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Pathology of tourism between Iraq and Iran an Iranian point of view

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Since 2014

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Introduction:

Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, this country had the largest number of Western tourists among its neighbors. About 700,000 Western tourists traveled to the country a year. After the revolution, this situation completely changed. First because of the unrest related to the revolution, then the beginning of the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, and finally, the reluctance of part of the Iranian governing body to develop tourism. In fact, on the one hand, this part of the Iranian government had a security issue view of Western tourists and felt insecure on their part, and on the other hand, because Western tourists were more interested in visiting Iranian monuments, especially pre-Islamic monuments such as Persepolis, the government did not want to develop this part of tourism. This issue goes back to the confrontation between the Islamic government and the history of pre-Islamic Iran and Iranian nationalism. Therefore, focusing on religious tourism, especially attracting Shiite tourists from the region and neighboring countries, was given priority. In the 1990s the ending of the Iran-Iraq war, the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus their leaving of Afghanistan and the founding of the Republic of Azerbaijan, gave Iranian officials the opportunity to focus on attracting Shiite tourists. However, there were still obstacles in the way of these tourist-sending countries. The civil war in Afghanistan had kept the country insecure and Iranian officials were reluctant to allow Afghans to enter Iran en masse. Before that, about three million Afghan refugees came to Iran and the country's capacity for immigrants was full. As soon as the Republic of Azerbaijan gained independence from the Soviet Union, it entered into a comprehensive war with the newly independent Republic of Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Finally, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and confronted the West, which imposed sanctions and restrictions on Iraq that prevented its citizens from traveling to Iran.

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In the early years of the 21st century, the situation in all three countries changed again. Afghanistan and Iraq were saved from the former dictatorial regimes by the US and its allies, and despite all the problems they faced this time, their situation became a little more stable. The situation in the Republic of Azerbaijan had also improved.

This time the restrictions were mostly imposed by Iran. Iranian officials still did not want visas to be issued easily to Afghans, and if Afghan citizens had a chance to obtain the Iranian visa after going through many hardships, they would have to pay a hundred dollars to obtain one. Conditions were better for the citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan. However, due to their rush to buy cheap Iranian goods, the use of specialized doctors and hospitals in Iran, etc., caused restrictions, although not as much as the Afghans. The situation for Iraqi citizens, however, was completely different. Due to the fact that this country is the burial place of six Shiite Imams, especially Imam Hussein (AS) and Imam Ali (AS), who are very holy and respected by the Shiites, the enthusiasm of the Islamic government of Iran and the people of this country to travel there was very high. Thus, both the government and a significant portion of the people were deeply interested in lifting travel restrictions. Nevertheless, nearly two decades after the restrictions were lifted, there are still significant restrictions, whether on visas, or other cultural and economic restrictions.

This article seeks to identify these limitations, examine the reasons for them, and finally offer suggestions for removing or reducing these limitations and increasing sustainable tourism between the two countries. In this way, the main focus of this article is on the restrictions of Iraqi tourists to travel to Iran and especially the reactions of some Iranians to these trips. So, this article does not deal much with the issue of Iranians traveling, including Iranian Kurds to Iraqi Kurdistan or Iraqi Kurds traveling to Iran.

Findings:

According to the statistical yearbook of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism of Iran (2021) in 2019,¹ ie before the epidemic of

1. Of course, the common calendar in Iran is the solar Hijri, which the new year begins on March 21 (Nowruz) and continues until March 20 of the following year. So when we say 2019, for example, we mean from March 21, 2019 to March 20, 2020.

the coronavirus, which dealt the strongest blow to tourism around the world, 8.832.050 foreign tourists entered Iran. Of course, there are always serious doubts on these statistics. Hoteliers, tour guides and tour experts have repeatedly objected to these figures. Because a tourist has a specific definition and anyone who enters a country can not be called a tourist. Based on the definition of the World Tourism Organization:

The act of people who travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited (cited in Gee. 1997: 5).²

Therefore, those who go to work in another country are not considered tourists. However, a large part of this figure of eight million are actually Afghans who come to work in Iran. Also, according to various definitions of tourism, the tourist stays at the destination for at least one night and at most one year. Therefore, Azerbaijanis or Iraqis who enter Iran, buy goods because of the cheap price and return to their country in an hour or two, can not be called tourists. On the other hand, the same statistical system is not accurate and reliable (Parliamentary Research Center. 2019: 29).³ This means that, for example, in the same statistic provided by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, there is no detailed information often, such as which countries Iranian outbound tourists go to and the number of incoming tourists coming to Iran from other countries is not specified separately and the researcher has to cite media reports.

But if we ignore these arguments, out of the nearly 9 million people who entered Iran in 2019, the Iraqis made up the most common majority with 3 million 165 thousand 839 people. In other words, Iraqis make up about 36% of the total number of tourists entering Iran. In the previous year, 2018, Iraq had sent 2 million 598 thousand 230 tourists to Iran. So, the number of Iraqi tourists who visited Iran in 2019 had increased by 21.8% compared to the same number of tourists in 2018. According the report of the Parliamentary Research Center (2019: 21) the main reason for the presence of so many Iraqi tourists

2. Gee, C and Fayos-Sola, E. (1997). International Tourism: A Global Perspective. Madrid: WTO.

3. Parliamentary Research Center (2019), Requirements for the realization of the second step of the revolution and tourism (with a focus on family tourism), Deputy of Social and Cultural Research.

in Iran is related to “the change in Iran’s approach to Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam.” According to the Deputy Minister of Tourism of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage,⁴ in addition to pilgrimage, Iraqis have been coming to Iran for medical treatment for several years, and their travels are getting a little longer, which is beneficial for Iranian tourism.

After Iraq, the countries of the Republic of Azerbaijan with 1.879.935 tourists were in second place and Afghanistan with 1.265.291 tourists were in the third place of tourist-sender to Iran.

This high number of Iraqi tourists in Iran is, of course, a two-way phenomenon. In other words, Iraq is also the main destination for Iranian religious tourists. Two years after the end of the war between the two countries, in 1990, an agreement was signed between the political delegations of the two countries, according to which up to three thousand pilgrims were to travel between the two countries every week. But this memorandum was not implemented. Six years later, in 1996, two more meetings were held on this issue and another agreement was reached. Finally, in 1998, the first group of Iranian pilgrims traveled to Iraq, followed by pilgrimage tours. This process came to a halt with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing insecurity in the country. During this period, however, many Iranians eager to visit Iraq traveled there illegally. In 2005, an agreement was re-established between the officials of the two countries to re-launch pilgrimage trips between the two countries. Due to the lack of facilities in the border areas of Iraq, the Iranian government built and commissioned a significant part of the facilities and amenities in these areas.⁵ Therefore, the number of Iranian pilgrims traveling to Iraq was increasing every year.

Until 2015, the number of Iranian tourists in Turkey was more than the number of Iranian tourists in Iraq. But from this year onwards, the number of Iranian tourists to Iraq increased, and thus Iraq became the most attractive destination for Iranians. However, it should be noted that the nature of these two destinations and the reasons why Iranians travel to them are quite different: Turkey is a destination mainly for recreation, shopping and experiencing (cultural and social) freedoms, while Iraq is a purely pilgrimage destination for Iranians.

4. <https://www.isna.ir/news/97091708500>

5. <https://news.haj.ir/news/ID/9021>

Out of a total of 9,517,011 Iranian tourists in 2019, a big part traveled to Iraq. Accurate travel statistics to Iraq were not available; But according to Iranian officials, we know that 3,080,000 Iranians traveled to Iraq for the Arbaeen march alone. If we consider the pilgrimages of Iranians to Iraq in other months of the year (whether in the form of pilgrimage tours or individual trips), this number will undoubtedly increase. In 2018, at least two and a half million Iranians participated in the Arbaeen ceremony⁶ (exact number of Arbaeen pilgrims this year could not be found). In 2017, 4.229.000 Iranians traveled to Iraq, of which 2 million and 320 thousand were there for Arbaeen.⁷ The desire of Iranians to travel to Iraq and make pilgrimages is such that even after the ban on travel between the two countries due to the spread of the coronavirus, many individuals and groups continued to travel to this country by circumventing the law, which is criticized by officials.⁸

Despite the desire of the people of the two countries to travel to each other, there are still issues and problems in this area that, if not managed, can have irreparable negative consequences not only for tourism between the two countries, but also for the relations between them. Most of these issues are due to the misconceptions of some people in these countries about tourists from the other country. Although a significant number of Iranians, especially Iranian religious people⁹, consider Iraqis and especially Shiites who travel to Iran as their brothers and sisters, there are also a significant number of Iranians who do not feel good about the presence of Iraqis in Iran. This feeling manifests itself to the extent that many Iraqi tourists in Iran also understand it and complain about this view of Iranians towards them.¹⁰

Of course, the negative feeling about the presence of Iraqis in Iran is not the only reason for Iraqis' dissatisfaction with their trip to Iran. For example, the Director General of Tourism Monitoring and Evaluation in Iran, without elaborating further, believes that the activities of intermediaries and brokers have

6. <https://shorturl.at/eirAP>

7. <https://shorturl.at/styLZ>

8. <https://shorturl.at/yBCU6>

9. Here, a religious person is someone who pays more attention to religious rituals such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage of imams, etc., and has deeper religious beliefs than religious commands and narrations.

10. <http://www.abadannews.com/index.aspx?pageid=140&newsview=12155>

at times caused dissatisfaction among Iraqi tourists.¹¹ In general, the weakness of infrastructure in the destination country is one of the main reasons for the dissatisfaction of both parties. Iranian tourists complain about poor roads, lack of service infrastructure in Iraq and health issues. On the other hand, Iraqi tourists sometimes have similar criticisms of Iran. Although the situation of roads, infrastructure and health in Iran seems to be better than in Iraq, it seems that Iraqi tourists compare the situation in Iran with other destinations such as Turkey, UAE, etc. At the very least, Turkey is a serious competitor for Iran in attracting Iraqi tourists, and Iraqi tourists who have traveled to both of these countries are aware that the tourism sector in Turkey is more developed than in Iran.

Another point is that despite the political and religious closeness of the two countries and the exchange of millions of tourists each year, the citizens of these two countries still need a visa to travel to each other. The Iranian government has repeatedly offered the Iraqi government to abolish visas between the two countries, but that request has not been accepted by Iraqi officials.¹² In the final decision and agreement, the visa is currently revoked only for Arbaeen pilgrims for 45 days, and visas are still required for the rest of the year.

Challenges and obstacles to tourism development between the two countries:

The present paper focuses on software barriers (cultural and social) rather than hardware issues and challenges (such as infrastructure and facilities). This is because a significant part of the hardware challenges depend on the economic situation of the countries and neither Iran nor Iraq are in a good position in this regard. Therefore, those limitations are somewhat understandable. But software barriers are less directly related to the economic situation and can be partially removed or corrected with the right planning. On the other hand, software development is a prerequisite for hardware development. In other words, if tourism infrastructure is well provided in a destination, but cultural and social barriers remain, tourism will certainly not flourish there. However, if cultural and social barriers give way to social and cultural empathy and closeness, tourists will be better able to cope with the hardware constraints there. The influx of millions of Iranian pilgrims to Iraq, despite the restrictions and accommodation in tents

11. <https://www.isna.ir/news/97062412272>

12. <https://www.irna.ir/news/84367809>

or even sleeping outdoors, is the best example of this claim. However, this does not mean ignoring hardware limitations and not trying to solve them; Rather, this article is more based on the concerns of the researcher on the one hand and his expertise on the other. Here, the main cultural barriers to tourism development between the two countries, especially the cultural barriers to the presence of Iraqi tourists in Iran, are examined.

1- Ignoring the tourists of neighboring countries and seeing only Westerners as real tourists.

Generally, the image of a tourist in the minds of Iranians, whether in the minds of officials and managers or in the minds of citizens, is a western person, especially a blond and blue-eyed person, with a backpack on their shoulder, a camera hanging around their neck and sandals on their feet and watching attractions. “Based on such an approach, in the first step of the Islamic Revolution, no comprehensive and codified program has been developed with a view to the capacity of neighboring countries in terms of tourist arrivals from these countries” (Center for Parliamentary Studies. 2019: 16). However, the number of European tourists who travel to Iran is usually less than three hundred thousand a year, and in exceptional cases close to five hundred thousand; But every year millions of tourists from neighboring countries travel to Iran.¹³ This situation has now somewhat changed in the minds of the rulers, especially with the ideological view based on Shiism since it accepts at least the Iraqi citizens (not yet the Shiites in Afghanistan or Pakistan). But Iranian citizens still do not have such a view about Iraqi tourists. The tourism private sector (such as hoteliers, travel agencies, tour guides, etc.) seems to have been realistic and receptive to tourists from neighboring countries (such as Iraqis) even before the authorities.

2- Historical hatred of the Arabs and the uniform view to all Arabs.

Iranians have historically shown a kind of cultural resistance to the Arabs. In the first centuries of the arrival of Islam in Iran, this resistance showed itself in the Shu’abiya movement. But about 150 years ago, when on the one hand new archeological findings introduced the brilliant civilizations of pre-Islamic Iran and on the other hand European nationalism became popular in Iran, Arabs and Islam were recognized by some Iranian intellectuals as the cause of the country’s backwardness. This view also spread among a significant number of Iranians,

13. <https://www.isna.ir/news/97062412272>

and now some Iranians still recognize modern-day Arabs as the cause of their misery. Any dispute between the Islamic Republic of Iran and an Arab country can be seen in the minds of many Iranians as a confrontation between Iran and the Arabs, regardless of the diversity between the Arabs. For example, many Iranians do not see differences between Arab countries or even among the citizens of any Arab-speaking country. That is why the Shiite Arabs of Iraq, or even Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, whose hope is in Iran in many cases, are seen no different from a Saudi Wahhabi Arab in the eyes of some Iranians.

Of course, this view is not unique to Iranians, and generally European, American, and even non-Arab Asian countries have a similar view of Arabs.¹⁴ For example, there is this unpleasant feeling among the Turkish people towards Arabs (in general). However, since a significant portion of Turkey's income comes from foreign tourists, these feelings are not at least apparent. Many Arab citizens have already bought houses in various cities in Turkey, especially Istanbul, as well as in the northern Black Sea coastal cities. The author has seen many times this feeling of dissatisfaction of many Turkish citizens towards the presence of Arab tourists in their country.

This inappropriate view of the Iraqi citizens sometimes spreads to the Kurdish citizens of this country, too. Based on a study on medical tourists from Iraqi Kurdistan in Iran, one of the cases that was mentioned a lot was the inappropriate attitudes and views of the medical staff towards these people (Mohammadi and Khaledi. 2019: 9).¹⁵

3- Memories of the war between Iran and Iraq.

The war between the two countries and bad memories in this regard can affect tourism. For example, many Chinese are less interested in traveling to Japan as an attractive tourist market, and as disputes between the two countries escalate (for example, over the ownership of Diovio Island in 2012), this tension caused many Chinese who had bought a Japan tour to cancel their trip. As many Chinese

14. Interestingly, many of the European and American countries also mistaken Iranians for Arabs, and one of the reasons for this is the similarity of the names Iran and Iraq.

15. Mohammadi, Saadi and Khaledi, Fereydoun (2019), Analysis of Factors Affecting the Satisfaction of Foreign Tourists Health Case Study: Tourists of Iraqi Kurdistan Climate, Urban Tourism Quarterly, 6: 3, pp: 16-1.

travel agencies themselves pioneered and canceled their Japan tours (Cheng & Wong, 2014).

For some Iranians, Iraqis are now seen as the ones who martyred or wounded many Iranians during the eight-year war between the two countries, regardless of their religion or status under Saddam Hussein. Of course, according to research (Shahangian et al. 2020: 113), these historical differences between Iranians and Arabs, as well as memories of the eight-year war between the two countries, are also of interest to Iraqis and are among the factors of their resistance to travel to Iran. Also, the religious differences of some Sunni Iraqis should not be overlooked in the Iraqis' dissatisfaction with the development of tourism between the two countries.

4- Economic issues of the presence of Iraqi tourists in Iran:

This discussion can manifest itself in several areas; But they all have one thing in common, and that is that Iranians (at least some of them) feel that the presence of large numbers of Iraqi tourists in their country not only does not benefit them, but also leads to a lack of resources. In some cases, this may not even have to do with Iraqi tourists, but rather with Iran's economic policies regarding Iraqi tourist attractions (here is the shrine of the Imams buried in Iraq). Here are some important examples:

In the wake of widespread US sanctions and the devaluation of Iran's national currency, the Iranian government has sought to keep the prices of some basic commodities low by providing large subsidies. This caused the citizens of some neighboring countries, especially the border residents, to come to Iran to buy these basic goods, buy a large amount of basic goods at cheap prices and return to their country within a few hours. These include Iraqi, Azerbaijani, and to some extent Armenian, Turkish, and Afghan citizens. The purchase of cheap but basic goods by Iraqis in Iran's border markets (for example, the Arvand River Free Zone) has been widely criticized by Iranians and locals alike.¹⁶

Also, the passengers of the Khorramshahr train to Tehran are generally Iraqis, and in many cases the tickets are all bought up, not allowing Iranians a chance to buy them. The main reason for this is corruption among the employees of the Khorramshahr train station, who buy most of the tickets themselves (which is illegal) and then sell them only to Iraqi passengers at a much higher price than the

16. <https://sedayiran.com/fa/news/198047>

approved rate. But since the value of Iran's currency is lower than that of Iraq, it is not difficult for Iraqis to pay such a sum.¹⁷ This has caused great dissatisfaction among Iranian travelers, to the extent that many of them want to allocate separate trains or wagons for Iraqis, or they are dissatisfied with the fact that they are accompanied by Iraqis who carry a lot of suitcases and bags and cram them between the other passengers.

Of course, these profiteering behaviors of some Iranian employees or etc. are also a source of dissatisfaction for Iraqi tourists. For example, Iraqi passengers have repeatedly complained about the fraud of taxi drivers at the Mehran border. Taxi drivers at the Mehran border terminal charge large fares to passengers, and in many cases, on the way to Tehran, they often exchange Iraqi passengers, and in fact buy and sell with the other drivers. These behaviors have been widely reported on Iraqi social media, but it seems that the Iranian authorities have not paid enough attention to the issue.¹⁸

Along with the people, some private tourism activists, are happy with the arrival of Iraqis in the country but are not satisfied with the way they enter and stay. According to them, Iraqis generally enter Iran by themselves and mostly stay in the homes of Iranian Iraqis or those known as "Muaved".¹⁹ They have houses in these cities that many Iraqi tourists go to, generally these are the homes of their relatives.²⁰ Of course, traces of exaggeration and magnification can be seen in such criticisms. Naturally, a significant portion of Iraqi tourists stay in hotels, and some stay in homes that are not necessarily the homes of their acquaintances and are mostly guest houses rented out illegally by Iranians.

"Iraqis are accustomed to traveling with their families and crowds because of their tribal life, they usually stay in one area for a long time," said the director general of Iran's Tourism Monitoring and Evaluation,²¹ in response to criticism of Iraqis' travel to Iran. He continued: "for this reason, they rent a hotel or a house

17. <http://www.abadannews.com/index.aspx?pageid=140&newsview=12155>

18. <https://www.irna.ir/news/83356432>

19. Muaved are Iraqis of Iranian descent who have lived in Iraq for several generations; But first Hassan al-Bakr and then Saddam Hussein expelled them from Iraq and sent them to Iran. Therefore, they settled in cities such as Mashhad, Tehran, Isfahan, etc.

20. <https://www.ion.ir/news/483152>

21. <https://www.isna.ir/news/97062412272>

for a long time, but the most important thing about Iraqi tourists is that they no longer travel only to Iran for pilgrimage, and in addition to Isfahan and Shiraz, they also go to lesser-known places such as Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari. They even pay more money than the Chinese and other tourists in Iran. Most Iraqis travel to Iran for medical reasons and necessarily spend some time recovering, so they spend more.” According to the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, every Iraqi tourist who comes to Iran spends at least a thousand dollars.²²

Regarding the presence of Iraqis in the guest houses, it is not bad to mention the same experience that happened in Turkey. The presence of Arab tourists in Turkey, and in particular their widespread purchase of houses in Turkey, provoked almost similar reactions on Turkish social media; In such a way that the media of this country has occasionally entered into this debate or has made the officials in the field of tourism or real estate to answer. This sensitivity is more about the citizens of some Arab countries, especially Syria.²³ Given the influx of nearly 3 million Syrian refugees into Turkey in recent years, there are many rumors that the Turkish government, and specifically the Erdogan government, is granting citizenship or even free housing to many of them to support his party and government in the elections. However, according to the law and the principle of diplomatic confrontation, the sale of houses to Syrian citizens is prohibited in Turkey, and therefore such statements are based more on rumors and concerns or even political rivalries than on facts.

However, the role of Iraqis and, in general, as the Turks call all of them as “Arabs” in recent years in the development of tourism and the housing market in Turkey is important. In recent years, one in five foreigners who have bought a house in Turkey has been Iraqi.²⁴ In many cases, they buy houses in Turkey, spend two to four weeks on vacation there, and then, in many cases, rent their houses to other Arab tourists. The familiarity of these tourists with the city where they bought is sometimes such that Murat Seracoglu, one of the directors of Turkish

22. <https://eghtesaad24.ir/fa/news/23925>

Of course, based on experience, ambassadors in many countries do not have accurate information and data about tourism and its revenues. The researcher has found this in his other writings and researches.

23. <https://www.haberturk.com/araplarin-turkiye-de-cok-mu-mulku-var-iste-gercek-rakamlar-2476684-ekonomi>

24. <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/02/21/turkiye-de-konut-satin-alan-her-5-yabancidan-biri-irakli-sehir-tercihlerinde-izmir-listede>

travel agencies, uses the phrase “they know [the city] like the palm of their hand”. These tourists even use private cars to get around in Turkey. Sixty percent of Arab tourists who go to Bursa go to the city themselves with information they have already found on the Internet and do not use travel and tour agencies. However, the same tourism director emphasizes that the role of these tourists in the economy of the destination cities is positive; Because during their stay, they use restaurants, shopping malls, tourist attractions, entertainment centers, etc.²⁵

A comparison of the situation of Iraqis buying homes in Turkey with their presence in guest houses in Iran, and the reactions to this behavior, is evidence of the greater sensitivity of Iranians in this area and the better management of Turkey in reducing tensions.^{26&27}

There has also been much criticism on social media about the Iranian government’s spending on developing the shrine of the Imams or even setting up the Arbaeen March in Iraq. In many cases, these costs are compared to the domestic needs of the country, to which the government pays less attention. Of course, this seems to be a two-way street. Many Iraqi citizens, especially non-Shiites, believe that the Iraqi government is spending a lot of money to hold the Arbaeen ceremony,²⁸ and that it is practically shutting the country down for nearly a month.

25. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/bursadan-daire-alan-arap-turistler-tatillerini-yatirima-donusturuyor/1662144#>

26. Of course, this was the first place for Iraqis to buy a house in Turkey since 2018, and Iran replaced Iraq. For example, while in 2018, Iraqi citizens bought 944 houses and Iranian citizens bought 394 houses in Turkey, in 2019, Iran took first place and Iraq took second place in buying houses in Turkey. This is due to the deteriorating economic situation in Iran over the past two years and the uncertainty of the future of the country, which has encouraged many Iranians to consider migrating to other countries or at least having a residence base in another country. <https://tr.euronews.com/2018/09/19/turkiye-den-hangi-ulke-vatandaslari-ne-kadar-konut-aldi>

27. <https://www.haberturk.com/araplarin-turkiye-de-cok-mu-mulku-var-iste-gercek-rakamlar-2476684-ekonomi>

28. For example, I once spent a few days in a hostel in Istanbul with a Sunni Iraqi youth who strongly believed that Iranian pilgrims come to Iraq for Arbaeen, eat and sleep for a month at the expense of the Iraqi government and people, and then return home, while many Iraqis are hungry.

In addition to economic issues directly related to Iraqi tourists, there are other issues that are being criticized by Iranians. Part of Iraq's gas and electricity is supplied by Iran. Given US sanctions, on the one hand, and Iraq's economic situation, on the other, Iraq's debt sometimes reaches billions of dollars when it has not been paid. Sometimes some Iranian officials point to these debts and their non-payment by Iraq, which are immediately widely reported on social media and networks, and Iran's soft and flexible policy towards Iraq is severely criticized. In particular, some Iranian officials believe that Iraq is deliberately not paying these debts and that the US sanctions are an excuse.

5. A stereotypical view on the sexual issues of Arab men.

It seems that most of the reactions to the presence of Iraqi tourists in Iran are related to the discussion of the concubine of Iranian women by Iraqi men. These reactions often became very serious; to the extent that some Iranian media were not ineffective in inciting Iranians in this regard. News of sex between Iraqi men and Iranian women is so rampant that few people questioned their correctness or inaccuracy. The wave began with a series of unproven photos and clips posted on social media about sex between Iraqi men and Iranian women, which drew domestic and foreign critics to criticize the Iranian government.²⁹

One of the first reports on the subject was a detailed report by the British Guardian newspaper³⁰ on sex tourism in Mashhad, especially between Iraqi men and Iranian women, the Persian translation of which was immediately published in some Iranian media outlets and provoked many reactions. The Deutsche Welle Farsi report, with the headline "The Iraqis and men's record travel to Iran",³¹ which was in fact a media mischief, also fits in this direction. What is more, seeing the headline gives the impression that only Iraqi men travel to Iran, and this statement is generally interpreted in light of the social background in Iran and the sensitivities about the relationship between Iraqi men and Iranian women. While most of the tourists who travel to Iran with their families are Iraqis.³² Research

29. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4390293>

30. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/07/prayer-food-sex-and-water-parks-in-irans-holy-city-of-mashhad>

31. <https://shorturl.at/kEQT5>

32. <https://shorturl.at/styLZ>

findings (Zakir, Shokouhi and Kharazmi. 2016: 14)³³ also confirm this point.

Undoubtedly, some Iraqi men are looking for Iranian women for temporary marriages, and in some cases, they succeed; But the number of these people is not significant compared to the population of millions of Iraqi tourists in Iran. But some media outlets are exaggerating in this regard. As mentioned earlier, many Iraqis prefer to go to a guest house instead of a hotel. “Out of 300,000 houses that operate in the field of tourist accommodation, only 20,000 houses have a house-passenger license, about 93% of the houses do not have a house-passenger license and operate outside the supervision of these organizations” (Parliamentary Research Center. 2020: 15).³⁴ Therefore, it is a suitable place for some moral corruptions and various crimes (Ibid., P. 2). Despite the efforts of the executive bodies to register these guest houses and monitor their activities, due to cumbersome laws in this field, only 20,000 guest houses have registered their specifications. The presence of Iraqis in the guest house seems to be one of the reasons for the widespread rumor on the relationship between Iraqi men and Iranian women.

Of course, the media coverage of this issue is not limited to Iraqi male tourists in Iran. There are also rumors and exaggerations about Iranian pilgrims in Iraq. For example, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat newspaper³⁵ published a report on its front page about the sexual relations of Iranian men with Iraqi women in Arbaeen ceremony. Of course, it later deleted this report from the output page of its website.

The extent of the Iranian reaction to this issue can be related to several factors: first, the sensitivity of the Iranians towards the Arabs in general and the lust of the Arab men in particular. There are many historical accounts of Arab soldiers raping Iranian women or taking them as slaves when Islam entered the country. The play “Sasan’s girl, Parvin” by Sadegh Hedayat, one of the most famous Iranian writers, who, of course, had strong anti-Islamic and anti-Arab views,

33. Zaker, Mohammad Hadi; Shokouhi, Mohammad and Kharazmi, Omid Ali (2016), The most important factors affecting the satisfaction of Arab tourists in the region from tourism services in Mashhad, International Conference on Civil Engineering, Architecture, Urban Management and Environment in the third millennium, Rasht, 5 September.

34. Parliamentary Research Center (2016), A Survey of the Status of the Guest House in Iran’s Tourism Industry, Deputy for Social and Cultural Research.

35. <https://aawsat.com/pdf/issue13872a/index.html>

illustrates this phenomenon well. Also, in the ethnic jokes that are common in Iran today, Arab men are known for their large penises. The second factor seems to be the mischief of the media, which is not ineffective either by Iran's enemies, regional rivals in attracting Iraqi tourists,³⁶ or business owners such as hoteliers who do not want Iraqi tourists to visit guest houses.

If this view of Iranians towards Arab tourists in general and Iraqi tourists in particular is not corrected, the bitter experience of people's treatment of tourists from Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1990s may be repeated,³⁷ which almost emptied the Iranian market of their presence forever (especially about Central Asian tourists).

6- Iranians' stubbornness with what government does.

Nikki Kadi in her book *The Results of the Iranian Revolution* (2004) has pointed out that the political view of many Iranian youth is to oppose everything that the government defends and to defend what the government opposes. This phenomenon is also evident in Iran's international relations and foreign policy. For example, many Iranians oppose the anti-American and sometimes even anti-Israeli views of their government, while opposing Iran's widespread support for Palestine and Lebanon. It is in this context that when the Iranian government welcomes Iraqi tourists, many Iranians oppose the presence of Iraqis in Iran simply because they do not trust the government.

Some of these objections stem from Iranian concerns. For example, they are concerned about the government's use of forces close to it in Iraq against possible future Iranian protests. A few years ago, a video of a young Iranian couple having a verbal conflict with a bearded young man was widely circulated on social media; With this writing at the bottom of the clip that:

"Immediate: The disgraceful incident of Qadisiyah was repeated. Harassment and insult to Iranian culture by a zombie of Hashdal-Shabi for the Iranian people. Iranians, look how humiliated we are in our country, which has a history and civilization of 2500 years, these thugs call us arrogant and uncultured. Stand up Iranians. Silence and observation mean the humiliation and slavery for these animals."

But there was no indication in the clip of where or when the incident took place;

36. <https://shorturl.at/styLZ>

37. <https://shorturl.at/styLZ>

Except that the channel label “Masih Alinejad”³⁸ was on the film. Therefore, it could be guessed that the film was taken from his channel. A search of Masih Alinejad’s channel found the clip, but with a completely different text:

“Hear the screams of this man over a motorized Basij who was disturbed for the “enjoining good” [Amr bel-Marouf]. This is forty years of hatred for the rule of the oppressors who treat us like ISIS. Dear Masih, publish this film for me so that other men can learn to support women and the people’s fear of these Basijis will end. Our camera is our weapon. It means getting stronger every day, not saying by force.”

Thus, it turns out that the bearded young man is not an Iraqi Hashd al-Shabi, but an Iranian Basij, with a city accent that some have introduced him as Iraqi to provoke Iranian sentiment.

Of course, a significant part of these reactions is a direct result of the Iranian government’s behavior. In many cases, the government finds itself without the need to clarify and explain the reasons for a decision or its implementation process, and therefore, instead of raising these issues through official sources, they are raised through informal sources, usually in the form of conjecture and probability. It fuels rumors and distrust of the government and its decisions among Iranians.

Suggestions and solutions:

The situations mentioned above are the most important obstacles to the development of tourism between the two countries, especially regarding the presence of Iraqi tourists and pilgrims in Iran. Finally, an attempt is made to provide practical solutions to reduce these barriers. Most of the solutions that have the most possibility of implementation have been considered.

A) Trying to show the diversity of the Arabs

Many Iranians do not know much about the diversity of Arabs (whether in political systems, religions, or dialects). In this regard, it is especially necessary to distinguish two points for Iranians: first, religious diversity and, therefore, the emphasis that Iraqi Shiites (along with Bahrainis, Saudi Shiites, Yemenis, etc.) feel close to Iran. Secondly and more importantly, the political perspective and especially the tensions in the Arab World that are related to Iran should be well explained. For example, three years ago, Haidar al-Abadi implicitly aligned

38. https://t.me/masih_alinejad/8054

himself with US sanctions against Iran. His action provoked very widespread reactions in Iran: why do we feel close to Iraq, when they are simply selling us? At the same time, many not only political groups, but also Iraqi Shiite citizens in general have strongly criticized Haidar al-Abadi's behavior and supported Iran. But the recent reactions were not displayed in Iran; Otherwise, it would undoubtedly have been effective in softening the atmosphere of Iran.

Even now, many Iranians still do not know that Iraqis living in Iran are in fact Iranians and were expelled from Iraq for the same cause during the time of Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam. These need to be informed. But a serious criticism of Iran's sovereignty is that for more than four decades, the government itself has not recognized them as Iranians.

B) Trying to show historical and cultural commonalities

Iran and Iraq want to jointly register the Arbaeen Walk at UNSCO.³⁹ This is good news that shows the religious commonalities of the two countries. But the commonalities of these two countries are not only religious and should be emphasized in other areas as well. For example, part of Iran's historical heritage is on Iraqi soil. Kasra Arch, the most important surviving historical monument from the Sassanid era, is located near Baghdad. Iranian nationalists, even those who criticize the entry of Islam into Iran, have great respect for the Sassanid period and its remnants. Thus, while the existence of a deficit arch in Iraq could bring the two countries closer together, not only has it not been used in practice, but it has sometimes been an obstacle to the development of relations between the two countries. Last year, when part of the monument collapsed, many Iranians on social media and even the media criticized the Iranian government why not spending at least a small portion of its budget on maintaining the Imams' tomb in Iraq for the Kasra Arch. Doesn't this monument matter? Of course, Iraq has already offered Iran to repair the Kasra porch, and Iran has announced that the precondition for such a thing is the financing of Iranian experts by Iraq.⁴⁰ But whatever it was, no result was obtained. Also, part of the archaeological finds on Iraqi soil is the common heritage of the two countries. The world's first electric battery (as it is called, of course) belonged to the Parthian Iranian government, which was discovered near Baghdad. The government of Iraq, in cooperation with the government of Iran, can highlight these works and pay more attention to them (for example, the renovation of the Kasra Arch, which is strongly emphasized),

39. <https://www.isna.ir/news/98040100268>

40. <https://www.isna.ir/news/98040100268>

attracting the enthusiasm and desire of even the non-religious part of Iranian citizens to Iraq and a general pull towards Iraq.

It is also possible for Arbaeen Iranian pilgrims to visit these monuments. Round-trip facilities from Kazemin to Madain, which operate several times a day, with or without charge, take interested pilgrims to this monument and return to the shrines.

Also, although Iraq is the main region of Mesopotamia and the birthplace of many ancient civilizations, Iranians have little knowledge of the historical monuments and civilization left in present-day Iraq. A recent dissertation on the familiarity of Iranians with the historical region of Babylon in Iraq (Qusay al-Bujasem, 2021) show this. Introducing this part of Iraq's historical heritage can also create an attraction for Iranian enthusiasts to travel to this country.

On the other hand, some of the works in the Iraqi National Museum are related to Iranian civilizations and cultures. The Iraqi Museum is a treasure trove in this area, which is still valuable despite being looted during the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. But a major problem is that the cost of tickets to enter the museum is in dollars, which is a significant amount due to the sharp devaluation of the Iranian currency.⁴¹ If the Iraqi authorities, in cooperation with the Iranian authorities, can provide separate tickets for Iranian pilgrims, this will provide the ground for Iranians to become more familiar with the brilliant civilizations of Iraq on the one hand and the historical and civilizational commonalities of the two countries on the other.

In general, the presence of millions of Iranians in the Arbaeen pilgrimage (and even other times of the year in the form of pilgrimage tours or solo trips) is a brilliant opportunity that can be extended beyond being one-dimensional and religious and can allow Iranians become more familiar with Iraqi civilization, Iranian monuments in Iraq and the commonalities of civilization of the two countries.

41. It is useful to express my personal experience in this regard. When I went to Iraq on a walk in Arbaeen in 2018 and finally reached Kazemin, I was eager to see the Iraqi National Museum. But after seeing the cost of the ticket, which was \$ 25 (at that time it was about 3.500.000 TIranian Rials, which was seventy times the ticket price for Iranian museums) and my student status, I canceled visiting the museum and returned to Kazemin.

C) Supporting the Arbaeen travelogues and the travelogues of Iraq in general

In recent years, as millions of Iranians travelled to Iraq for the Arbaeen March, many travelogues have been published by them. A common feature of all these travelogues is the mention of the over-hospitality of the Iraqis who wholeheartedly welcome the Iranian pilgrims. In general, the hospitality of Iraqis is one of the social factors affecting the satisfaction of Arbaeen Iranian pilgrims and one of the reasons for the willingness of Iranians to travel to Iraq again (Tajbakhsh, 2019: 113).⁴² This hospitality undoubtedly has a significant effect on reforming Iranians' view of Iraqis. But these travelogues are read only by a special group of Iranians; specifically, those who have either been on this trip before or plan to do so in the future. Supporting these travelogues to publish more and cheaper copies and thus giving more Iranians access to them can be effective in softening the Iranians' view of Iraqis and therefore allowing for more Iranians' hospitality when Iraqis travel to Iran.

D) Cooperation with the Iranian media in resolving misunderstandings

Above is the discussion of travelogues, which are usually published in book form. But the problem is that now, with the advent of smartphones, less people read books than smartphones and social networks or other media, not only in Iran or Iraq, but around the world. Therefore, it is better for parts of these travelogues, or information about the historical and civilizational monuments of Iraq, or the commonalities of the two countries, etc., to be published in the popular media of the country. Of course, now in confirmation and defense of the expansion of relations between the two countries, many Iranian media close to the state publish a lot of material. But the problem is that critics of the Iraqis presence in Iran are not readers of such media. Therefore, the publication of such content and news in the more public and non-governmental media will be more effective. In addition to the official media, they can be published on popular Telegram channels and popular Instagram pages for a fee.

42. Tajbakhsh, Gholamreza (2019), Satisfaction and Pilgrimage (Case study: Iranian pilgrims on the Arbaeen 2019 pilgrimage in Iraq), *Journal of Hajj and Pilgrimage*, 4: 2, pp. 9-21.

E) Inform Iraqi tourists about the sensitivities of some Iranians.

As a last resort, it is suggested that the Iraqi mass media and social networks inform about the sensitivities of some Iranians about the behavior of some Iraqi tourists in Iran and provide the necessary warnings. This awareness-raising should be done in a way that does not tarnish the pride and character of Iraqis and does not backfire or be abused by critics of the expansion of relations between the two countries.