less in some other one. But the other aspect of Iran-Iraq interactions is social and religious relations, which can be found at the annual Arbaeen March. By facilitating and encouraging the presence of Iranian pilgrims in Arbaeen rituals, Iran has tried to promote social, cultural and economic interactions with Iraq while reproducing its social and ideological power in the domestic and regional arenas. The present study seeks to use the practice theory to answer the question of 'What impact the Arbaeen March has had on Iran's soft power in Iraq?' So, the literature review, conceptual

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framework, methodology and then the impacts of Arbaeen March on the soft power of Iran in Iraq are investigated. Finally the conclusion will express.

1. Literature Review
Heidari, Ezzati, and Fallahi (1401) in the article titled "Role and Position of the Arbaeen March on the Soft Power of the Islamic Republic of Iran" show that the Arbaeen March has had a positive effect on the promotion of Iran's soft power by strengthening religious values, spiritualism, strengthening sacrifice, martyrdom and expectation. The main part of the article on the soft power components of the Islamic Republic of Iran includes values, spiritualism, Shi'a culture, political values and foreign policy desirability.

The authors see the Arbaeen March as a factor in strengthening Islam, the transcendence of Shi'a discourse, strengthening the culture of martyrdom, justice seeking, national consensus, and paving the way for media confrontation with Western news imperialism. This article has two theoretical and example gaps. On the one hand, the paper lacks an analytical framework to investigate the nature of the Arbaeen March as an effective action on the soft power components of Iran. On the other hand, the article suffers from an example void in the sense that the Arbaeen March occurs in a timeless and placeless atmosphere and has nothing to do with its location in Iraq.

Ghiathi, Borzouei, Nasiri (1399) in the article "Cultural Diplomacy of the Arbaeen Pilgrimage Walking Ritual, the Dimensions and Strategies" considers the most vital cultural influences of Arbaeen ceremonies include communicating with non-governmental sectors in cross-border academic research affairs, laying the groundwork for the expansion of cultural tourism with an emphasis on intercultural relations in the field of Islamic and Shia civilization, coordination with other countries' seminaries to strengthen and spread Islamic propaganda, and establishing joint religious research institutes in the political and civilizational teachings of Ashura theachings. This article analyzes diplomacy in the form of scientific and cultural projects between Iran and Iraq and does not have a coherent theoretical approach on this issue.

Kristia et al, (1396) in the "Towards Karbala: A Study of Iranian and Iraqi Shia with Public Opinion Polls" examines the views of participants in the Arbaeen ceremony in 2015 on issues such as media, sectarianism, religion, gender, democracy, regional conflicts, Iran's nuclear policy, and attitudes towards America. Their goal is to address the cognitive gap regarding this ceremony in Western countries.

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Therefore, it can be claimed that the findings of this book cannot be used to analyze Iran's soft power in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Khani (1396) argues in his article "Arbaeen Pilgrimage as a Soft Power of the Islamic World" that solidarity, coordination, kindness, empathy, hospitality and creating a sense of "Being Us" turn the Arbaeen March into a great source of soft power for the Islamic world in general and Shia world in particular. It can be considered an effective mechanism for moving towards convergence in the Islamic world and even globalizing Islam. However, Khani's analysis is at a macro level and does not address effective strategies for promoting this convergence.

In the article "Global Convergence and Solutions Through the Expansion of Arbaeen Culture" by Parvish (1396), Arbaeen culture is considered one of the factors that can pave the way for convergence in the Islamic world, because solidarity and unity among individuals in this ceremony can be a source of soft power for promoting cultural diplomacy in the process of global convergence. Parvish also looks at cultural diplomacy in Arbaeen from a macro perspective and does not pay much attention to actions at the micro level.

In his article "Dimensions of Achieving Sustainable Security in the Light of Religious Rituals with Emphasis on Arbaeen March," Moeinipour (1396) considers creating sustainable security as one of the main indicators of achieving a new Islamic civilization. He believes that in some cognitive, ethical, and behavioral dimensions, Arbaeen March can lead to producing and increasing of sustainable security. This article uses Barry Buzan's theoretical framework to explain the cultural capacities of Arbaeen as a security-building factor. Although Moeinipour has used a coherent theoretical framework, his problem is that he does not pay much attention to actions that take place during Arbaeen March.

In his article "Husseini Arbaeen March and Its Discursive Implications in Providing Cultural Capacity," Baqeri (1396) examines the discursive dimensions of Arbaeen March's discourse capacity. In his opinion, this event takes place within three overlapping discourses: Husseini, revolutionary Islamic, and Shii fundamentalist discourse. These discourses can be considered as including fighting against oppression and expanding justice, revolutionary agency, and cultural expansion. Baqeri's article cannot establish an analytical relationship between discursive elements and actions resulting from Arbaeen March.

Bani Asad (1399) states in his article on "Ethnography and Anthropology of the Culture of Hosseini Arbaeen March" that Arbaeen

has created a kind of convergence between cultures, which has led to the strengthening and expansion of the great global culture of Muslims and Shiism regardless of ethnicity, race, age, and other cultural differences. Therefore, responsible institutions in Iran and local organizations in Iraq should work together to institutionalize this culture. Bani Asad has somewhat touched on social and institutional roles but has not used a coherent conceptual framework.

Mousavi and Bayat (1396) state in their article on the "Social and Political Impact of the Functions of Arbaeen March on the Elevation of Shiism" that Shias demonstrate various dimensions of their social identity to the world in this great gathering, while the presence of pilgrims at this ceremony leads to influence and impact among them. The authors examine this question in two political and social dimensions: 'Whether Arbaeen pilgrimage has had an impact on elevating Shia thinking or not?', and through this lens, they discuss social functions such as identity formation, lifestyle, community correction as well as political functions such as resistance, unity, and security.

Mousavi and Bayat have tried to enumerate the social and political functions formed within the framework of Arbaeen ceremony and examine their effects; however, their work lacks necessary conceptual elements for analyzing social and political roles.

Previous studies on this topic have only addressed cultural, security, ethical-normative, religious, and some limited political aspects as well as strategies for cultural diplomacy and convergence in the Islamic world. This literature has mainly looked at the Arbaeen March from a macro-level analysis and an idealistic and prescriptive perspective, and has not been able to examine the capacity of micro-level actions of the Arbaeen March to influence Iran's soft power in Iraq from the perspective of a coherent conceptual framework. Some perspectives have looked at this ceremony as part of Islamic soft power, global convergence, cultural capacity building, and sustainable security analysis using macro-level concepts.

Others have used micro-level concepts to analyze it from a folkloric and social impact perspective. The main problem with these studies is that on the one hand they are idealistic and far from reality, ignoring field actions in Iran-Iraq interactions; on the other hand, they lack a coherent conceptual framework for examining how the Arbaeen March influences Iran's soft power in Iraq. Therefore, in this study we use the practice theory to examine the impact of the Arbaeen March on Iran's soft power in Iraq.

2. Conceptual and Methodological Framework: Practice Theory

Firstly, we discuss the concept of behavior and then move on to the practice theory. Dehkhoda dictionary defines "Practice" (or Ravieh in Persian) as "Continuous effort in any work that a person is engaged in." Iver Neumann considers practice to be a socially recognized action. If discourse structures create a field of action, practice is actually the socialized patterns of that action. From this perspective, practice analysis means examining the internalized and material patterns of action that arise around actors' common understanding (Neumann, 2002 AD: 628).

The interpretation of practice for the Arbaeen procession is used because the Arbaeen March has been repeated for many years as a continuous set of various physical and mental activities along with previous knowledge that includes perceptions and understandings, emotional states, and motivational cognitions.

In recent decades, considering the discursive turn in theoretical literature on International Relations, extensive research has been conducted on the semantic, metaphorical and discursive dimensions of recent international issues (Schmidt, 1998 AD; Hall and Jackson, 2007 AD: Chp 4; Schmidt, 2011 AD; Moshirzadeh, 2015 and 2016 AD; Masoudi, 2019 AD; George, 2021 AD).

Iver Neumann is a pioneer theorist who considers practice turn as a complement to discursive or linguistic turn. In his view, culture is a product of the mutual interaction between practices and discourses in narratives. Neumann considers discourse analysis to be a distant and lazy analysis that ignores field information and practical political actions. According to Neumann, by analyzing discourse, we can examine the conditions for action realization, but in the practice turn, social action itself is examined (Neumann, 2002 AD: 628).

In recent years, alongside the growth of practice theory in other fields of social sciences such as hermeneutics studies (Ginev, 2019 AD) and management (Blackler and Regan, 2009 AD), extensive research has been conducted based on practice theory in International Relations (Neumann, 2002 AD; Hansen, 2006 AD; Andersen and Neumann, 2012 AD; Lequesne, 2015 AD; Pouliot and Cornut, 2015 AD; Kustermans, 2015 AD; McCourt, 2016 AD; Faizullaev and Cornut, 2017 AD; Hopf, 2017 AD).

This theory argues that in order to understand the field of international politics, the physical actions of actors in this field must also be analyzed, as international actors are heavily influenced by their habits and bodily desires. The practice theory of International Relations, which some have also called the new constructivism (Eggeling, 2021

AD: 151), is a collection of theoretical approaches that focus on the practices of actors instead of emphasizing interests, norms, identity, and language. It emphasizes practical and tangible dimensions of International Relations (Bueger and Gadinger, 2020 AD: 7).

Advocates of practice turn like Iver Neumann argue that a focus solely on linguistic and discursive constructs cannot provide a proper understanding of constructed realities in country-to-country relations. Therefore, it is necessary to examine bodily actions as well. Neumann argues that textual analysis alone cannot adequately demonstrate practical developments in foreign policy (Neumann, 2002 AD: 641-646).

Joseph Nye defines soft power as the 'ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion or reward'. In his view, soft power arises from cultural appeal and political ideas (Nye, 2004 AD: x), cultural and ideological influence (Baykurt and Gracia 2021 AD), and a country's technological capabilities (McCarthy, 2015 AD).

In other words, soft power means the ability to influence the behavior of others through attraction, legitimacy, and credibility. Soft power is not exclusively the result of official government action but can be a byproduct of social communication between countries (Wilson, 2015 AD; Mustajoki, Protasova, and Yelenevskaya, 2020 AD).

One of the examples of forming the social communications in Iran's relations with other countries is the Arbaeen March, which can be a factor in strengthening Iran's soft power in Iraq. Accordingly, this article seeks to examine the effects of the annual Arbaeen march on Iran's soft power in Iraq based on practice theory in International Relations. In this article, practicivist methodology is used; meaning that two types of first-hand and second-hand data have been collected to examine the semantic aspects of Arbaeen March. First-hand data has been obtained through interviews with Iranian and Iraqi elites involved and related to the march to gain a sympathetic understanding of its effects on Iran and Iraq's social, cultural, and political interactions.[1]

In addition, second-hand data has been obtained through indirect reading method of practices. In this method, practices are read through texts, documents, reports, and visual products related to Arbaeen March; so that detailed descriptions of activities related to Arbaeen March can be obtained from these documents and reports; which can include archives, diaries or written correspondence, annual reports, diplomatic telegrams, minutes or recorded and transcribed meetings

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1. Some of these interviews have been conducted by traveling to Iraq and meeting with Iranian and Iraqi elites.

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and sessions; visual productions and material products that are considered a form of indirect observation of constructs.
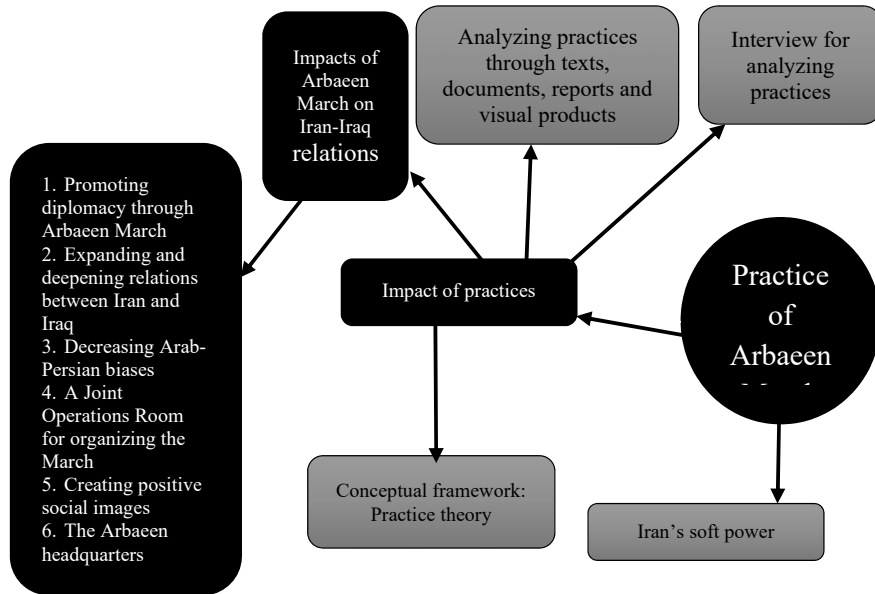
Figure 1: A conceptual model of the practice effect of the Arbaeen March on Iran's soft power in Iraq

3. The Arbaeen March as Practice and its Impact on Iran's Soft Power in Iraq

The Arbaeen March has created a situation as a transnational field of action that appear in it some cultural and social behavior derived from religion. In other words, the physical location of the Arbaeen March affects the actions and behaviors of its participants. The main actors in this field are Iranian and Iraqi people and elites who interact with each other. The socio-cultural capital of the Arbaeen March is the shared social network between Iranian and Iraqi individuals and groups. On the other hand, executive interaction between local and regional actors in this event can lead to new perceptions among elites involved in the event, which can provide a basis for new interactive behaviors between the two countries in broader areas. In the following, we will discuss various dimensions of interactive behaviors during the Arbaeen March further on.

3.1. Strengthening the Iran Public Diplomacy

Countries use different types of formal and public diplomacy to advance their goals in the international arena. Formal diplomacy is the

interactions between diplomatic officials of the two countries; but in public diplomacy, governments attempt to directly influence the people of other countries through social and cultural exchanges and create a positive image of the country in the international arena (Saei, 2021 AD/1400 SH). In the form of public diplomacy, some countries use innovative and specific ways to exit political and economic deadlocks with the outside world which called special diplomacy. Examples of this particular type of diplomacy can be used in watching a football game by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and his Australian counterpart Malcolm Turnbull on March 26, 2017 or watching 400-person yoga by Indian Prime Minister Modi and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during a visit to China in May 2015 are (Heidarzade Naini, 2019 AD/1398 SH).

Considering the different types of diplomacy, the gathering of millions of Shias in the days leading up to Arbaeen and on the routes leading to Karbala had some characteristics of diplomacy in the informal space. Some Iranian and Iraqi officials attend the ceremony, paving the way for interactions between them outside of formalities. In this type of diplomacy, the possibility of informal exchange of views and unmediated recognition of social and political issues arises. For example, Iranian vice presidents, ministers and officials have frequently participated in the march and have discussed and exchanged views with some Iraqi officials, such as governors and some Iraqi officials and parliamentarians.

3.2. Creating the Citizenship Diplomacy

In citizenship diplomacy, citizens have the right to communicate with citizens of other communities to reach common views or to partially neutralize the adverse effects of misunderstandings. Communication within the framework of citizenship diplomacy is important for developing the human relations, resolving disputes, eliminating mistrust and hostility, and creating mutual understanding in various societies (Azari et al., 2015 AD/1394 SH).

In line with citizenship diplomacy during the Arbaeen march, numerous business-trade relations have been formed. For example, Iranian pilgrims from Gilan and Mazandaran could connect with Iraqi sides during the Arbaeen march to prepare tea and rice and some food items.

In the same way, a number of Iraqis, owner of Mukebs and Arbaeen activists participated in the 'Atr-e Sib Fair on Arbaeen merchandise and could purchase the required items of their delegations and clients, including disposable containers. Another effect of the Arbaeen march is forming the connections between the Iranian and Iraqi academic community. Among them, the University of Religions has held

meetings with Iraqis in the Arbaeen category that create opportunity for familiarity and continuity of these connections (Kalantari, 2022 AD/1401 SH).

The doctors' community of the two countries has also established connections. For example, in one of the Babylon regions, Iraq (an area around the shrine of Imam Reza's brother Qasim), many people there had eye diseases and could not be treated because of lack of access to doctors and poverty, and in one of the Arbaeen marches, Iranians ophthalmologists with awareness of the situation in that area went there and settled for free. They provided many services that remained in the minds and memory of Iraqis and generated popularity. This can be referred to as service and medical diplomacy, which is the product of the Arbaeen march.

3.3. Formation of Social Ties between Iran and Iraq

Soft power is not exclusively the result of official action by governments, but can be a by-product of social interactions between societies (Wilson, 2015 AD; Mustajoki, Protasova, Yelenevskaya, 2020 AD). The Arbaeen march can be a source of attraction that leads to voluntary cooperation between the people of Iran and Iraq in two ways: first, through common religious values in the form of spiritual attraction to Imam Hussein (AS), and second, through the values of hospitality and respect for guests in Iraqi culture towards visitors of Imam Hussein. Hospitality and serving guests are highly valued in Iraqi-Arab culture among both Sunni and Shia Muslims, especially among Shia Muslims who take honoring and serving visitors of Imam Hussein very seriously. Therefore, the attractiveness of Iraqi-Arab culture regarding honoring guests, especially visitors of Imam Hussein, complements the attractiveness of common religious values between the people of Iran and Iraq. Face-to-face communication is the most effective way for human interaction. This face-to-face communication takes place during the Arbaeen march, and virtual communication can complement and strengthen these interactions after Arbaeen days. A combination of meetings and online communications can create a kind of Iranian-Iraqi civil society that seeks to learn about each other's cultures.

3.4. Reduction of Arab and non-Arab (Ajam) Hostility

Although the issue of Arab and non-Arab issue can be traced back to the history of Iran-Arab relations, it intensified during the rule of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq. The Ba'ath regime sought to portray the war with Iran as a war against historical enemies of the Arabs to gain political and financial support from Arab countries. However, during the Arbaeen pilgrimage, many of the negative propaganda by Iranian opposition media decreases and its effects are neutralized throughout

the pilgrimage (Iranian Consulate in Iraq, 2022 AD/1401 SH). The Arbaeen march brings together the two nations of Iran and Iraq to interact with each other, eat together at one table, walk together on footpaths, be guests at each other's homes, sign trade agreements with each other, and even marry each other. Similarly, Iraqis also travel to Iran and become guests at Iranian homes and establish intimate and extensive relationships with each other (Hosseiniyan, 2022 AD/1401 SH).

These friendly and familial connections that are created between host and guest through the Arbaeen pilgrimage may be unknown to each other beforehand but they find each other during this event. These connections give depth and stability to Iran-Iraq relations which are politically significant. On the paths of the Arbaeen march, every Iraqi family finds a number of Iranian friends and continues this friendship and bond through WhatsApp and other social networks, inviting each other and engaging in mutual behaviors and hospitality under the title of "Hospitality Diplomacy."

This has had and will have very good political and security effects and reflections. For example, after the protests of the Iraqi people in Karbala and the burning of the Iranian consulate in Karbala, an unsafe atmosphere was created before and after the Arbaeen march, but during the two weeks and three weeks of Arbaeen days, a safe and calm atmosphere was formed (Iranian consulate in Iraq, 2022 AD/1401 SH).

3.5. Establishment of A Joint Operations Room

Regarding the presence of millions of Iraqi and Iranian participants in the Arbaeen march, providing security for participants by Iranian and Iraqi security forces is one of the vital issues that Iran and Iraq have paid attention to. The Arbaeen march has created a security convergence during its duration. To ensure the security of the Arbaeen ceremony, the central headquarters of Arbaeen and its committees, as well as Iraq's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had many units from Iraq's security forces responsible for this task; sometimes even Iraq's military forces as well as Hashd al-Sha'abi were responsible. The security convergence between the forces of the two countries in establishing and creating physical, spiritual, and psychological security for the participants of Arbaeen is a crucial issue that has been created through the Arbaeen pilgrimage. In fact, the Arbaeen ceremony creates a religious, social, and cultural convergence that can contribute to security stability. Therefore, in the discussion of identity formation and cultural development of the Arbaeen pilgrimage, the resistance front has a very serious and direct impact. As a result, the Arbaeen march has strengthened the axis of resistance (Cultural and Educational

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Committee of Arbaeen Headquarters, 2022 AD/1401 SH; Masjedi, 2020 AD/1399 SH). The millions of people participating in the Arbaeen march are security producers because they create security (Zaytoon Institute, 2017 AD/1397 SH).

3.6. The Arbaeen Headquarter [Setad-e Arbaeen]

The central headquarter of Arbaeen is located in Iran's Ministry of Interior and is responsible for organizing the event. The external section of the Arbaeen headquarter is located at Iran's embassy in Baghdad and is responsible for Arbaeen affairs in Iraq under Iran's ambassador to Baghdad. Cultural issues related to Arbaeen are under the responsibility of Iran's cultural attaché in Baghdad. This headquarters and its committees hold various meetings throughout the year to plan and organize the Arbaeen march in various dimensions.

The strategic principles of the central headquarters of Arbaeen include strengthening cohesion among Shia followers and promoting Islamic denominational convergence. However, what is more important in terms of the impact on Iran's soft power patterns in Iraq is the policies of the Arbaeen Headquarters, which include recognizing threatening scenarios with the aim of preventing and combating them, rule of law to ensure order and security, strengthening law enforcement and security cooperation between the two countries, providing the necessary infrastructure and conditions for achieving order, security and border regulations, respecting the traditions and values of the government and people of Iraq, respecting the host position of the Iraqi government and people, respecting Iraqi laws and regulations, observing Islamic ethics and respecting the rights of the Iraqi people, developing physical, spiritual and voluntary participation and social institutions, organizing religious groups and volunteers to provide legal grounds for people's activities with the aim of promoting border provinces (Cultural and Educational Committee of Arbaeen Headquarters, 2022 AD/1401 SH).

Conclusion

The practice theory in International Relations teaches us that focusing solely on macro-discursive constructs cannot lead to an accurate analysis of realities in country-to-country relations. Rather, practices and their effects on international phenomena should also be analyzed. Based on this theoretical approach, the main question of this article was 'What impact has Arbaeen's march as a practice had on Iran's soft power in Iraq?' Through collecting primary data by interviewing Iranian and Iraqi elites, authors have concluded, that the Arbaeen March as a

transnational practice provides a basis for cultural, social, executive, and even economic interactions between Iran and Iraq. Therefore, it strengthens Iran's soft power in Iraq. When common values lead to acceptable behaviors between two countries, soft power becomes very important in their relations.

The Arbaeen march produces and reproduces these common values between Iran and Iraq. The Arbaeen March can be regarded as a starting point for creating a long-term strategy for increasing cultural interactions between Iran and Iraq. The attention of elites and people to the challenges of Arbaeen and public policy-making can deepen and stabilize the effects of the Arbaeen march on Iran-Iraq relations. In general, the six impacts of the Arbaeen march on Iran's soft power in Iraq are strengthening public diplomacy in Iran, forming citizen diplomacy, creating social links between Iran and Iraq, reducing Arab-Persian tensions, establishing joint operations rooms, and forming an Arbaeen headquarter.

As a result of examining the impact of the Arbaeen march on Iran-Iraq relations, it is clear that its religious practice of Arbaeen March has had a positive effect on Iran's soft power in Iraq. From this perspective, the claim of practice theorist in International Relations it can be confirmed that practices have ontological status in international affairs; it means that they can independently influence international phenomena.

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