

Opportunities and Challenges Facing the Track Two Diplomacy in Iran-US Relations (With an Emphasis on Sports Diplomacy)

Soudabeh Mokhtari¹, Garineh Keshishyan Siraki^{2*},
Arsalan Ghorbani Sheikhneshin³

¹PhD candidate in International Relations, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Kish International Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kish Island, Iran

^{2*}Department of Political Science and International Relations, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

³Department of International Relations, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran

Received: 22 July 2021 ; Accepted: 11 Sep 2021

Abstract

Sports diplomacy is one of the Track Two diplomacy that helps countries in times when two countries cannot improve their relations through official diplomacy. The two countries of Iran and the United States faced many problems in their relations after the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, which made it impossible to continue cooperation with official diplomacy. Therefore, sports diplomacy under informal diplomacy and second track diplomacy has been considered in order to help improve the relations between the two countries, although in a very small measure. In line with this issue, in this article, the opportunities and challenges facing the diplomacy of the Track Two in Iran-US relations (with an emphasis on sports diplomacy) have been discussed and the relevant cases have been examined. In this article, the opportunities, challenges, strengths and weaknesses in this field have been discussed by emphasizing the theoretical framework of SWOT. The findings show that sports diplomacy between the two countries has been able to help improve relations at a very limited level.

Keywords: Sports diplomacy, Track Two diplomacy, Iran, United States, Opportunities, Challenges

Introduction

In the past, due to the nature of the international system, which was mainly based on hard power, the main tools of the governments to realize their international goals were the military, the army, consultations and the

creation of international alliances and coalitions. But in the field of globalization and changes in the international system, countries are trying to use all the tools, such as sports, to achieve their goals. Although, in the

*Corresponding Author's Email: G_keshishyan@azad.ac.ir

framework of traditional power relations in the international system, attention was also paid to sports; However, globalization and the evolution of the nature of the international system, theoretically and practically, have changed the tools used by governments and countries to advance their goals and international interests.

Considering that the structure of the international system has undergone serious changes in the contemporary world. In this structure, political units seek to increase their power, wealth and prestige and use all available old and new tools to achieve these goals. In this framework, the role and functions of sports have increased day by day and are moving beyond their traditional functions. This issue comes back to some specific factors, the most important of which is the importance of finding the political, social and economic effects of sports, its impact on the social strata and the growth and development of sports sciences.

Undoubtedly, the most important issue regarding the connection between sports and international relations is the issue of sports diplomacy. In another form, sports, apart from the professional atmosphere and championship, can serve diplomacy to resolve differences or facilitate relations between countries and create a secondary path (the Track Two diplomacy) in the interaction between countries. Holding matches between Iranian and American teams in football, wrestling and even volleyball have been evaluated in this framework. Although these events have had a limited effect in reducing the differences between the two countries, they have had a positive effect in breaking some taboos and red lines in the political relationship between the two countries. In this article, we intend to list the opportunities and challenges facing the diplomacy of the Track Two be-

tween Iran and the United States by emphasizing sports diplomacy; So, we will address this issue.

2- Problem statement

The interaction of sports with the fields of economy, culture, politics, industry and other social aspects of the society has made sports not to be considered only as entertainment; Rather, many capacities can be seen in it that can create huge political, economic, educational, moral, social, biological and cultural effects. For this reason, the all-round development of sports is widely welcomed in the society, and it finds its position in the society's household basket, and people show a lot of luck to invest in it. Along with the mentioned issues, the cultural and international roles and functions of sports have been developed. So that now sports are considered as one of the tools of public diplomacy and implementation of foreign policy of countries. In fact, governments are trying to bring public opinion with them by using public diplomacy in order to face fewer problems in order to achieve their foreign policy goals. In fact, sports can make the voice of a nation more clearly heard by other politicians and play a complementary role for the policies of a government.

Sports diplomacy allows governments to show remarkable flexibility when their diplomatic relations are weak or strong. Diplomatic interactions of sports make possible a soft way to discover changes in the relations of countries and for them, they create alternative ways of dialogue between nations and unfamiliar people, and in some cases, they are a tool to provoke or punish a nation.

On the other hand, it has been proven that sports are not only a fun and part-time activity, but a scientific phenomenon that has a high capacity beyond the external realm and

can be a social, political, economic, cultural and diplomatic phenomenon. Today, sport is considered as a tool for realizing diplomacy, ideology, nation building and creating national identity and common sense, and access to the international arena and gaining commercial benefits; And the use of sports events for the realization of diplomacy and the realization of the governments' goals is of great interest and can bring opportunities and challenges. This issue has also been effective in the strained relations between Iran and the United States, and for many years, the two countries have tried to use sports diplomacy in the framework of the Track Two diplomacy in a way to reduce the tension in the relations between them.

Among the important cases of sports diplomacy between Iran and America, we can mention the wrestling diplomacy between the national teams of the two countries in 1998 and the football match in the French World Cup in the same year; those wrestlers played the role of cultural ambassadors between the two countries in the best way regardless of political issues. Due to its high capacity, relatively low cost and high productivity, this type of diplomacy can work and have positive results in countries, which unfortunately our politicians either could not or did not take it very seriously.

In fact, sports can have a good result in the development of peace, of course, with the belief and guidance of the diplomatic system of the country, knowingly and guided. Therefore, in this research, an attempt has been made to find out what opportunities and challenges sports diplomacy can have as one of the areas of diplomacy of the second path; And in terms of opportunities, at the lowest cost and at sensitive times, it helps to de-escalate the relations between Iran and the United States, and provides a basis for new

attention to sports diplomacy. Although this research was faced with limitations and challenges such as the reluctance of some experts to discuss and ask questions in this field; This research has tried to examine these opportunities and challenges in addition to the historical investigation of the relations between Iran and the United States at different times and the influence of sports diplomacy.

In the current situation, on the one hand, due to Iran's current sensitive position on the world stage and pressure from some countries, and on the other hand, the presence of Iran's national sports teams in popular international events such as the Olympic Games, the World Cup; An opportunity has arisen to reduce the pressure of the international community, and help the country's sports elites to improve Iran's position in the new world structure. Therefore, the current study tries to investigate the role of second-track diplomacy in the relations between Iran and the United States in relation to sports diplomacy. Undoubtedly, providing short-term, medium-term and long-term solutions in this research can help policymakers in adopting solutions to improve the relations between the two countries. Especially since sports diplomacy is a low-cost, attractive and people-friendly way to restore mutual relations.

The main question

What are the opportunities and challenges of the diplomacy of the Track Two focusing on sports diplomacy in Iran-US relations?

The main hypothesis

Sports diplomacy can be seen as an opportunity by influencing the expansion of peace and friendship, getting out of isolation and economic development, and of course this path has many challenges.

3- Research background

Doosti and Hassanpour qadi (2021); In an article entitled "The place of sports diplomacy in Iran's foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution of 1979". They try to address the position of sports diplomacy in foreign policy in the governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the victory of the Islamic Revolution. The results of their efforts have indicated that the country's sports diplomacy does not follow a special pattern. But as time passes since the beginning of the revolution, the governments oblige themselves to use this diplomacy more in line with their goals, regardless of their political positions. Which, of course, has differences with the current research, and the main difference is the overall view of the role of sports diplomacy. Meanwhile, the current research deals with the role of sports diplomacy in Iran-US relations.

Sabzi et al. (2020), in an article entitled "Designing a model of the concepts of the impact of sports diplomacy on the development of relations between Iran and the United States". They try to examine the role of public diplomacy and specifically sports diplomacy in the relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, focusing on the development and strengthening of their soft power in the world. The authors of this article believe: Considering Iran's successes in recent years in the field of international sports, including the 17th place among 206 countries in the 2012 Olympic Games; This country can use this capacity to help develop its interactions in the international arena. Although this article deals with the role of sports diplomacy in the relations between Iran and the United States, its difference with the current research is the investigation of one aspect and that is the effect of sports diplomacy in the formation of soft power.

Javadipour et al. (2019); In an article titled "The role of sports and sports development in advancing cultural-social policies and foreign relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran". In an interview with a number of experts, they have come to the conclusion that various challenges and weaknesses, including the following, have caused this type of diplomacy to be used less. Lack of a clear and transparent policy, lack of necessary information and knowledge in this field, lack of recognition of the potential abilities of cultural-sports diplomacy. In this article, it is proposed as a solution; that hosting international events and participating in international events can be implemented in the field of sports diplomacy by athletes, coaches and sports personalities with the support of the national media along with the targeted membership of national stars in international forums. The clear difference between this article and the current research is the general view of the article on the category of sports diplomacy, which does not fit with the current research.

Shariyati et al. (2017); In an article entitled "Structural modeling of sports diplomacy components in the development of international relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran", they try to look at the role of sports diplomacy through 10 components in a structural view. These components include the following; International branding and prestige, cultural development, political development, economic development, fight against isolation and sanctions, exit from the dark side, peace and friendship, national unity and integration, media interactions and development of intelligent power in the development of relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The difference between this article and the present research is that it looks generally at the category of sports diplomacy and its im-

pact on the relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but the present research specifically deals with the role of sports diplomacy on the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States at a certain point.

Sabbaghian (2015), in an article titled "Sports Diplomacy" believes; Sports in the world today are widely spread in all countries and new international documents also pay special attention to sports. The internationalization of sports has caused countries to look at international sports competition as a field to advance their national interests and realize their political goals. For this reason, in this article, the author tries to examine the role of sports, especially in major international sports events, in order to advance the diplomatic goals of countries. Of course, as it is clear from the author's point of view, this article has an obvious difference from the current research, and that is the general view of the category of sports diplomacy.

Mannheim (2011), in his book entitled "Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy, Expanding Influence"; The issues of the system in which foreign brokers provide their services have been studied. Also, *New Diplomats*: presents a picture of an industry in the United States created to influence American media, public opinion, and elite opinion for the benefit of foreign government or corporate clients. And it includes an analysis of the information of the Ministry of Justice documents, which identifies the level and type of activities of the United States institutions that are registered as agents of foreign stakeholders. The study of public diplomacy in America, specifically in this book, has a significant difference from the current research, which specifically tries to pay attention to the effect of sports diplomacy in the relations between Iran and the United States.

Zahrana (2011), in the book "Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications of the United States after September 11", has expressed the importance of public diplomacy in the foreign policy of the United States. The present book is divided into three parts: Part I, *The Legacy of Lessons Learned*, reviews US public diplomacy in the period of 9/11. The author gives an overview of the events after the mentioned incident, that is, the era when there was a lot of international support for America. It then examines the events that led to the gradual decline of international support for the United States. Although many analysts believe that anti-Americanism increased in the post-September 11 era; But a more detailed analysis of the current trends in that period, and especially the issues related to public communication, shows that the challenges facing the public diplomacy of the United States were more complicated and costly than to be solved by improving the image of this country. This book tries to pay attention to American public diplomacy after the 9/11 incident, and basically, sports diplomacy has not been given much attention in it, and in this respect, it is very different from the current research.

Malakoutian (2009), in an article titled "Sports and Politics", has studied various aspects of the relationship between sports and politics, and based on this study, he says that the relationship between sports and politics is a two-way relationship; In such a way that on the one hand, politics has an effect on sports through the formulation and implementation of sports strategies. And on the other hand, sport affects politics by strengthening human values and national solidarity and increasing political participation, and of course, it is also used by world powers, especially when international sports are held. The author takes a general look at the phenomenon of sports and its impact on

politics, and it is different from the current research, which specifically deals with the impact of sports diplomacy on the relations between Iran and the United States.

Anna Stasovsky (2013) in an article entitled "Alternative sport for diplomatic activities"; states that success in sports requires a lot of practice, discipline and tactics of patience and skill that help young people before they succeed in various social contexts. In this context, sports diplomacy as a new phenomenon has opened a path in sports, which aims to increase dialogue to open new horizons and perspectives and help to better cultural understanding between the people of the world. The purpose of sports diplomacy is to help overcome cultural differences in sports and its active role in bringing people closer together. As an activity, sport diplomacy first of all teaches good skills such as leadership, teamwork, respect for rules and respect for each other and respect for differences. In this article, the author deals with the influence of his ministry on the general aspects of people's cultural and social life, such as leadership, etc., and in this sense, it is significantly different from the current research.

4-Theoretical framework

The efficient use of planning techniques and methods in approaches based on strategic thinking requires a correct understanding of the theoretical foundations supporting these techniques and methods.

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.



Strengths

Strengths describe what organizations excel at and what separates them from competitors: for example, a strength can be a strong brand, customer loyalty, unique technology, etc.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses do not allow the performance of the organization to reach the optimal level. They are the points that the business needs to improve in order to gain an edge over the competition.

Opportunities

Opportunities refer to favorable external factors that can provide competitive advantage to the organization.

Threats

Threats include factors that have the possibility of harming the organization.

Discussion

The relations between Iran and America in the past century have been completely opposite ends of a spectrum; One end of it is before the Islamic revolution, and the other end appeared after the Islamic revolution, which continues to this day. In the first place, American relations were formed on the basis of a very close strategic alliance that the two countries were always in a very good condition and many regional issues were discussed and debated within the framework of the ties between these two countries. During this period, Iran benefited from the advantages of friendship with America, which includes the use of scientific and military technologies, deep cultural and political ties. In the military aspect, the Shah was allowed to buy many products that America used in its army, and in the political aspect, it was seen as a safe island and America's hope for the future of

the Middle East. Instead, the Shah provided America with everything from the Golan region in various domestic and regional arenas. On the other side of this spectrum is the post-revolution era, when these relations have experienced an intensifying tension. The Islamic Revolution turned the safe island of the Shah and Iran into a mirage for America and was considered a strategic failure for this country, which had not made any preparations to face it. From this period onwards, the trend of tension-causing issues between the two countries has always increased, and has spread to various political-security, cultural, social and economic fields. After the revolution, Iran became the most important ideological enemy of America and offered the most anti-American content to the international arena.

5- Iran-US relations from 1998 to 2022

In the years before the Islamic Revolution, Iran was considered one of the main allies of the United States in the Middle East region, which played an irreplaceable position in Washington's global policies. But the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 basically changed the relationship between Iran and America from a special relationship to a hostile one. However, this did not prevent US presidents in both parties, from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, to reach a possible detente with Tehran. There are many ideological, political and economic factors behind the inability of Washington and Tehran to normalize their relations in the last four decades. However, one of the things that has received less attention is the US presidential election cycle, the subsequent change of administrations and their impact on Iran's politics in creating a moderate or extreme issue.

In fact, on both sides of the hostile relations between Iran and the United States, it is

the nature of the change of government that has reduced the possibility of de-escalation to the minimum possible. For example, in order to de-escalate tensions between Iran and America, the continuation of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's presidency was as necessary as the continuation of Barack Obama's presidency. It is an undeniable fact that on both sides of the tension, the establishment of relatively extreme governments has prevented the de-escalation of tensions.

Especially in the years after 1998, when the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran achieved stability in the governance cycle, this issue has been more evident than ever before. Therefore, by dividing on the effectiveness of different presidents, different periods are drawn in the field of relations between Tehran and Washington.

At the end of Bill Clinton's presidency, which coincided with the effectiveness of the reform government led by Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, the opportunity was provided for Iran and the United States to put the path of de-escalation on the agenda. But the defeat of Al Gore, the representative of the Democratic Party, against the Republican George Bush, who was the leader of the American neoconservative spectrum, further caused the realization of such an event to be completely forgotten; Because basically, Bush and the Republicans had radical positions against Tehran. In the meantime, the terrorist incident of September 11, 2001 became the reason for Tehran to be reduced from the position of the savior of the dialogue of civilizations to the axis of evil in America.

In this situation, the release of confidential information about Iran's nuclear program and the establishment of the revolutionary and conservative government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran made the two countries' entry into the field of de-escalation and dis-

pute resolution even more dark and ambiguous. At the end of George Bush's administration, the pressure of sanctions on Iran was doubled, and this problem increased even more after the effectiveness of Barack Obama and as a result of his diplomatic efforts to create a global consensus against Iran. Although Barack Obama had a relatively soft position for cooperation and reconciliation with Iran, Ahmadinejad's government closed the door to de-escalation by considering the sanctions to be a piece of paper and not trusting Washington's positions.

Nevertheless, as a result of holding the presidential elections in Iran in 2013 and the establishment of the moderate government headed by Hassan Rouhani, the door was opened for negotiations between Tehran and Washington. The coincidence of two moderate governments in Iran and the United States was basically a suitable ground for reaching an agreement on Iran's nuclear program, the result of which could be seen in the 2015 nuclear agreement under the title of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, contrary to the current trend, in the 2016 US presidential elections, just like the chain of events in the relations between the two sides, this time it was the turn of a person who was basically a sworn enemy of the JCPOA; And he considered himself committed to breaking this agreement after reaching the presidency of the White House.

The coming to power of Donald Trump in 2017 was the new procedure of ending the de-escalation process and entering the new arena of increasing tension between the two countries of Iran and the United States. In a situation where Rouhani's government expected to negotiate with the United States on the cancellation of non-nuclear sanctions; Suddenly, with Donald Trump's decision in 2018, Washington withdrew from the 2015

nuclear agreement and the unilateral return of sanctions against Iran was keyed. In general, it can be stated that the sequence and continuation of confrontation between moderate and conservative governments on the basis of ideological, political and cultural differences has been the basis of more than four decades of continuous tension between Tehran and Washington.

6- Sports diplomacy as a part of the Track Two diplomacy and its impact on the relations between Tehran and Washington in 1998-2019

From traditional diplomacy to new diplomacy, sport has had a "beyond entertainment" function that is often used or abused by ruling elites. Sports, as one of the key components of soft power, can be an efficient tool in determining diplomatic relations. Many policymakers and experts support the belief that sports diplomacy is an easy, safe and gentle tool to improve international relations (Min & Choi, 2018). They have used major events as a political propaganda to serve as a way to advance the diplomatic goals of the host countries (Won & Chiu, 2019). If the message and image of a nation is transmitted through sports and the positive characteristics of sports, the perception of the people of other countries about another country will undergo a fundamental change (Murray, 2012).

Therefore, the diplomacy of the second path, focusing on sports diplomacy, can help to strengthen the relations between different countries and also help rebuild the image of a country in the eyes of the world and other countries. The necessity of this type of diplomacy for Iran and America is undeniable. Despite the tensions between America and Iran and the lack of official diplomatic relations between the two countries, various types of people-to-people exchanges, espe-

cially sports, have been among the few forms of civil interaction between the two sides in the years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

Based on the diplomacy of the second path, a deeper reading can be achieved. In this regard, while more than two decades of talking about dialogue with the US on any issue, it is faced with severe attacks from extremists. Regardless of hostile political relations, Iranian athletes compete with their American rivals and millions of people watch these competitions. Therefore, sports events and other exchanges have played a leading role in strengthening the public diplomacy of Iran and the United States. These examples of the second track diplomacy, relying on sports diplomacy, have challenged the malicious stereotypes against Iranians that have become an ingrained part of the American political discourse (Entessar, February 9, 2017).

Iran's revolutionaries and Islamic rulers who initially had a negative approach to competing and participating in various sports arenas, especially against America; They quickly understood the importance of this issue and encountered its positive functions in creating a new image of their country, so they welcomed it with a more positive view. Of course, at first glance, the idea of improving relations between the people of Iran and the United States, as well as the two governments, through sports competitions seemed somewhat strange, because international sports events often crystallize nationalist feelings. Especially since the spirit of sports is related to competition, which means that in a sports competition, unlike, for example, a meeting between filmmakers and academics, each side intends to show its superiority over the other.

This "multiplicity of meanings and symbols" makes sports diplomacy "one of the

most ambiguous tools of doing diplomacy", which makes it particularly useful; Because "it can show that a country is strong and not to be underestimated, but also flexible and negotiable (Peppard and Riordan, 1993: p. 9). Therefore, competition and cooperation are symbolized by the same event. On a more practical level, administrators, coaches and diplomats need to work together to create sporting exchanges, which can help break the ice between officials and ordinary citizens of remote countries (Peppard and Riordan, 1993: p.2). Of course, as it was said in the discussion of sports diplomacy, the importance of sports diplomacy is that it involves the politicians behind the story and in a warm atmosphere, in order to send the necessary pulses to the politicians of other countries.

In the historical dimension, the importance and function of sports diplomacy in Iran-US relations was understood by Washington before the Islamic Revolution. This was also related to the prevalence of anti-American atmosphere caused by the initial waves of the revolution and the overthrow of the national government of Mohammad Mossadegh with the cooperation of the United States. The Shah of Iran, who fled the country due to internal opposition, returned to the country on August 19, 1953 with the direct support of the American and British governments and after the overthrow of the Mossadegh government. The disillusionment of the Iranian people with the Americans due to their interference in the country's internal affairs led to a wide wave of anti-American views and movements. Especially since this wave was welcomed by the enthusiasts of the anti-imperialist ideas of communism.

Therefore, two years later, on April 13, 1955, David Albritton, the former American Olympic high jump champion, arrived in Tehran. The US Department of State and the

Iranian government had invited this retired athlete for an initial period of four months to promote American sports in this country. Albritton's trip formed an important part of the US sports diplomacy campaign of the 1950s that influenced public affairs. In addition to trying to dissuade Iranians from supporting the Soviet Union, these initiatives were aimed at promoting positive perceptions of the United States among a population that was increasingly drawn to anti-American rhetoric and slogans (Wainwright, 2021: p.812). The US Intelligence Agency implemented these policies on behalf of the State Department. In 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the new president of the United States, founded the organization to promote his country's norms, values, and ideas to audiences abroad.

Based on the evaluation of this organization, sports were evaluated as the most effective way to interact with the people of Iran. Certain sports entertainments were deeply rooted in the public consciousness, which were very effective in shaping national identity. The Iranian government assisted the agency's efforts here. Senior officials wanted to prevent citizens from traditional entertainment such as Iranian wrestling. Instead, they sought to show the modernity, power and development of Iran by increasing the interest and participation of people in competitive sports of other countries. This included wrestling and football, as well as the various athletics competitions present in the Olympics (White House Office, July 14, 1953).

The new approach was the basis for planning a diplomatic application program to develop relations with Iran and also to create a positive image of America in the minds of Iranians. As a result, after the Islamic Revolution, when the tensions were high, it could

be used as a less expensive way to de-escalate. The most important period of the formation of these relations was from the beginning of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's presidency, which will be discussed further.

During this time, while the US government insisted that government-to-government negotiations were only a means to begin the process of improving relations. A number of non-governmental organizations in the United States responded enthusiastically to Khatami's invitation to exchange elites, professors, and cultural relations within the framework of Second Track diplomacy. At that time, several Iranian delegations have visited the United States and a smaller number of Americans have also visited Iran, which usually had positive results (Chehabi, 2007: p. 89). The most famous sports contacts that received special attention, which also brought many positive reactions, were the mutual meetings between Iranian and American wrestlers and the football match between Iran and the United States on June 21, 1998 in Lyon, France, which became known as the match of the century.

Iran's presence in the international sports scene continued despite the revolution, because the importance of this arena was understood by the revolution. Of course, Iran boycotted both the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow (due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) and the 1984 Games in Los Angeles (to show opposition to American hegemony) in the name of the declared foreign policy of the new regime. The doctrine of "Neither West nor East" was undoubtedly the most important foreign policy declared by Iran at that time.

In this way, Iranian athletes were banned from participating in the Olympic Games for 12 years, which caused a lot of damage to the country's sports. In fact, it must be said that

the opportunity that sports diplomacy could provide to political diplomacy was easily lost. This opportunity, the use of sports diplomacy, could have been used to introduce and issue the message of Iran's nascent revolution to other countries of the world, but unfortunately, this opportunity was easily missed. After that, when Iran sent a team abroad, some athletes used this trip to escape. While the rest were told to use competitions for Islamic propagation (Keddie and Mark, 1990). In some of these events, Iranian athletes competed with Americans, but they were not always willing to face Israelis.

But regarding the sports diplomacy between the United States and Iran, it should be said: these links are mainly focused on the two disciplines of freestyle wrestling and football. Given the stark disparity between the United States, as the world's biggest sporting power since the fall of the Soviet Union in terms of Olympic medals won, and Iran, which has had a much more limited presence on the international sports scene, these two fields are ideal. Because in freestyle wrestling, both countries are among the best in the world, while in football, both are definitely ordinary (Chehabi, 2007: p.96).

This would have prevented humiliating sporting defeats that could have done more harm by hurting national pride. It should be noted, however, that in the United States, wrestling and football, while attracting millions of sports fans in high schools and colleges, are not spectator sports. In addition, international sports events are less televised in the United States than in Iran, as Americans show much less interest in world championships or foreign sports and prefer to watch American football or basketball matches of their local teams. This factor limits the potential of sports contacts in wrestling and football to change the attitude of the

American people about Iranians and the political system of this country. However, this issue is the opposite in Iran. Not only wrestling is a very popular sport, but football has also found a special place among Iranian people. However, Iranians not only support domestic teams in these two sports, especially football, but also keenly follow world and regional football tournaments and, to a lesser extent, wrestling. This makes Iranian people more effective than Americans in sports diplomacy.

7- Football match of the century and redefining sports diplomacy between Iran and America

The gap between Iran qualifying for the World Cup in France in November 1997 and the match against the United States on June 21, 1998 was accompanied by a fierce conflict between the officials of Iran's domestic sports, part of which was the tension between the reformist and fundamentalist political forces. But in the end, Khatami's comrades won, and before that, the speakers of Jam announced that they will surprise the world. Takhti's tradition is now included: it provides a reservoir of values and attitudes embedded in traditional Iranian culture that can be used to correct the image of the "ugly Iranian". Far from opposing their host, the Iranian players came to the field with a display of zeal and a revolutionary look, well-groomed and without beards (Chehabi, 2007: p.99) and presented a bouquet of flowers to their counterparts before each game.

The media called the Iran-US football match a game of spite and revenge; But the American and Iranian authorities had ordered the players to be polite and FIFA, as the governing body of world football, had declared June 21 as "Fair Play Day". Clinton recorded a message broadcast before the game in

which he expressed hope that the game would be "a step toward ending the alienation between our nations" (Longman, 21 June 1996: p. 2). When the big moment arrived, the two teams exchanged gifts and eschewed the customary pre-match photos in favor of a group photo with all 22 players to kick off the match. After the end of the game, when the Iranian team won 2-1, the players changed their shirts. The two teams jointly received the FIFA Fair Play Award on 1 February 1999 (Vecsey, 22 June 1998: C1 and C9).

Clinton congratulated the victory of the Iranian team. In Iran, the official reaction, like the government itself, was Janus like. President Khatami emphasized sports ethics and said: "What is important is the effort, hard work, solidarity, skill and intelligence of our youth", but admitted that "of course, when the result of this effort is victory, the feeling of happiness increases". Ayatollah Khamenei, on the other hand, likened the victory to the revolution and the war with Iraq and said: "Tonight, the strong and arrogant opponent felt the bitter taste of defeat at your hands again." At the grassroots level in Iran, people celebrated their team's victory instead of America's defeat, and the general joy was devoid of any anti-American flavor. Elsewhere in the Middle East, however, the population celebrated the US defeat, particularly in the Shia-dominated areas of Lebanon, where Iran enjoys a degree of soft power (Sciolino, 22 June 1998: c9). Of course, the result was largely ignored in America.

Of course, the football diplomacy between the two countries did not end here, and two

years later, in January 2018, the Iranian national football team, which won the game of the century in the French World Cup, was invited to hold a friendly match in Los Angeles. Although this meeting did not have the sensitivity of the previous meeting, it showed that the two countries have realized the importance of football to reduce tensions and a way for more communication, especially through the second path. These sporting events were followed by other similar events that included wrestling, football and other less popular sports.

8- Obstacles of sports diplomacy in the Trump era

In this regard, American and Iranian sports diplomacy became a victim of Trump's harsh policy towards the Islamic Republic and Iranians in general. President Trump's executive order temporarily banning Iranians from traveling to the United States had a devastating effect on the 2017 World Wrestling Championships in Kermanshah. Trump's decision immediately affected Iran's sports teams, as the US government denied visas to Iran's archery team to participate in the Vegas Shoot, the world's largest and most prestigious archery tournament. Partly due to Trump's executive order and partly due to the non-issuance of visas for the Iranian archery team, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on January 3, 2017 that it would reciprocate by not issuing visas to the US wrestling team to travel to Iran.

(Chart 1) which is a kind of framework of the role of sports diplomacy.

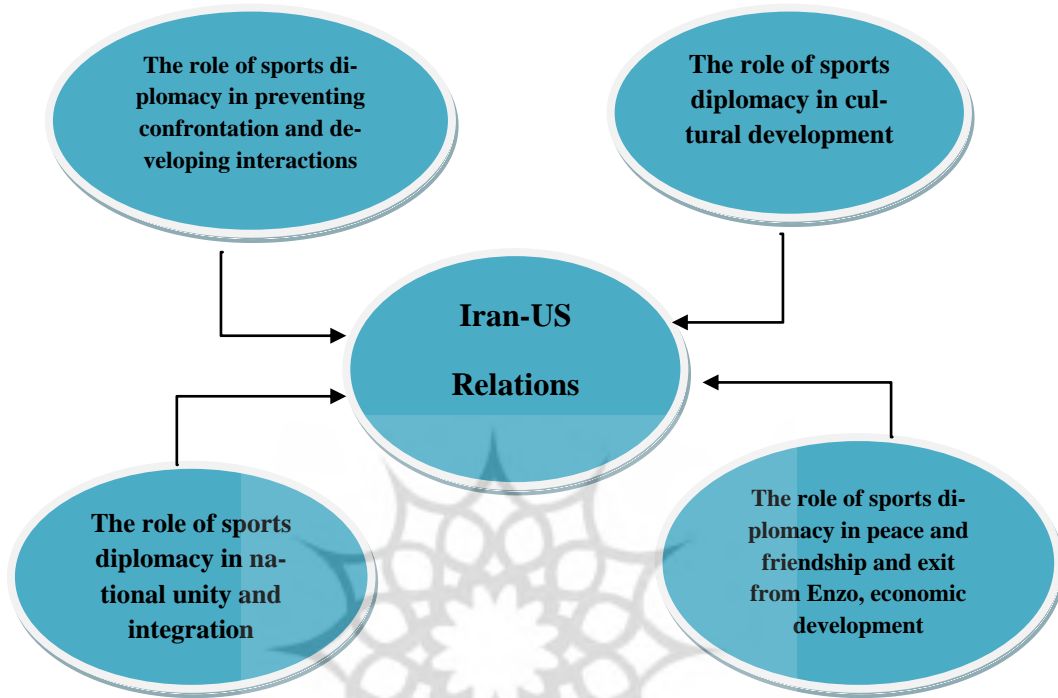


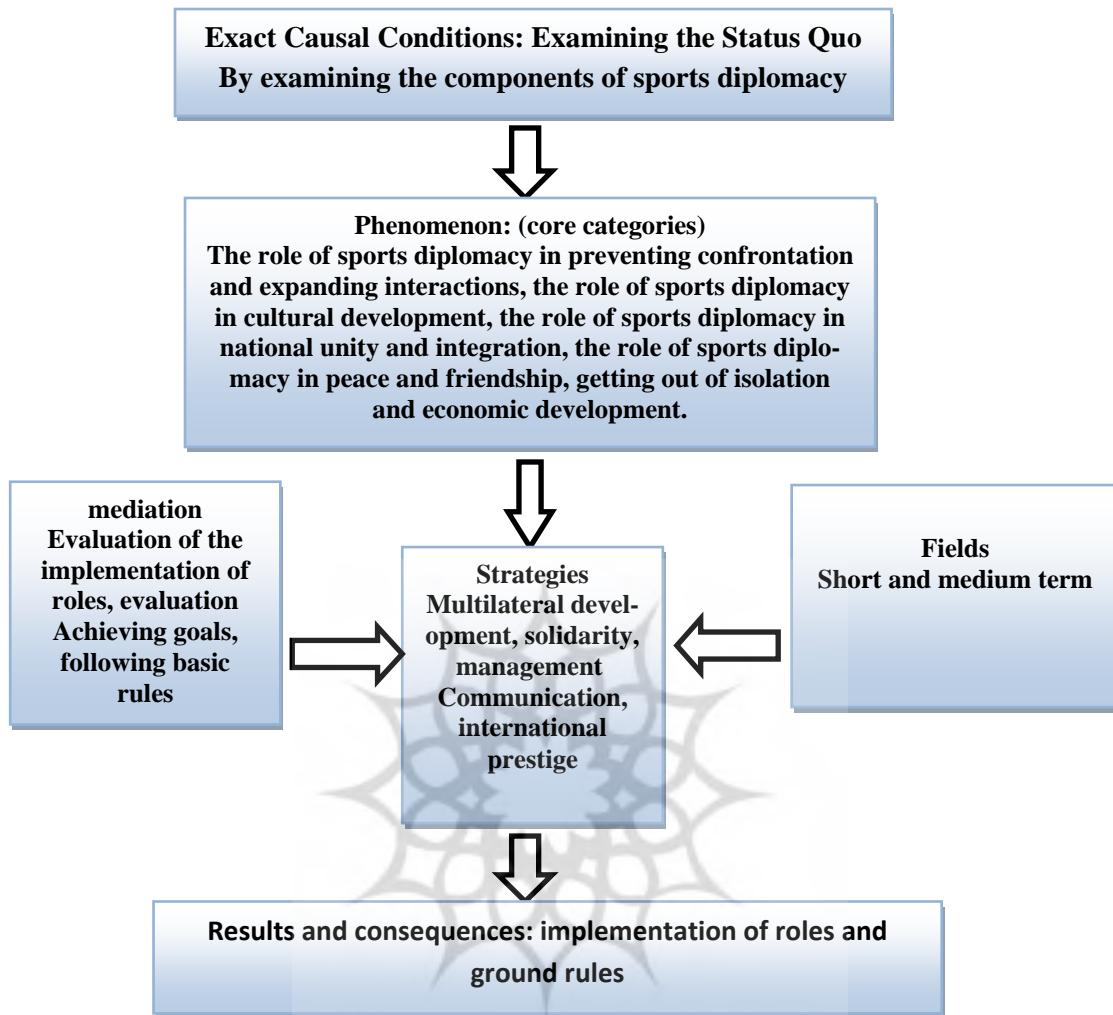
Chart: 1 (research findings)

Finally, the paradigm model of diplomacy of the Track Two based on sports diplomacy in the relations between Iran and the United States is presented in Figure 1. As shown in the above figure, one of the necessities of sports diplomacy in the relations between Iran and the United States is to pay attention to the evaluation of the implementation of roles, the evaluation of the achievement of goals, and the observance of basic rules. This is in line with solving management issues (mediation), for this purpose, it is necessary that the officials provide the necessary conditions for multilateral development, solidarity, communication management, international prestige (strategies).

It is also an important requirement to have short-term and medium-term goals, and it

seems necessary to create structural changes in this field (fields). The role of sports diplomacy in preventing confrontation and expanding interactions; The role of sports diplomacy in cultural development; The role of sports diplomacy in national unity and integration, the role of sports diplomacy in peace and friendship; Exit from Enzo and economic development are

Other requirements for examining the role of sports diplomacy in the relations between Iran and America (phenomenon (core category)). Of course, it should be kept in mind that without defining and specifying the components of the implementation of roles and basic rules, sports diplomacy cannot proceed (results and consequences).



The paradigmatic model of the role of the Track Two diplomacy in Iran-US relations

Conclusion

The role of sports diplomacy as one of the main types of second track diplomacy on the relations between Iran and the United States of America in 1998 to 2019 was discussed. In addressing this issue, by presenting a unified theoretical framework model, an attempt was made to examine the function of sports diplomacy in the field of de-escalation or escalation of relations between Iran and the United States. According to the findings of the current research, sports diplomacy, as one of

the main types of diplomacy of the secondpath, has had a special function in building the relations between Tehran and Washington during the years after 1998 and has played a significant role in the relations between the two countries of Iran and the United States.

To such an extent that after every sports event between the two countries, politicians have also offered their opinion and also sports, cultural, economic and political directions. In the years under review, sports have

been a key diplomatic tool to not only establish non-political relations between the two countries, but also to reduce tensions and even in some cases express regret for America's past behavior towards Iran and Iranians. Sports at the initial stage of this research made the non-political relations between Iran and the United States have a new experience, and until today, it has been one of the main levels of continuity of ties between the two countries despite all the tensions.

Although Iran-US relations have gone through two general stages in the past century, with the introduction of public diplomacy, second track diplomacy and sports diplomacy, the second era of relations between the two countries has taken on extremely complex forms and dimensions. In the first era, diplomacy was often pursued through the official links of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is at the highest levels. Sports at the initial stage of this research made the non-political relations between Iran and the United States have a new experience, and until today, it has been one of the main levels of continuity of ties between the two countries despite all the tensions.

Although Iran-US relations have gone through two general stages in the past century, with the introduction of public diplomacy, second track diplomacy and sports diplomacy, the second era of relations between the two countries has taken on extremely complex forms and dimensions. In the first era, diplomacy was often pursued through the official links of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is at the highest levels. During this period, of course, we are gradually witnessing the strengthening of cultural, sports, artistic, social and economic relations between the two countries, but all these ties were overshadowed by diplomatic and politi-

cal ties that were at a favorable level, so their importance was not understood.

The occurrence of the Islamic Revolution, which was the end of the previous deep and direct diplomatic relations, created a gap between the two countries, which highlighted the necessity of a third party (Switzerland) between the two countries. However, the emergence of new discourses in Iran provided the platform for indirect diplomatic relations and the second track, with sports diplomacy at the forefront. The exchange of teams and athletes, hosting of sports competitions, common sports topics between the two countries, participation in competitions and mutual competition made the importance and function of this diplomacy to be noticed. To such an extent that the diplomats were pursuing diplomatic and political goals behind these sports developments. The two countries found sports diplomacy as a low-cost, attractive and people-friendly way to restore mutual relations and took maximum advantage of it.

Proponents of second track diplomacy, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and sports diplomacy emphasize the difference that people can make in the relations between their countries. However, participation in foreign policy can be a double-edged sword. Considering the performance of Iran's political system, which was designed to negate the absolute power of the United States, the mobilization of public opinion is perhaps the best hope for overcoming bilateral problems, which became the basis for the foundation of sports diplomacy after the revolution.

This mobilization to rebuild the Iranians' mental image of America has also been noticed and welcomed by American political and sports decision-makers and has continued. Sports has also become a platform for political action between the two countries,

and when one of the countries has shown laxity or narrow-mindedness in facilitating the conditions for the presence of athletes in its soil, the other side has also reacted. Therefore, it can be said that sports have been the key tool for the implicit orientation of the two countries against each other in the second place after political issues.

In fact, the sports contacts between Iran and the United States formed and continued from 1998 to 2021 can be useful in influencing the decision of the two countries to review their relations. They can also help thaw the ice between officials on both sides as a result of shared sporting interests, a common sense of a particular sport or team, and a particular sport. But sports communication by itself cannot lead to better deep political diplomatic relations. Both the American government and the Iranian government are involved in a complex two-level game in which an internal coalition in favor of foreign policy must be put together before implementing that foreign policy; And mastering and agreeing on the rules of this game is much more difficult than the rules of wrestling and football. But we have seen that sports have been able to provide grounds for de-escalation and mutual understanding in cultural and even political dimensions between the two countries, so the function of sports in strengthening the relations between the two countries is very prominent.

References

- Chehabi, H.E. (2007). Sport diplomacy between the United States and Iran, in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 12:1, 89-106, DOI: 10.1080/09592290108406190.
- Danly, M. (2011). *Communicating Sport Mega-Events and Soft Power Dimension of Public Diplomacy*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa.
- Doosti, Morteza and Reza Hassanpour Qadi, (2021). "The position of sports diplomacy in Iran's foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution of 1357", *Sports Management Quarterly*, Volume 13, Number 2
- Entessar, Nader (2017). *The Limits of Sports Diplomacy in US-Iran Relations*, *Lobe Log*. At: <https://lobelog.com/the-limits-of-sports-diplomacy-in-us-iran-relations/>.
- Javadipour, Mohammad and Nazanin Rasekh, (2019). "The role of sports and the development of sports diplomacy in advancing cultural-social policies and foreign relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Journal of Sports Management*, Volume 11, Number 2
- Keddie, Nikki R. (2003). *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Yale University Press.
- Keddie, Nikki R. and Mark, J. (1990). Gasirowski (eds.), *Neither East nor West: Iran, The Soviet Union, and the United States*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Longman, Jere (1996). *Diplomacy and Urgency as the U.S. Faces Iran*, *The New York Times*, C2.
- Malakoutian, Mustafa, (2009). "Sports and Politics", *Political Quarterly of Tehran University, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences*, Volume 39, Number 2

- Mannheim, Yarol, (2011). "Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy, Expansion of Influence", translated by Mohammad Sadegh Esmaili and Hesamuddin Ashena, Tehran: Imam Sadeq University.
- Min, D. and Choi, Y. (2019). Sport Cooperation in Divided Korea: An Overstated Role of Sport Diplomacy in South Korea, *Sport in Society*, 22(8).
- Murray, Stuart (2012). Sports-Diplomacy: A Hybrid of Two Halves. At: <http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/>.
- Murray, Stuart (2013). Moving beyond the Ping-Pong Table: Sports Diplomacy in the Modern Diplomatic Environment", *P D Magazine*, 9.
- Peppard, Victor and Riordan, James, (1993). *Playing Politics: Soviet Sport Diplomacy to 1992*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Sabbaghian, Ali, (2017). "Sports Diplomacy", *Studies and Culture Quarterly*, Year 16, Number 31
- Sabzi, Zohreh, Mehdi Shariyati, Faizabad and Reza Sabunchi, (2020). "Designing a model of the concepts of sports diplomacy influencing the development of relations between Iran and the United States", *Journal of Sports Management*, Volume 12, Number 4
- Sciolino, Elaine (1998). Singing, Dancing and Cheering in the Streets of Tehran, *The New York Times*, p.C9.
- Shariyati, Mehdi and Goodarzi Mahmood, (2017). "Structural Modeling (SEM) of Sports Diplomacy Components in the Development of International Relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran", *New Approaches in Sports Management Quarterly*, Volume 5, Number 16
- Stasovsky, Ana, I. Stojanovska, T. & Qazimi, A. (2013). "Sport as a substitute for diplomatic activities". Professional Paper. 1.
- Vecsey, George (1998). The Defeat is Apolitical as Yanks Lose to Iran, *The New York Times*, C1 and C9.
- Wainwright, Darius (2021). Athletics, Exhibitions and Exchanges: American Sport Diplomacy in Iran, 1955–1959, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, VOL. 38, NO. 8, 811-828.
- White House Office (July 14, 1953). *United States Interests and Objectives in Respect of the Near East*, Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, NSC Series, Policy Papers, DDEL.
- Zahrana, Rhoanda, (2011). "Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications of the United States after September 11", translated by Mehdi Zolfaqari, Tehran: Imam Sadiq University.