



التحديات التي تواجه تطوير كرة القدم في العراق

Institutional and Political Barriers to Football Development in Iraq: A Thematic Qualitative Analysis

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الملخص

على الرغم من الأهمية الثقافية والدور الكبير الذي تلعبه رياضة كرة القدم، إذ تواجه هذه الرياضة عقبات كبيرة، بما في ذلك عدم الاستقرار السياسي، وضعف البنية التحتية، والقيود المالية. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد التحديات الرئيسية التي تعيق نمو وتطور كرة القدم في العراق. استخدمت هذه الدراسة نهجاً نوعياً، شمل مقابلات شبه منظمة مع 20 شخصاً مرتبطاً بكرة القدم. هذا يعني أن عدد المشاركين كان 20 شخصاً مشاركين في إدارة كرة القدم العراقية. والحد الأدنى لمدة المقابلة كان 23 دقيقة، والحد الأقصى كان ساعة وسبع دقائق. وشملت مجموعة البحث مسؤولين من اتحاد كرة القدم العراقي، وأعضاء البرلمان، ومديري رياضات، ومدرّبين، وإداريين، وحكام، ولاعبين سابقين في المنتخب الوطني. وتم استخدام التحليل الموضوعي لتحليل البيانات من خلال استخدام النمذجة المستهدفة، والتي تستخدم طريقة تحليل موضوعي من ست خطوات (براون وكلاارك 2006)، مما أدى إلى تحديد 35 رمزاً موزعة على سبعة مواضيع رئيسية مستمدة من البيانات.

وكشفت النتائج عن تدخل سياسي في الحكومة الرياضية في العراق، وممارسات إدارية غير مستقرة، وميزانيات غير كافية، وهياكل تنظيمية ضعيفة، وبنية تحتية هشة، وضعف كبير في المشاركة. وهذه التحديات مترابطة، مما يؤدي إلى تفاقم نقاط ضعف الحكومة، مما يُفاقم بدوره المشكلات المالية والتنموية.

وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الرياضة العراقية تواجه عقبات منهجية معقدة. حيث تعاني كرة القدم العراقية من مشاكل تتعلق بالحوكمة وإدارة الموارد. ينبغي أن تُعطي الإصلاحات الأولوية للقيادة الشفافة، وتنويع التمويل، والاستثمار في البنية التحتية، والتطوير الجذري لتحقيق نمو مستدام ونجاح تنافسي. ولتحسين هذه الجهود، ينبغي تقييم التحديات باستخدام نموذج *SPLISS* وإعادة صياغته وفقاً لذلك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحديات كرة القدم، حوكمة الرياضة، القيود المالية، البنية التحتية الرياضية، العراق.

ABSTRACT

Aim and background: Despite the cultural importance and unifying role of football, the sport faces significant obstacles, including political instability, inadequate infrastructure, and financial constraints. This study aims to identify the main challenges limiting the growth of football in Iraq.

Methodology: This study used a qualitative approach, involving semi-structured interviews with 20 football-related individuals. That means the number of participants was 20 people involved in Iraqi football. The minimum duration of the interview was 23 minutes, and the maximum was one hour and seven minutes. The research group included Iraqi Football Association officials, parliament members, sporting directors, coaches, administrators, referees, and former national team players. Objective analysis is used to analyse data through the use of targeted modelling, which uses a six-step objective analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2006). resulting in the identification of 35 codes grouped into seven main themes derived from the data.

Results: The findings reveal political interference in sports governance, unstable management practices, insufficient budgets, poor organizational structures, underdeveloped infrastructure, and fundamentally weak participation. These challenges are interconnected, worsening governance weaknesses that, in turn, intensify financial and developmental issues.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Iraqi sport faces complex, systemic obstacles. Iraqi football suffers from issues related to governance and resource management. Reforms should prioritize transparent leadership, diversified funding, infrastructure investment, and fundamental development to achieve sustainable growth and competitive success. To improve these efforts, challenges should be assessed using the SPLISS model and reformulated accordingly.

Keywords: Football Challenges, Sports Governance, Financial Constraints, Sports Infrastructure, Iraq.

Introduction

Football is intricately woven into the cultural and historical landscape of Iraq and the wider Middle East, where it has historically functioned as both a leisure pursuit and a means of national representation. Historical records indicate that early forms of the game were played in Mesopotamia as far back as 1000 BC, with artistic representations from the 19th century affirming its role in Iraqi social life (Raab and Khalidi 2020); (Tabbaa). The contemporary version of the sport was officially introduced through British colonial influence in the late 19th century. Since that time, football has emerged as the most

favored sport in Iraq, attracting widespread social engagement and acting as a fundamental component of national identity.) Mohammad Abdolzahra, Mirsafian et al. (2024) Iraq's foray into international competition commenced at the 1948 London Olympics, and the national team has since participated in six Olympic events, achieving its highest placement with a fourth-place finish in 2004. A particularly pivotal moment in Iraq's football narrative was its surprising triumph in the 2007 AFC Asian Cup, a victory celebrated globally as a rare instance of unity amidst turmoil.) Al-Arian (2022). In addition to these accomplishments, Iraq has also taken part in regional contests, such as the Pan-Arab Games, amassing a commendable collection of medals despite occasional disruptions in participation (Rolim Silva and Gerber 2012)

Despite its cultural significance and historical achievements, the development of football in Iraq has been consistently hindered by structural, political, and economic challenges. Extended periods of conflict, political turmoil, and financial mismanagement have weakened the foundations of Iraq's sports framework, resulting in football being underfunded and inadequately administered (Ottaway and Kaysi 2012). Although Iraq possesses abundant natural resources, its sports infrastructure remains antiquated and disjointed, indicative of years of insufficient investment and neglect (Abdul Amir and Shaalan 2020)

Consequently, while football maintains a prominent role in Iraqi society, the nation has faced difficulties in establishing a sustainable, competitive, and professionally governed football environment. Ongoing challenges—including weak institutional governance, political interference, financial limitations, and a lack of long-term strategic planning—have exacerbated the disparity between Iraq's footballing potential and its actual accomplishments on the global stage.

Scholarly research suggests that athletic achievement is seldom dictated solely by innate ability. Instead, it is intricately linked to the existence of robust institutions, methodical planning, and significant financial backing (De Bosscher, De Knop et al. 2006); Gásquez and Royuela 2014) . Nations that strategically allocate resources towards sports infrastructure, youth development, and governance frameworks typically excel beyond countries with similar or even superior athletic capabilities (De Bosscher, Shibil et al. 2015). This correlation is particularly pronounced in elite football, where effective systems for talent identification, regulatory structures, and commercial investment foster an environment conducive to success (Taylor 2017). Conversely, post-conflict and politically unstable nations, such as Iraq, frequently experience fragmented governance, corruption, and dependence on temporary aid, resulting in stagnation in sports development. (Giulianotti and DARNELL 2016). Comparative analyses in regions like Afghanistan, Sudan,

and Palestine validate that instability, the collapse of infrastructure, and political meddling in federations are prevalent obstacles to advancement (Bahir and Kandahar 2020); (Dart 2022)).

Within Iraq, the scholarly discourse surrounding football development is notably limited and disjointed. Current research frequently focuses on specific topics, such as gender disparities, futsal organization, or the advancement of youth sports. For example, Javani, Alyasiri, and their associates (2023) illustrate how patriarchal values, unequal media portrayal, and imbalances in resource distribution intensify gender disparities within Iraqi football. In a similar vein, (Alshiblawi, Talebpour et al. 2022) utilizes a SWOT analysis to reveal weaknesses in futsal, pinpointing governance issues, inadequate facilities, and a lack of resources as persistent challenges. Another framework, introduced by (Mohammad Abdolzahra, Mirsafian et al. 2024), emphasizes the significance of financial planning, governance, socio-cultural influences, and human resource capabilities for Iraqi football clubs, while also acknowledging the nation's unexploited potential in sports science. In the Kurdistan region, research conducted by Ibrahim, Izadi, and others (2022) highlights how political frameworks and party dominance hinder decision-making, funding, and talent cultivation. Together, these studies provide important insights; however, they fall short of offering a comprehensive framework for examining the structural obstacles facing Iraqi football as a whole. Given these gaps, there is a clear need for a systematic investigation into the challenges facing football development in Iraq. Unlike purely descriptive accounts, a structured analysis can reveal how interconnected issues—ranging from governance and regulation to infrastructure, talent development, and media engagement—create systemic barriers to progress. Addressing such challenges is crucial not only for improving the performance of the national team but also for leveraging football's broader role in fostering social cohesion, youth engagement, and international representation. Accordingly, the present study aims to identify and categorize the main obstacles to football development in Iraq across seven thematic areas: governance and policy, legal and regulatory framework, financial management, strategic planning, talent development, media and marketing, and infrastructure.

By analyzing these dimensions from the viewpoints of essential stakeholders, this study aims to deliver a thorough comprehension of the systemic obstacles that have hindered Iraqi football for many years. In this endeavor, it adds to the extensive literature on sports development in post-conflict environments and provides actionable insights that can guide policymakers, federations, and international collaborators. Ultimately, enhancing football in Iraq transcends the realm of athletic achievement; it

serves as a means to foster national resilience, cultural expression, and sustainable social progress.

Methodology

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the key barriers and capacities to the development of the sport of football in Iraq, and a qualitative approach is chosen to gain in-depth insights from key stakeholders and thoroughly investigate the institutions. This qualitative research is also based on a data search (Andrew, Pedersen et al. 2019). The researcher used semi-structured interview protocols and applied research strategies to gather information from 20 experts in the field of football. That means the number of participants was 20 people involved in Iraqi football. The minimum duration of the interview was 23 minutes, and the maximum was one hour and seven minutes. Objective analysis is used to analyse the data through the use of purpose-built modelling. The participants of this study are all stakeholders who have a direct or indirect impact on the sport of football in Iraq. The actors included politicians, a former MP for the Sports and Youth Committee in 2018, sporting directors, the vice-president of the Iraqi Football Association, club presidents, sports science experts, media and sports reporters, former national football team players, and football coaches.

Data Analysis

To analyse the qualitative data, a six-step objective analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used. Brown and Clarke's (2006) Inductive Six-Step Approach: These six steps are: **The First Step:** Familiarity with the data: This step forms the basis for other research steps. In order for a researcher to be familiar with the depth and breadth of data, he or she needs to immerse themselves in it to some extent. Data immersion is often the act of actively revisiting data, searching for meaning and patterns. **The second step:** The creation of the initial code begins when the researcher has read the data and is familiar with it. The first step is to create the initial code from the data. **The third step:** Searching for Themes. This phase begins when all the data has been encoded and collected, and the researcher has a list of the various codes that have arisen during the research. At this stage, the researcher begins the analysis and considers how the various codes can be combined to create a set of main and sub-axes. **The Fourth Step:** Review Axes. The fourth phase begins when the researcher has created a set of themes and is reviewing them. It is also a criterion for evaluation. The internal consonance and external contrast of the themes taken from a topic must be meaningfully consistent,

while there must be a clear distinction between the different themes. At this stage, the researcher needs to determine whether or not these axes form a comprehensive and unified map. **The 5th step:** Define and Name Axes. Step 5 begins once you have a satisfactory outline of the topics. At this stage, the researcher will define and review the topics that have been presented. Then, the data within is analyzed. At this stage, the researcher should write a brief and specific analysis of each topic that is relevant to the main research question. **Step Six :** The preparation of the Phase 6 report begins when the researcher has a well-defined set of themes. This phase includes the final analysis and writing of the report. The final report should present a concise, logical, coherent, and non-repetitive account of the material and data. (Braun and Clarke 2006) In order to verify the reliability of the information produced in this study, the researcher maintained a long-term relationship with the research environment and analyzed the negative and positive cases of the cues. Controls were also employed, and expert and researcher reviews were used to stabilise and classify classifications. In other words, in this study, in order to increase credibility, all the initial codes were reviewed by the researcher after the completion of the coding of each interview, and the main themes were identified and the extracted codes were given to the experts for review and validation in order to enhance their expertise. The reliability of the information produced in this study was ensured through these measures.

Data Collection

Data were collected using live interviews:

- Participants: 20 key stakeholders, including the vice-president of the Iraqi Football Association, members of parliament, members of the Iraqi Football Association (IFA), sports officials, club managers, former national team players, coaches and sports referees, and sports journalists.

-Sampling: Targeted sampling was used to select individuals with first-hand knowledge of football politics and administration in Iraq.

Questions were on governance challenges, infrastructure, youth development, coaching, funding, media, and institutional coordination; verbal informed consent was obtained, interviews were recorded, and descriptive reports can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of the interviews (research samples)

Number	Profession -occupation	Workplace
1	President of the Iraqi delegation to the Paris Olympics and head of Iraqi table tennis.	The Iraqi Olympic Committee
2	Member of the Sports and Youth Committee of the Iraqi	parliament

Parliament - 2018		
3	Second Vice President of the Iraqi Football Union	The Iraqi Football Association
4	President of the Iraqi Football Union - Sulaymaniyah Branch	The Iraqi Football Association
5	President of the Iraqi Football Union - Kirkuk Branch	The Iraqi Football Association
6	President of the Iraqi Olympic Committee - Sulaymaniyah Branch	The Iraqi Olympic Committee
7	Member of the board of directors of Newroz sports club and vice president of Kurdistan football union.	The Iraqi Football Association
8	The president of the sports board of the Kurdistan National Union and a lecturer at Sulaymaniyah University.	Political Party
9	Former Football Players of the Year (8 players)	The Iraqi Football Association
10	Director of Electronic Systems of Newroz Sports Club	Sports journalist
11	Former coach and player of the Iraqi national football team	The Iraqi Football Association
12	International Football Referees (3 referees)	The Iraqi Football Association

In order to use objective analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) and content analysis of the interviews, the transcript of each interview was first transcribed from the audio recordings of the interview sessions, and then transcribed using the notes taken from the interview sessions.

After a thorough study of these texts, all independent ideas in the form of concepts and initial code were selected for each of the prepared interviews. Table 2 provides an example of the initial code.

Table 2: Sample Initial Codes Taken from Interviews

Themes	Primary Code	Text Example (Logical-Conceptual Project)
First Axis	Politics and Governance	Conflicting roles and weak coordination between football institutions.
		Lack of a common national vision for football development
Second Axis	Legal and Organisational Challenges	Political interference in football governance.
		Lack of competence in the recruitment and selection of sports managers.
		The existence of political and religious ideologies in football institutions.
		Weak and inconsistent legal framework for the governance of Iraqi football.
		Not amending the laws of sports, especially football
		Politicisation of legal and administrative reforms.

		Legal obstacles facing Kurdistan football Political disagreements over the implementation of the laws due to political conflicts.
Third Axis	Budget and Finance	Poor management of the sports budget. Financial support based on political and personal connections, not objective criteria. Lack of long-term investment mechanisms by football clubs and institutions. Lack of financial transparency and auditing. Lack of transparency, good governance, and domestic and international investment.
Fourth Axis	Strategy and Planning	Lack of a long-term national strategy for football Lack of a unified system for professional sports Loss of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms There is a lack of an international model for the development and management of the sport of football. Lack of strategic priorities at the level of football development.
Fifth Axis	Identifying talent	Lack of a formal system for identifying national talent. Limited and unsystematic football academies Poor scouting mechanisms and focus on young people in larger cities compared to smaller towns. Lack of cooperation and coordination in the development of young people. Caring for athletes on the basis of profit, not their growth and education.
Sixth Axis	Media & Marketing	Lack of media strategy in Iraqi football Weaknesses of sports branding and sponsorship mechanisms Lack of use of media and marketing Lack of a sports marketing plan in the organization. Financial restrictions that prevent sports from being marketed.
Seventh Axis	Sports Infrastructure	The unequal distribution of sports infrastructure. Lack of training and accommodation Access to appropriate sports services Relying on the basis of non-formal training. The development of sports infrastructure has been concentrated in clubs and big cities.

Results:

This study aims to identify and analyze the main obstacles to the development of football in Iraq. A total of 35 components were selected in

seven main categories: Policy and Governance, Legal and Organizational Challenges, Budgeting and Finance, Strategic Vision and Long-Term Planning, Talent Identification and Development, Media and Marketing, and Sports Infrastructure and Training Institutions.

One of the components identified in this study was "Politics and Governance", the governance of football in Iraq is characterized by the clash of roles, the lack of coordination and the lack of a unified vision between the Ministry of Youth, the Iraqi Football Association (IFA) and the Olympic Committee, and the federations, While the structure of sport in Iraq is based on these four principles, interviews have described the football system as “inconsistent and unequal distribution of labor, often influenced by political and personal interests and the rule of law rather than technical planning”.

One striking conclusion is the lack of coordination among the main football institutions in Iraq, as (De Bosscher, De Knop et al. 2006) emphasizes that strong and unified governance is essential to a functioning sports system, but in Iraq, the clash of responsibilities between the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Iraqi Football Federation, and the Olympic Committee can lead to bureaucratic confusion and competition for control. This is consistent with the literature on sports governance in fragile states, where political interference and weak institutions often impede joint planning. (Houlihan and Green 2009, Darnell 2012) The lack of a common national vision prevents Iraq from building a unified football development strategy.

Corruption and political interference are widely acknowledged throughout football institutions, as participants pointed out “that appointments to leadership positions are often based on loyalty rather than experience”. The selection and promotion of a player is sometimes related to political or tribal affiliations. Perhaps the most damaging finding is the widespread politicisation of football institutions, where leadership roles are often filled on the basis of political, personal, sectarian, national, or tribal affiliation, rather than technical merit. This destroys legitimacy and creates a culture of bias. As in the studies of (De Bosscher, De Knop et al. 2006) these dynamics are widely documented in global sport and public sector studies. In the case of Iraq, this has contributed to a deep public distrust of sports institutions and has discouraged talented people from engaging with the system.

Experts also identified legal and regulatory hurdles as another major obstacle to the sport of football in Iraq. Participants believe "that one of the main challenges facing the governance of Iraqi football is the inconsistency and weakness of the legal and organisational frameworks". As (Al-Zubaidi, Eghbali et al. 2024) believe that addressing legal and administrative deficiencies can make a significant contribution to the challenges of Iraq's current sports system. Participants pointed to the weakness of sustainable,

well-documented laws and administrative systems that can support long-term sport development. As they argue, the legal structure that governs Iraqi sport is not clear and consistent, and much of the reform remains private or political rather than part of a unified system. According to (Ibrahim, Izadi et al. 2022) one of the obstacles to sport is the structural and legal barriers facing the Kurdistan Olympic Committee, which has left it without legal support in Iraq and the Kurdistan Parliament. Although Article 4 of the new law of the Iraqi National Olympic Committee (Law No. 19, 2019) stipulates that the Iraqi National Olympic Committee can "have branches in regions and governorates," political disagreements between the two parties and the PUK and PDK over the legality of this committee have led to the Kurdistan Olympic Committee's decision not to be approved by the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament.

Another component identified in this study was the budget and finance, which suffers from both mismanagement and political inconsistencies. There are no fixed mechanisms for long-term investments in Iraqi clubs, youth academies, or sports infrastructure; funds are often distributed politically and temperamentally or without a transparent scale, and the audit system is weak or unprepared. In the case of the participants, "the support of the sports clubs is the support of the mood, and the mood plays a role in the support of the sports clubs". As (De Bosscher, De Knop et al. 2009) highlight the importance of sustained and transparent financial support for elite and elite sports. In Iraq, financial management is inconsistent and unclear and prone to political manipulation, which not only undermines program planning but also erodes trust among stakeholders and limits long-term investment in youth and infrastructure. According to (Ibrahim, Izadi et al. 2022) Lack of funding for sports, support for a particular sport, and support for clubs close to political and governmental authority were among the most important factors and challenges of financial support in Iraqi Kurdistan. Studies in other developing countries, such as Sudan and Afghanistan, show similar problems in which financial aid is either misused or unsustainable, leading to systemic disruption in the development of sport (Giulianotti 2011). The situation in Iraq is a reflection of these structural weaknesses. Iraq's football sector has been plagued by uncertain financial deals, which have hampered international investors and support. Research (De Bosscher, Shibli et al. 2016) emphasizes that transparent payment mechanisms are associated with better governance and public trust.

Another component identified in this study is the perspective of long-term strategy and planning in Iraqi football. One of the major gaps in the development of football in Iraq is the lack of a clear and long-term national strategy. In contrast, countries such as Germany have succeeded through

comprehensive reforms based on long-term plans. After the poor results in 2000, Germany implemented a national football plan that included youth academies, regional centers, and systematic talent development.(Green and Houlihan 2005) Similarly, European countries such as Portugal and England have developed long-term models that link youth and professional football systems.(Relvas, Littlewood et al. 2010) These examples show that without a coordinated and long-term strategy, it is impossible to achieve sustainable development. According to the participants, "the most important thing is to have a long-term and unified strategic vision, along with a follow-up and monitoring mechanism that we currently lack". This study (Van Bottenburg, Shibli et al. 2015)emphasizes the importance of strategic prioritization. This research (Bayle and Madella 2002)also shows how national sports organizations strategically allocate budgets and importance to hopeful sports to enhance their success.

Another important component that was identified in this study was "Identifying and Developing Talents" in the sport of football in Iraq. Iraq does not have a formal and active system for the selection and development of talented youth; the number of football academies is small, and those that do exist are run without rules and regulations and are mostly for business, generally without professional standards. According to the participants, "there are many talented children in the provinces, but they are not being given attention", and the talent identification system does not exist in all provinces. And this system should be activated and established in Iraq. The failure to identify and educate young players across Iraq is a significant obstacle. According to reports, English first-tier football academies invest between £2.3 million and £4.9 million a year, while Sport UK spends around £100 million a year on the selection and development of sporting talent. (Till and Baker 2020) Research by (De Bosscher, De Knop et al. 2009)emphasizes structured talent development pathways, including early scouting, national youth leagues, and strong relationships between sports schools and clubs. In Iraq, these systems are either absent or poorly coordinated, especially outside of big cities, and this is in line with the findings of the world literature that say talent alone is not enough – systems and support must be in place.(De Bosscher, Shibil et al. 2015) Iraq does not have this systematic support, which limits the country's ability to translate talent into competitive athletes.

Iraq's current system suffers from fragmentation, a lack of academics, and weak oversight mechanisms. Participants believe "that poor selection and talent development are hallmarks of Iraqi sport". In this context, (Ibrahim, Hamatineghad et al. 2013)in examining the effectiveness of selected sports federations in Iraq stated that supporting championships and inclusive sports, and identifying talents and abilities were one of the most important criteria for organizational effectiveness in Iraqi sports federations. (De Bosscher, Shibli et

al. 2016) also stated that identifying talent is one of the main reasons for success in elite sports. According to the research, the lack of a system to support talented sports and identify talented athletes among the athletes in the region has made this structure an important issue for participants.

Another component identified in this study was media and marketing. Researchers (Jackson and Michael 1991, Mull, Bayless et al. 1997, Higgs, Weiller et al. 2003, Kian 2007) believe that mass media can influence several dimensions and aspects of sport development. Also, according to the results of (Moradi, Honari et al. 2012) It was found that there was a significant correlation between the four-dimensional role of sports media and the development of championship sports. A grand strategy is needed to provide programming in the sports media for the development of championship sports, thereby playing an effective role in national development. Therefore, the development of championship sports requires the cooperation of the media, sport, and science.

Branding and media are now an integral part of modern elite sports. Participants believe "that Iraq is very weak in terms of media and branding and is still in its infancy". Also, the findings highlight how Iraqi football does not have a media strategy, brand development, or private sector sponsorship mechanism. Media and marketing capabilities are also underutilized in sports, and while social media platforms are growing in popularity, they are not systematically used to build brand equity, attract sponsors, or increase public engagement. (Al-Zubaidi, Eghbali et al. 2024) Sports marketing is considered to be one of the main areas that sports organizations around the world rely on. The lack of sports marketing plans within Iraqi sports institutions due to the difficulties and financial crises that affect sports marketing plans within sports institutions prevents most of the Iraqi Super Football League clubs from implementing their planned programmes and activities properly. Due to the lack of significant financial resources in this area because sports marketing is still new in Iraq, such organizations do not rely on sports marketing to optimize their resources and do not plan their annual financial plans and do not move continuously. (Khalaf and Waga 2019)

The final component identified in this study was sports infrastructure and training facilities. Iraq's sports infrastructure has not reached the level of fully meeting the needs of athletes, although in recent years, most of the big clubs have their own stadiums, and in general, about 18 international stadiums have been registered on the official website of the Ministry of Sports and Youth. <https://www.moys.gov.iq/ar> In the Sports Stadiums Map section, but it's not just the sports infrastructure in the stadium - what is important is the availability of training facilities and accommodation - these do not exist in Iraq. Stadiums are unevenly distributed, investment is concentrated in a few

city centers, and many areas do not have adequate sports services. According to the participants, Iraq's football infrastructure needs to be changed and improved; it is unevenly distributed, and often, some cities do not have access to sports services. Many young players train in informal stadiums, while large investments are concentrated in Baghdad and other major cities. This echoes similar issues faced by post-conflict societies, which often override the priorities of rebuilding sport unless it is supported from the outside. Infrastructure gaps not only limit physical training but also disrupt the motivation and survival of long-term athletes.

Overall, the results of this study show that the political, legal, financial and media dimensions of Iraq's football system constitute an interconnected structure that limits systemic reform. Governance failures are not just administrative but are deeply ingrained in political culture, affecting legal unity, financial sustainability and public perceptions. Therefore, any attempt to reform Iraq's football system must take a unified approach that simultaneously addresses these causal linkages rather than treating each side as a separate challenge. By exposing these interconnections, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional fragmentation and political support interact to shape the current course of football in Iraq.

The practical value of this research lies in its ability to inform documented reforms in the Iraqi sports system. It highlights the need for a unified national framework of sport governance that clearly defines institutional roles, ensures transparency in budgets, and recognises legal and regulatory cohesion. In addition, by linking the situation in Iraq to comparative international examples (e.g., Germany, England, Portugal), the study emphasises how strategic planning, structural talent systems, and effective media participation can transform elite sports performance. Therefore, the study not only identifies the failures of football development but also provides a practical perspective for policymakers, federations, and sport administrators who are trying to establish sustainable, merit-based reform strategies that are in line with global best practices.

Conclusion:

The study explored the multifaceted barriers to football development in Iraq, identifying 35 important factors grouped into seven main themes - governance and policy, legal and regulatory framework, budget and finance, strategic planning, talent identification and development, media and marketing, and sports infrastructure. In direct relevance to the objectives of the study, the findings show that political interference, institutional fragmentation, and corruption within governance structures have weakened coordination and

accountability, thus achieving the primary objective of assessing governance weaknesses. The second objective, which targets the legal and regulatory environment, is addressed through evidence of inconsistent law and the absence of a uniform or constantly updated sports law, demonstrating how legal inconsistency impedes reform.

Financial mismanagement and political resource allocation, identified under Goal 3, expose mechanisms of financial instability that limit investment in youth development and infrastructure. The fourth goal is reflected in the lack of a comprehensive national strategy, which impedes long-term planning and undermines sustainable development. Similarly, results related to talent recognition and development confirm Goal 5, which shows that inadequate scouting systems, unregulated academies, and business practices limit athletes' education and development. Goal 6 – Media and Marketing – with the finding that the sector is not yet developing, as weak branding, sponsorship, and digital engagement limit public awareness and investment opportunities. Finally, the unequal distribution of sports infrastructure associated with Goal 7 highlights structural inequalities that limit access and impede athlete development in many districts.

Taken together, these relevant findings show that Iraq's football system is constrained not by isolated flaws but by the political, legal, financial, and institutional flaws that reinforce each other. The study concludes that comprehensive reform and coordination are essential. The study suggests that public policy actors, sports policy makers, and the Iraqi Football Association should make use of the proposed "Iraqi Football Barriers Framework" to assess these systemic challenges and guide future reforms through the SPLISS model.

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