

Projecting Influence without Coercion: Constraints on India's Soft-Power Engagement in Iraq

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Abstract

India's foreign policy in West Asia has increasingly incorporated soft power as a strategic instrument to project influence without coercion. Iraq, as a conflict-affected and politically fragmented state, represents a critical yet understudied arena for evaluating the effectiveness of India's soft-power diplomacy. Despite India's substantial soft-power resources rooted in its civilizational heritage, democratic values, educational capacity, medical expertise, and non-interventionist diplomatic legacy, its influence in Iraq remains limited in depth and visibility. This article examines the key structural, security, institutional, competitive, and perceptual constraints that hinder India's soft-power engagement in Iraq. It argues that India's soft power in Iraq remains largely under-institutionalised and reactive, preventing the translation of goodwill into sustained influence. The study concludes by outlining future-oriented strategies to enhance India's soft-power effectiveness in Iraq and similar conflict-affected contexts.

Keywords: *Soft power, India–Iraq relations, West Asia, Cultural diplomacy, Conflict-affected states*

Introduction

Soft power has become an increasingly important component of contemporary international relations, particularly for states seeking to shape outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. Joseph Nye's conceptualisation of soft power as the ability to influence preferences through culture, political values, and legitimate policies has provided a foundational framework for analysing non-coercive diplomacy in a globalised world. For India, soft power resonates deeply with its historical identity as a civilizational state, its democratic political system, and its postcolonial commitment to non-alignment and peaceful engagement. In West

Asia, where geopolitical competition is intense and military interventions have produced mixed outcomes, soft power offers India a normative and pragmatic pathway for engagement. Iraq presents a particularly complex case for assessing India's soft-power diplomacy. Since 2003, Iraq has experienced prolonged political instability, violent conflict, and institutional fragmentation, creating a challenging environment for attraction-based engagement. Although India enjoys historical goodwill in Iraq and has maintained consistent diplomatic relations, its soft-power presence remains limited when compared to regional and global actors. This article seeks to examine why India's soft-power engagement in Iraq has not translated into sustained influence, despite the availability of significant soft-power resources.

Conceptual Framework: Soft Power in Conflict-Affected States

The effectiveness of soft power is deeply shaped by context. In stable political environments, soft power operates through open cultural exchange, academic mobility, tourism, and civil society engagement. In contrast, conflict-affected states are characterised by insecurity, restricted mobility, weak institutions, and fragmented public spheres, all of which constrain traditional forms of soft-power projection. Researchers argue that in such contexts, soft power must rely on adaptive strategies centred on humanitarian assistance, capacity building, education, and healthcare rather than mass cultural diplomacy.

In Iraq, the legacy of war, sectarian divisions, and governance challenges has narrowed the space for sustained people-to-people engagement. As a result, soft power becomes less visible and more dependent on institutional continuity and long-term commitment. India's engagement in Iraq must therefore be evaluated not merely in terms of intent or resources but in terms of how effectively its soft-power strategy adapts to these structural constraints.

India's Soft-Power Instruments in Iraq

India possesses a diverse range of soft-power assets that have enhanced its global image, including cultural pluralism, democratic governance, higher education institutions, affordable healthcare, and a globally dispersed diaspora. In principle, these resources position India as an attractive partner for post-conflict states seeking development-oriented cooperation. In Iraq, however, the application of these resources has remained limited and uneven.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives have been sporadic and largely symbolic, constrained by security concerns and the absence of permanent cultural institutions. Educational engagement, including scholarships and academic exchanges, has not been scaled to reflect Iraq's reconstruction needs or youth demographics. Medical diplomacy, particularly through pharmaceutical exports and private healthcare services, has generated some goodwill but remains disconnected from a broader public diplomacy framework. Consequently, India's soft-power engagement in Iraq lacks coherence and strategic depth, limiting its long-term impact.

Table 1. India's Soft-Power Instruments and Their Application in Iraq

Soft-Power Domain	Instruments	Intended Outcomes	Status in Iraq	Key Constraints
Cultural diplomacy	Yoga Day, Cultural events, Cinema	Cultural familiarity	Sporadic	Security risks, lack of cultural centres
Educational diplomacy	ICCR scholarships, Exchanges	Human capital development	Underutilised	Low awareness, limited Arabic outreach
Medical diplomacy	Medical tourism, Pharmaceuticals	Humanitarian goodwill	Moderate	Logistical and institutional barriers
Development cooperation	Training and capacity building	Institutional trust	Minimal	Low visibility
Diaspora engagement	Indian workforce	People-to-people ties	Weak	Security restrictions

Table 1 highlights the fragmented nature of India's soft-power engagement in Iraq, with cultural and educational diplomacy particularly constrained by institutional and security limitations.

Security and Political Constraints

Security instability remains the most significant constraint on India's soft-power engagement in Iraq. Persistent violence, terrorism, and militia activity have imposed severe restrictions on mobility and public engagement. Indian diplomats, professionals, and cultural representatives operate under stringent security protocols, limiting outreach beyond official interactions. These conditions reduce opportunities for sustained cultural exchange, academic collaboration, and grassroots engagement, which are essential for effective soft power.

Political instability further compounds these challenges. Iraq's fragmented political landscape, frequent changes in government, and contested authority structures undermine policy continuity and long-term planning. Soft power, which relies on sustained interaction and trust-building, struggles to take root in an environment where institutional priorities shift frequently and governance remains fragile.

Institutional and Resource Constraints

India's soft-power engagement in Iraq is also constrained by limited institutional investment. Compared to its engagement in regions such as Southeast Asia or Africa, India has devoted relatively modest diplomatic and cultural resources to Iraq. The absence of permanent

cultural centres, limited scholarship allocations, and constrained public diplomacy budgets reflect Iraq's lower prioritisation within India's broader foreign policy framework.

This under-institutionalisation results in short-term and reactive engagement rather than sustained influence. Without dedicated institutions to anchor cultural, educational, and developmental initiatives, India's soft-power efforts remain fragmented and dependent on individual diplomatic initiatives rather than strategic planning.

Competitive Soft-Power Environment

India's soft-power engagement in Iraq unfolds within a highly competitive geopolitical environment. Regional actors such as Iran and Turkey possess deep historical, religious, linguistic, and cultural ties with Iraqi society, which they actively leverage through media networks, religious institutions, and economic engagement. Western states, particularly the United States and European actors, maintain influence through reconstruction aid, non-governmental organisations, and governance support programmes.

In comparison, India's approach is characterised by restraint and non-intervention. While this enhances India's normative credibility, it also limits visibility and societal penetration. In a crowded diplomatic landscape, India's low-profile strategy makes it difficult to compete for attention and influence, particularly among Iraqi political elites and civil society actors.

Table 2. Comparative Soft-Power Presence of External Actors in Iraq

Actor	Key Soft-Power Tools	Level of Societal Penetration	Comparative Advantage
Iran	Religious networks, media	High	Sectarian and ideological ties
Turkey	Cultural centres, Trade, Media	High	Linguistic and historical links
United States	NGOs, Aid, Education	Moderate-High	Financial and institutional capacity
India	Culture, Education, Healthcare	Low-Moderate	Non-interventionist image

Table 2 demonstrates that while India enjoys normative credibility, it lacks the embedded networks that allow other actors to exert deeper societal influence.

Cultural, Educational, and Perceptual Constraints

Despite India's global cultural appeal, its cultural diplomacy in Iraq remains limited in reach. Language barriers, particularly the lack of Arabic-language outreach, constrain effective communication and engagement. Educational ties are similarly underdeveloped, with

relatively low enrolment of Iraqi students in Indian institutions due to limited awareness, security concerns, and competition from Western and regional education providers.

Perception gaps further constrain India's soft power. India is often viewed primarily as an economic partner and energy importer rather than as a contributor to reconstruction, governance, or social development. Limited media visibility and public diplomacy efforts reinforce this narrow perception, reducing India's attractiveness as a long-term strategic partner.

Diaspora and Foreign Policy Constraints

The Indian diaspora has traditionally played a significant role in transmitting soft power. In Iraq, however, the diaspora's impact remains limited. Indian nationals are largely employed in short-term contractual sectors, with restricted societal integration due to security concerns. As a result, diaspora-driven cultural exchange and community engagement remain weak.

At a structural level, India's broader foreign policy orientation also shapes the limits of its soft-power engagement. India's emphasis on strategic autonomy, non-interference, and risk aversion has enabled it to maintain goodwill but has also limited deeper societal involvement in conflict-affected states. Soft power initiatives often remain secondary to immediate economic and political priorities.

Future Perspectives

Looking ahead, India's soft-power engagement in Iraq requires a strategic recalibration. Greater institutionalisation through permanent cultural and educational platforms, expanded Arabic-language outreach, and targeted scholarship programmes could significantly enhance India's visibility and credibility. Medical diplomacy and digital cooperation offer particularly promising avenues for engagement, as they address immediate societal needs while avoiding political entanglement. As Iraq continues its gradual stabilisation, early investment in non-coercive engagement could yield long-term strategic dividends for India.

Conclusion

India's soft-power engagement in Iraq reflects a paradox of significant potential constrained by structural, institutional, and contextual challenges. While India enjoys goodwill rooted in its civilizational heritage, democratic values, and non-interventionist foreign policy, these advantages have not been fully converted into sustained influence. Persistent insecurity, institutional underinvestment, intense competition, and perception gaps collectively limit India's ability to project influence without coercion.

Addressing these constraints requires a coherent, adequately resourced, and context-sensitive soft-power strategy aligned with Iraq's reconstruction and capacity-building needs.

Strengthening soft power in Iraq would not only deepen bilateral relations but also enhance India's broader engagement with conflict-affected regions in West Asia.

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