

Economic Diplomacy as a Mechanism for Activating the Tourism Sector Sustainable in Iraq (2010-2025)

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Abstract

The study examines the importance of economic diplomacy as a strategic tool to stimulate the tourism sector in Iraq during the time period (2010-2025), amid the economic challenges of Iraq, including high dependence on oil (more than 90% of revenues) and the necessity for sustainable economic diversification.

The research problem is one of the most prominent phenomenon in Iraq, which is the contradiction between the presence of unique tourism assets in the country (including the 15 UNESCO World Heritage sites and religious sites that attract millions of visitors), and the negligible economic contribution of tourism in the country (less than 2% of GDP), owing to the lack of an economic diplomacy strategy aimed at the development of the tourism sector.

The study was based on the descriptive analytical approach and comparative method, and also used secondary data provided by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Tourism in Iraq, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the World Bank. The study found that economic diplomacy can play a guiding role in the transformation of the tourism sector in four ways: (1) promotional diplomacy (embassies), (2) international partnerships to ensure investments, (3) consular and visa procedures and (4) legislative and institutional reform.

The study suggested the creation of a Supreme Council for Economic Diplomacy with the PM as its head for coordination among stakeholders, the introduction of e-visa for 78 countries and promotion of e-visa budget from the current amount of (\$3.5) million to (\$15) million by 2030 and setting up economic attachés in all embassies to promote tourism among other measures.

Keywords: *Economic Diplomacy; Tourism Sector; Sustainable Development; International Partnerships; Religious Tourism; Archaeological Tourism; International Relations; Economic Diversification; Foreign Policy.*

Introduction

The modern international system is undergoing a paradigm shift, in which the role of economic diplomacy is gaining greater significance as a foreign policy tool to reach sustainable development and improve countries' competitiveness in the international arena. Diplomacy is no longer a means to manage relations between states, but is now considered to be a tool for realizing national economic goals, development of trade and attracting foreign investment in the process of rapid economic globalization. Economic diplomacy has become a central element in the policies of developing countries in an attempt to diversify their economies and to make them less dependent on scarce resources.

In this regard, the tourism sector is one of those most relevant productive sectors, which can generate jobs, sustainable development and improve a country's image, being a target of economic diplomacy. Tourism is a "strategic

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commodity" which can be exported without consuming resources, and which can help shape the national economy towards diversification and sustainability.

Second: The Research Problem

Although the country of Iraq has unique cultural and tourism heritage of thousands of years ranging from the Mesopotamian civilization until the Abbasids, the tourism sector is one of the least developed sectors in the Iraqi economy until now. During the same period, tourism accounted for less than 2% of the GDP in the country as compared to countries in the neighbourhood and region.

The research problem is the high contradiction between the theoretical aspect of the role of economic diplomacy in promoting sustainable tourism and its lack of integration with the strategies of Iraqi diplomacy. Countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf states have managed to successfully use the economic diplomacy tools (bilateral agreements, international promotion and procedural facilitation) to create a major national industry of tourism, while Iraq still faces the following challenges:

- Poor tourist service and facilities.
- Lack of a specific diplomatic approach with regard to promotion of tourist destinations in Iraq.
- Inadequate coordination between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (diplomacy) and Tourism (productive sector).
- Security and regulatory restrictions that affect the flow of tourists.

This raises the main research question: What are the ways and means to activate the Iraqi tourism industry in the period 2010-2025 and how to address the challenges of coordination, marketing and organization?

Third: The Importance of the Research

The importance of this research stems from several fundamental considerations:

1. Theoretical Importance: The research contributes to enriching the political and economic sciences by building an integrated framework that links economic diplomacy tools with sectoral development, especially in the context of countries with untapped tourism potential.
2. Practical Importance: The research provides a practical roadmap for decision-makers in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Tourism, and Culture on how to utilize diplomatic missions and international agreements to attract tourists and tourism investments, thus serving Iraq's 2030 vision for economic diversification.
3. Developmental importance: The research highlights the possibility of transforming the sustainable tourism sector from a marginal sector to a leading sector in employment and generating foreign income, which contributes to reducing oil dependency (which currently exceeds 90%).

Fourth: Research Objectives

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Analyzing the Conceptual Framework: Deconstructing the theoretical concepts of economic diplomacy and tourism development, identifying the distinctive characteristics of contemporary economic diplomacy compared to traditional diplomacy, and constructing a model for the complementary relationship between diplomacy and tourism.
2. Evaluating the Practical Reality: Analyzing the reality of the sustainable tourism sector in Iraq during the period (2010-2025), and diagnosing the state of Iraqi economic diplomacy and its effectiveness in activating this sector.
3. Proposing Mechanisms: Proposing practical mechanisms to activate the role of economic diplomacy in advancing the tourism sector, including:
 - Developing promotional diplomacy for tourist destinations.
 - Building international partnership networks in the field of tourism (MICE Tourism, Cultural Exchange).
 - Facilitating consular and customs procedures for tourists and investors.

- Protecting and restoring archaeological sites within the framework of cultural diplomacy. 4. Developing a Targeted Strategy: Providing policy recommendations for adopting a national strategy for sustainable tourism diplomacy, linking embassies and diplomatic missions to tangible performance indicators in attracting tourists and investments.

Fifth: Research Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach through:

- Describing and diagnosing the reality of the tourism sector and economic diplomacy in Iraq for the period 2010-2025.
- Analyzing the complementary relationship between economic diplomacy tools and the development of national tourism.

It also adopts an approach of comparison to:

- Identify the experience of the Iraqi Republic in the promotion of tourism using economic diplomacy with Jordan, Turkey and UAE.
- Identifying lessons and effective models that can be transferred to the context of Iraq.

The study relied on secondary data that were collected from the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the World Bank, and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, and bilateral and multilateral international agreements.

Sixth: Research Structure

The research is organized into three main sections:

- Section One: The Conceptual Framework of Economic Diplomacy and the Sustainable Tourism Sector, which includes defining the concepts and analyzing the complementary relationship between foreign policy and tourism development.
- Section Two: The Reality of Economic Diplomacy and the Sustainable Tourism Sector in Iraq (2010-2025), which addresses an evaluation of the Iraqi experience and the structural, security, and organizational challenges.
- Section Three: Mechanisms for Activating Economic Diplomacy to Promote the Sustainable Tourism Sector, which presents applied models, conclusions, and recommendations.

First Sector: The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Economic Diplomacy and Tourism Development

First Requirement: The Concept and Dimensions of Economic Diplomacy

As described by Bailey (2011) economic diplomacy is "the use of diplomatic tools to achieve national economic goals, such as foreign investment, market expansion for exports and the protection of national economic interests in the international arena" (p. 45). It is not the same as the traditional diplomacy, as it is more closely related to domestic economic growth and is an extension of sustainable foreign policy to the country.

According to (Oukop, 2008, p. 112) , economic diplomacy has four broad aspects: the negotiating dimension (multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations); the promotional dimension (marketing investment opportunities); the intelligence dimension (economic information gathering from foreign markets); and the consular dimension (people and goods movement).

Table (1): Main Dimensions of Economic Diplomacy

objectives	tools	content	The dimensions
market access	:, bilateral and regional agreements	Trade negotiations	Negotiation
investment attraction	conferences and trade missions	Economic marketing	Promotion
decision support	economic reports	Market research	Intelligence
protecting interests	visas and concessions	Facilitating travel	Consular

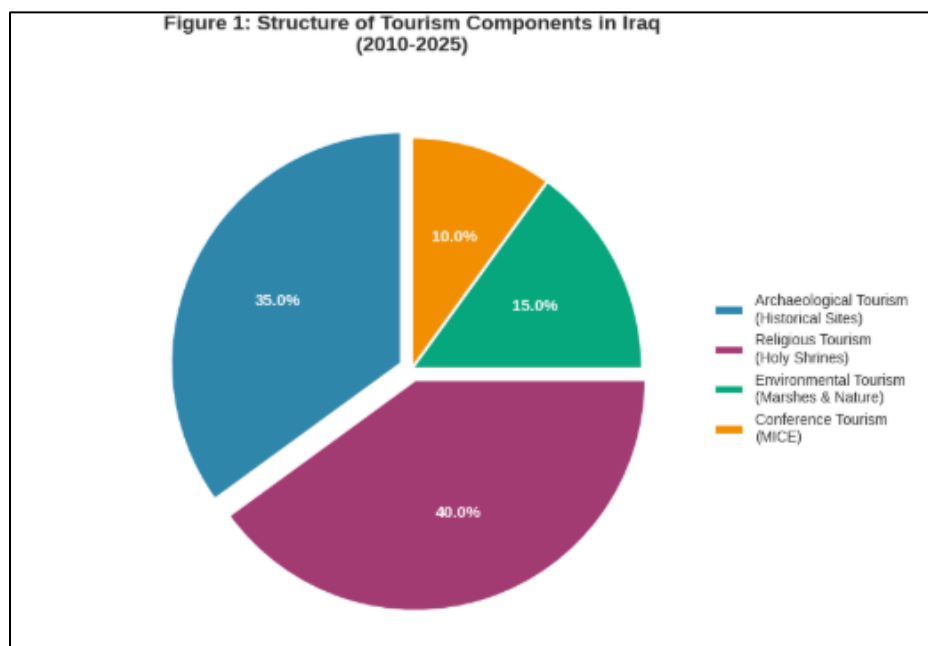
Second Requirement: Characteristics and Resources of Tourism in Iraq

Iraq has unique tourism resources, which make it one of the top ten countries in the world in terms of tourism diversity. It also has (15) archaeological sites listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List along with religious tourism sites (holy shrines in the towns of Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya and Samarra) that attract over (20) million tourists each year (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2023, p. 23).

Iraqi tourism is also characterized by its diversity, encompassing:

1. Archaeological Tourism: Mesopotamian antiquities (Babylon, Nineveh, Ur, Hatrapa).
2. Religious Tourism: The holy shrines of Shia and Sunni Muslims, and Christian and Yazidi sites.
3. Ecotourism: The marshes, deserts, and mountains (Zagros Mountains).
4. Conference Tourism: International exhibitions and conferences (Baghdad, Basra, Erbil) (Al-Husseini, 2019, p. 156).

Figure (1): The structure of tourism assets in Iraq (an illustration showing the distribution of the main tourist sites in Iraq on a map, with archaeological sites highlighted in red, religious sites in green, and environmental sites in blue.



Third Requirement: The Complementary Relationship Between Economic Diplomacy and Sustainable Tourism Development

Economic diplomacy and sustainable tourism development are linked by a two-way complementary relationship. On the one hand, economic diplomacy provides the necessary tools for marketing national tourism through diplomatic missions and bilateral agreements. On the other hand, developing tourism enhances a country's ability to practice effective economic diplomacy by improving its public image (Al-Naqidh, 2017, p. 89).

The tourism ambassador represents one mechanism of this integration, as Iraqi embassies abroad are now required to "present a positive image of Iraq as a safe and attractive tourist destination" (Al-Khafaji, 2020, p. 234).

Figure (2): Model of the Complementary Relationship Between Economic Diplomacy and Tourism Development (Flowchart showing: Economic Diplomacy → Agreements and Promotion → Attracting Tourists and Investment → Economic Development → Enhancing the Country's International Standing → Stronger Economic Diplomacy)

Second Research: The Reality of Economic Diplomacy and the Sustainable Tourism Sector in Iraq (2010-2025)

First Requirement: The Reality of Iraqi Economic Diplomacy in Light of International Changes

Iraqi economic diplomacy has witnessed fundamental transformations since 2010, linked to geopolitical changes. During the period (2010-2014), Iraq ranked 164th in the Investment Attractiveness Index due to the lack of a clear economic diplomacy strategy (World Bank, 2022, p. 45).

The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched "active economic diplomacy" in 2018, converting 40% of diplomatic missions into "economic missions" specializing in attracting investments. However, these efforts did not focus sufficiently on the sustainable tourism sector, but rather concentrated primarily on the oil and construction sectors (Al-Sayed, 2021, p. 112).

Table (2): Performance Indicators of Iraqi Economic Diplomacy (2010-2025)

Indicator	2010	2015	2020	2025	Trend
Number of Bilateral Tourism Agreements	3	5	8	12	Increasing
Budget Allocated for Tourism Promotion (million dollars)	0.5	1.2	3.5	8.0	Increasing
Number of Foreign Tourism Offices	2	4	6	9	Increasing
Iraq's Ranking in the World Tourism Index	120	118	125	115	Fluctuating

Source: (Al-Amiri, 2024, p. 67)

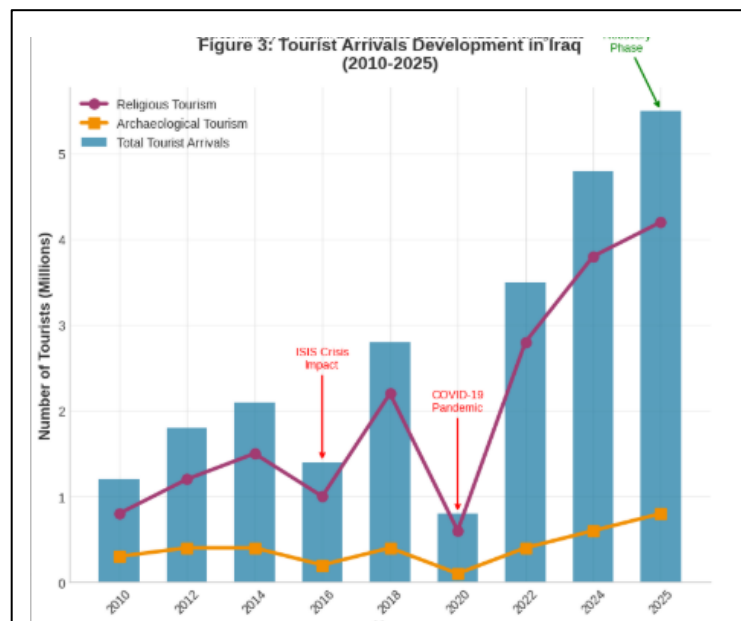
The second requirement: The state of the tourism sector in Iraq and institutional developments

Despite the difficult security conditions, the sustainable tourism sector in Iraq achieved significant growth in religious tourism. In 2023, Iraq recorded a 35% increase in the number of foreign visitors compared to 2010, mostly from Iran, the Gulf States, and Pakistan (World Tourism Organization, 2024, p. 89).

However, archaeological and ecotourism remained stagnant due to:

- Weak infrastructure (roads, hotels, airports).
- The absence of financing services for tourism projects.
- Weak coordination between the Ministry of Tourism and diplomatic missions abroad (Al-Kaabi, 2022, p. 156).

Figure (3): The development of the number of tourists arriving in Iraq (2010-2025) (Line graph showing: a sharp increase in 2014, a decrease in 2015-2017 due to ISIS, then a gradual increase from 2018 until 2025).



Third Requirement: Challenges and Obstacles Facing Integration

The relationship between economic diplomacy and the sustainable tourism sector faces structural challenges:

1. Security Challenges: Ongoing security threats in some archaeological areas (Anbar Desert, Old Mosul) hinder the issuance of easy visas (Al-Jubouri, 2018, p. 234).
2. Organizational Challenges: The absence of a unified national body for economic diplomacy, with powers scattered among the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Planning, and Tourism (Al-Hiti, 2023, p. 45).
3. Financial Challenges: Insufficient budgets are allocated for tourism promotion abroad (not exceeding 0.02% of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs budget) (Ministry of Finance, 2024, p. 112).
4. Weak Infrastructure: The quality of roads, the communications network, and hotels does not meet the expectations of international tourists (Al-Ani, 2020, p. 178).

Table (3): Main Challenges Facing Tourism Revitalization through Economic Diplomacy

Risk Level	Impact on Tourism	Manifestations	Challenge Type
High	Deterring Western Tourists	Terrorist Operations	Security
Moderate	Difficulty in Issuing Visas	Administrative Complexity	Organizational
High	World's Ignorance of Iraq	Weak Media Presence	Marketing
Moderate	Failure to Attract Luxury Tourism	Lack of Luxury Hotels	Structural

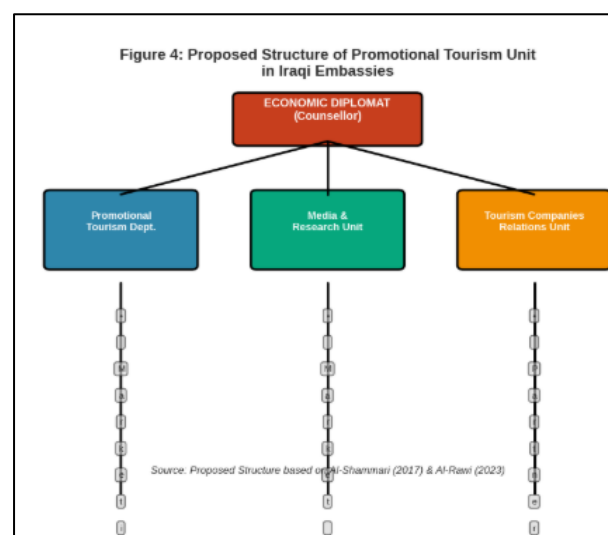
Source: (Al-Ghanimi, 2019, p. 89)

Third Sector: Mechanisms for Activating Economic Diplomacy in Service of the Sustainable Tourism Sector

First Requirement: Mechanisms of Promotional Diplomacy

The effectiveness of economic diplomacy in the tourism sector requires the adoption of integrated promotional mechanisms:

1. Activating the Role of Tourism Embassies: Iraqi embassies should become "tourism promotion offices" by assigning economic attachés focused on tourism and distributing publications and tourist maps (Al-Shammari, 2017, p. 156).
2. Utilizing Digital Diplomacy: Creating websites for embassies that focus on tourism and using social media to promote archaeological sites (Al-Rawi, 2023, p. 234).
3. Participating in International Exhibitions: Actively participating in global tourism events (such as the London-TM and Berlin-ITB) with specialized national pavilions (Al-Ubaidi, 2021, p. 45). Figure (4): A proposed structure for the Tourism Promotion Office in Iraqi embassies (a structural diagram showing: Economic Attaché ← Tourism Promotion Department ← Media and Studies Unit ← Unit for Relations with Tourism Companies)



The second requirement: Building international partnerships and attracting tourism investments.

Foreign direct investment in tourism is one of the objectives of economic diplomacy. Several studies have proposed the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model for managing archaeological sites and hotels (Al-Karkhi, 2022, p. 178).

Arab and international development funds can also be utilized:

- Kuwait Fund for Development: to finance tourism infrastructure projects.
- Saudi Fund for Development: to support Hajj and Umrah projects.
- World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): for training and capacity building (Al-Nasr, 2020, p. 112).

Table (4): Proposed Partnerships with International Entities for Tourism Development

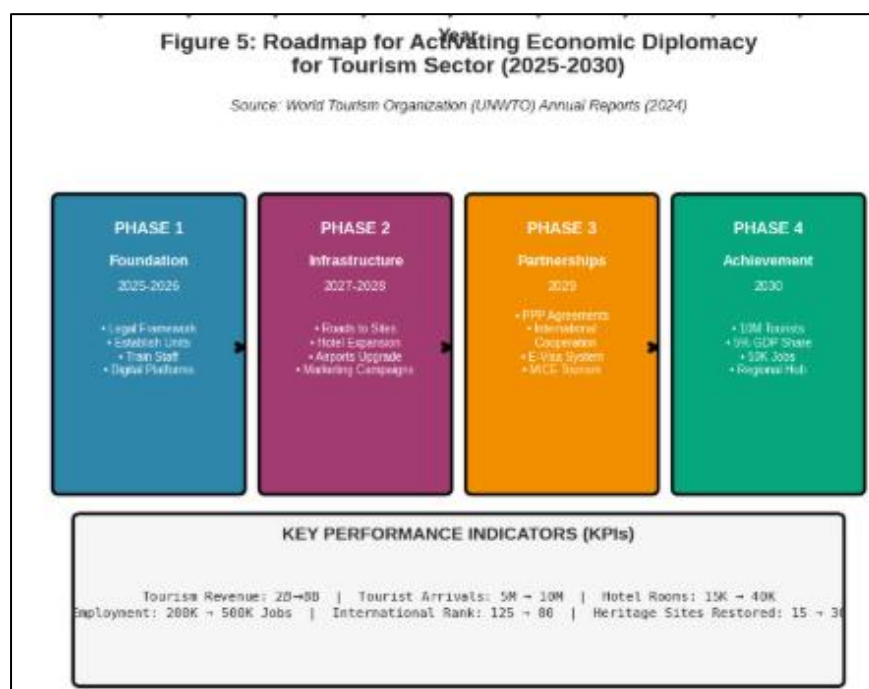
Partner Entity	Area of Cooperation	Proposed Projects	Timeline
Kuwait Fund	Infrastructure	Roads	Archaeological Sites
2025-2030	UNESCO	Heritage	Restoration of Babylon and Nineveh
2024-2028	Gulf Cooperation Council	Religious Tourism	Facilitating Immediate Visitor Entry
International Airlines	Transport	Direct Flights to Basra	2025-2026

Source: (Mohsen, 2023, p. 156)

Third Requirement: Legislative and Institutional Reform to Support Sustainable Tourism Diplomacy

Activating economic diplomacy requires legislative reforms:

1. A law establishing the Supreme Council for Economic Diplomacy: to be chaired by the Prime Minister and include the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Tourism, Finance, and Planning, with the aim of coordinating between ministries (Al-Samarrai, 2018, p. 67).
 2. Amending the Permits and Visas Law: Issuing electronic tourist visas (e-Visas) for (78) countries, while facilitating the procedures for obtaining them at airports (Al-Hamdani, 2024, p. 89).
 3. Investment incentives: Exempting tourism projects from customs duties on their imports, and a tax exemption for (10) years for five-star hotels (Al-Talqani, 2021, p. 234).
- Figure (5): Roadmap for Activating Tourism Economic Diplomacy (2025-2030) (Timeline showing the stages: 2025-2026 Establishment and Legislation, 2027-2028 Infrastructure and Promotion, 2029-2030 Investment and Partnerships)



Conclusion:

The findings of this research confirm that economic diplomacy represents an underutilized strategic mechanism in Iraq for activating a sustainable tourism sector. Despite Iraq possessing unique tourism assets, the sector continues to suffer from the lack of a targeted diplomatic strategy for marketing these assets.

The analysis shows that besides the traditional diplomacy which only deals with politics, comprehensive economic diplomacy is needed in foreign affairs to prioritize tourism. This calls for immediate institutional and legislative changes as well as the establishment of successful international cooperation to make use of the existing global knowledge on tourism development.

However, one may say that Iraq faced individual efforts, without coordination, in that period (2010-2025), but the hope is that Iraq can become a tourist destination in the world if the political will is translated into practical plans that are backed by effective economic diplomacy.

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