



## Iranian Influence and Middle Eastern Security Order: A Case Study of Iran-Iraq Political Rivalry Since 2011

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### ABSTRACT

This paper will analyze the role of influences and effects of Iran on the Middle East order of security in terms of the Iran-Iraq political rivalry since 2011. Political instability in the country after the pulling out of the U.S. troops and sectarianism in Iraq provided means through which Iran could build its presence in the region by forming political alliances, investing in the economy, and sponsoring Shia militias. Combining neorealist and constructivist perspectives, the given analysis will put an emphasis on the fact that Iran can achieve strategic depth and use sectarian identity as a justification of the involvement. At the same time, the experience of Iraq on the way to sovereignty and control of non-state actors believes in the scope of foreign intervention. The results highlight the dual nature of the role of Iran as a stabilizing and destabilizing actor and depict how the governance of regional security has been transformed into a hybrid form that brings in both state and non-state actors. The research is valuable in relation to learning how power, identity, and agency interact with each other in a multifaceted manner to contribute to the present geopolitics in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Iranian Influence, Middle Eastern Security Order, Political Rivalry, Political Instability, Neorealist and Constructivist Perspectives

### INTRODUCTION

The changing power structures, the regional conflicts, and the historical resurgence of the non-state actors have significantly influenced the changing security dynamics of the Middle East since 2011 (Valensi, 2015). Of such dynamics, the growing regional power of Iran has become the main parameter in the reflux of the Middle Eastern security order. The political vacuum and weak state forms that the Arab uprisings left made it possible to readjust regional power so that regional

powers would gain leverage and provide national interests (Hinnebusch, 2016). In this regard, the political competition between Iran and Iraq, especially after the U.S. troops' withdrawal in 2011 period, provides a case study that is critical in perceiving how the Iranian foreign policy and regional security institutions interacted (Kamel,2017).

Traditionally, the strategic ambitions of Iran in the Middle East have been based on a mixture of ideological devotion, security interests, and geopolitical ambitions. Since 2011, Tehran has been strengthening its efforts in neighboring countries, especially in Iraq, by building on its influence via political alliance and economic assistance to the non-state militias (Azizi, 2022). Geographic proximity, religious inclination, and political instability has seen Iraq become a point of focus of the Iranian foreign policy. This has not only reduced Iraq to a sphere of influence but has also led to the overall rebalancing of regional forces (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016).

Iran-Iraq political rivalry is, however, not simply a bilateral competition; it is a symbol of deeper structural tensions in the Middle East security order. Efforts by Iraq to exercise its sovereignty and pursue an independent foreign policy, in most instances, have come into conflict with the efforts being made by Iran concerning the need to exercise strategic depth and ensure a re-emergence of hostile regimes within its borders (Dodge, 2012). This relationship is also aggravated by the role of external factors, such as the United States and the Gulf states, which have been traditionally bent on balancing the Iranian influence and increasing the rivalry between the geopolitical stakes in Iraq.

In addition, domestic and regional security have also become even more indistinct due to the emergence of sectarian politics and the spread of armed non-state actors since 2011. Iranian backing of the Shia militia in Iraq has been commendable as it has infiltrated the extremist groups like ISIS, but on the other hand, it has led to issues of state sovereignty and monopoly of violence (REZAIE & VALIZADE, 2016). This two-sidedness highlights the intricacy of the role of Iran as a stabilizing and destabilizing actor in the region.

This paper, consequently, discusses the nature and implications of Iranian influence in the emerging security order in the Middle East in the context of the Iran-Iraq political rivalry since 2011. It claims that Iran is intervening in Iraq in a larger plan to reconfigure the structures of regional security plans to its advantage, and also points out some of the inherent contradictions and latencies in this strategy. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the current Middle East geopolitical landscape, focusing on the interaction between state and non-state actors, on the one hand, and internal and external pressures, on the other.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Existing literature on the foreign policy of Iran explores the features of this policy based on the ideological commitment and realistic needs of security. According to scholars, it is a mixture of revolutionary ideology and geopolitical necessity that drives Iran to act in the region in ways that have been commonly

referred to as a strategy of strategic depth to prevent outside attack and promote influence (Zamiri, 2024). This strategy has been tightened since 2011, with Iran exploiting political instability within the Middle East in order to consolidate its standing. As (Wehrey et al., 2018) note, one of the ways Iran has succeeded in exercising power outside of its borders is through the use of a network of allies and proxy groups, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The source definitely makes it clear that the foreign policy of Iran has not been an expansionist policy but also a defensive one aimed at countering the perceived threats posed by the United States and other regional competitors like Saudi Arabia.

The change of Iraq's political system following the U.S withdrawal in 2011 has been a topic of diverse scholarly debate. According to scholars like Dodge (2012), the weakness of institutions of the state in Iraq, coupled with the continuing sectarian cleavages, has given room to foreign influences. The loosening of the central force and the divisions of the political influence helped Iran to become more engaged in Iraqi politics. Moreover, Yoshioka (2025) suggests that the hybrid political order in Iraq, which is marked by an absence of institutionalized structures and the presence of informal militia groups, has enabled the Iranian influence via the non-state agencies. The literature highlights the fact that Iraq is not just a passive recipient, but a relatively active actor trying to strike a balance between the conflicting outside forces and internal security.

Relationship Iranian-Iraq Since 2011 has been evaluated as an intricate cooperation and competition blend. Besides the religious and economic ties, there is tension in the issues of political self-rule and sovereignty between the two countries. According to scholars, Iraq's attempts at exercising an autonomous foreign policy come into conflict with the ambition of Iran to have an influence, and a rivalry takes place in subtle yet constant forms (Gause, 2014). This competition is encircled in a larger region of security processes, with Iraq being a strategic battlefield of rival powers. It is an issue which has been complicated by the presence of outside forces, especially the United States, who solidify the issue of Iraq as a subject of geopolitical rivalry.

Numerous studies center on the question of how the non-state actors redefine the Middle Eastern security order. The emergence of the activities of other state-oriented approaches to security, including militias and paramilitary organizations, has questioned the conventional view of a state-centered security (Singh & Nunes, 2016). Although such groups have assisted in counterterrorism, they have weakened the sovereignty of states and institutional unity. Scholars believe that the rising stature of these actors signifies part of a wider shift in regional security, where power has been decentralized at a variety of levels other than being concentrated at the state apparatus (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010). In this literature, Iran is set to play a dual role in stabilizing extremist cases and destabilizing them by supporting parallel security systems.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paper is founded on both neorealism and constructivism, which jointly offer an analytical insight into the Iranian influence and Iran-Iraq political animosity

against the changing Middle Eastern security order since 2011. These theoretical approaches are especially relevant because they either represent material power relations or ideational forces that influence state behavior in the region.

### **1. Neorealism and Regional Power Politics**

Neorealism (Structural Realism) is one of the main theories of interpreting the actions of Iran, in which they act as rational players in an anarchic international system. Neorealist scholars argue that states ensure the survival, security, and maximization of power in the self-help system (Kadercan, 2013). The lack of centralized power in the Middle East has increased rivalry among the regional powers, especially following the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The role of Iran in Iraq, which is growing, can be viewed in this light as a strategy to increase its levels of strategic depth and neutralize external threats, particularly the threats of the United States and its regional partners. Developing political partnerships and assisting non-state actors, Iran aims at ensuring the security of their boundaries and extending its influence outside its state. Iraq, on its part, is a focal point where the process of power balancing and rivalry at the regional scale takes place (Kirmanj & Sadq, 2018). Therefore, neorealism can be used to describe the strategic calculations behind the policies of Iran as well as the larger geopolitical game that generates the current security order of the region.

### **2. Constructivism and Sectarian Identity Politics**

Whereas neorealism lays stress on material power, Constructivism puts stress on the contribution of ideas, identities, and norms in influencing the behavior of the state (Wendt, 2015). The sectarian identity, especially the Shia affiliation, is a factor that contributes to political orientation and the formation of foreign policies in the Iran-Iraq relations.

Through inter-religious and ideological support, Iran has been able to establish close relationships with the Shia political actors and militias in Iraq. This is not just a matter that represents strategic interests but the power of identity-driven narratives that justify the role of Iran. Constructivist views hold these identities to be constructed socially, with being mobilized politically to be perceived as allies or enemies (Siniver, 2012). In turn, the influence of Iran in Iraq cannot be adequately explained without taking into account the interaction of the sectarian and ideological variables with the geopolitical goals.

### **3. Hybrid Security Governance and Non-State Actors**

The idea of hybrid security governance gives another theoretical dimension to the participation of non-state actors in the Middle Eastern security order. The spread of militias in Iraq (especially those that are sponsored in some way by Iran) is only an example of how state and non-state approaches to security are gradually becoming integrated in the post-2011 Iraq status (Zamiri, 2024). These actors are working outside and inside the formal structures of the state, thus making sovereignty and governance difficult. It falls within the greater regional approach of Iran, depending on such groups to propel its influence with little exposure to confrontation.

### **4. Theoretical Approaches Synthesis**

This paper combines neorealism, constructivism, and hybrid methods of security governance in the formulation of a multidimensional approach to explain the Iran-Iraq political rivalry. Neorealism offers the strategic and material interests of Iran in its actions; constructivism tells us about the contributions of identity and ideology, and hybrid security governance reveals the mechanisms of how the influence is exerted (Nia, 2012).

These two views can be combined to form the dynamic insight of the role of the Iranian influence in making the Middle East security order since 2011. This conglomerate structure is specifically appropriate in the analysis of the intricacies of Iraq as an independent state, as well as a war zone of power projection.

## METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate the Iranian influence and Iran-Iraq political rivalry in the developing Middle East security order since 2011. As one of the most critical units of analysis based on its geopolitical connections, Iraq is the country where the case study approach is employed because it is the focal point of the Iranian regional policy. The study mainly relies on secondary sources, such as scholarly sources, reports on policies, official publications, and reliable forms of media, to make the analysis complete and properly substantiated. The thematic content analysis method is used to determine critical trends as far as the foreign policy conduct of Iran, the political relationships of Iraq, and the influence of non-state actors on the regional security are concerned. In addition, the theoretical framework used in the study is a combination of neorealism and constructivism that enables the analysis of material power and considers the ideological considerations, including sectarian identity. This methodological strategy would allow a subtle insight into the intricate relationship between the state and the non-state actors, and into the wider geopolitical context of the Iran-Iraq rivalry in the post-2011 Middle East.

### Methodological Table

| Component                    | Details  | Purpose / Justification   |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Research Approach</b>     | Qualitative Case Study (Iraq, post-2011)   | To provide an in-depth examination of Iranian influence and the Iran-Iraq political rivalry.                |
| <b>Theoretical Framework</b> | - Neorealism: Explains Iran's strategic and material motivations<br>- Constructivism: Examines sectarian identity and ideational factors (Wendt, 2015) | Integrates material, ideational, and operational dimensions to comprehensively analyze Iran-Iraq relations. |
| <b>Primary Data</b>          | Not applicable (study relies on secondary sources)   | N/A   |
| <b>Secondary Data</b>        | - Academic literature and peer-reviewed journals<br>- Policy reports from think tanks  | To triangulate evidence on Iran's influence, Iraqi  |

| Component                     | Details  | Purpose / Justification   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Sources</b>                | Government documents and statements                                  | sovereignty, and the evolving regional security order.  |
| <b>Data Collection Method</b> | Document analysis and literature review                              | To systematically gather information relevant to research objectives.   |
| <b>Analysis Technique</b>     | Thematic content analysis  | To identify patterns, relationships, and recurring themes regarding Iranian influence, non-state actors, and Iraqi responses. |
| <b>Unit of Analysis</b>       | of Iraq as a strategic case within the Middle Eastern security order | To understand how local, regional, and external factors shape the Iran-Iraq political rivalry.                                |
| <b>Time Frame</b>             | Post-2011 (after U.S. withdrawal from Iraq)                          | To focus on the period of intensified Iranian engagement and evolving hybrid governance dynamics.                             |

### Data Analysis

The recent Middle Eastern security landscape since 2011 has shifted considerably owing to the fact that state institutions became weak, non-state powers emerged, and the rivalry among the states increased. In this dynamic environment, Iran's intervention in Iraq is one such move in redesigning the Iraqi security order to fit its geopolitical and ideological interests. The Iran-Iraq political rivalry analysis shows a complicated situation of cooperation, competition, and influence-building that reflects the rest of the region.

Iran has secretly and steadily deepened its influence since the withdrawal of the U.S forces in Iraq in 2011 due to systematic exploitation of political fragmentation and institutional inefficiencies in the Al- Iraqi state. Iran has managed to become entrenched in the political and security system of Iraq through its close relationship with Shia political parties, religious groups, and militia groups. This is in line with the neorealist view of Iran seeking strategic depth, because Iraq is a buffer zone against foreign aggression as well as a tool of exerting regional influence. Iran is involved, and this has been able to enable it to match the moves of its competitors, especially the United States and the Gulf states, thus solidifying its status as a regional powerhouse.

Simultaneously, Iraq is not the country that has been an inactive participant in this relationship. The political elites in Iraq have been trying to claim their

sovereignty and diminish excessive reliance on foreign powers, such as Iran. This has brought about a low-surface but persistent competition in terms of politics with Baghdad seeking to adopt a middle-ground foreign policy as it seeks to juggle internal differences. This conflict between independence and influence can be especially observed in Iraq and its attempts to control militia groups and make them a part of the official state organization. Although a part of the factions identifies strong with the interests of Iran, it is evident that there are factions that are emphasized on Iraqi nationalism and reflect the fragmented political authority of the country.

Within the sphere of comprehending the forces of Iranian presence in Iraq, the role of non-state actors plays a key role. Iran ardently backed Shia militias, especially when it was confronting ISIS, and as a result, this gave it a lot of power in the Iraqi security system. These entities find themselves as influential forces in their own capacity, and mostly they work under the name of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). On a hybrid security governance approach, this fact indicates a non-traditional state-centric approach but a more intricate system where power is dispersed among both formal and informal institutions. Although these militias have helped stabilize Iraq amid the threat of extremists, they have also made governance more complex by defying the monopoly on the use of force by the state.

Constructivist opinions also help to shed light on the role of sectarian identity in developing the Iran-Iraq relations. Iran has successfully used the commonality of Shia identity as a source of influence, creating ideological agreement and justifying its presence in the political life of Iraq. The latter strategy, however, has had its own turn of opposition, especially among sections of the Iraqi people who believe the Iranian influence is an abuse of national sovereignty. The emergence of nationalistic forces and the eruption of protests against outside intervention are signs that limit the identity-based influence and reinforce the contentious role of the Iranian intervention in Iraq.

Besides, the Iran-Iraq dispute should be addressed in terms of the international and regional rivalry. Iraq is a region that has evolved and evolved into a strategic point of action where different players, such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf nations, would want to make their own gains and deal with Iran. This foreign meddling has heightened the complexity of Iraqi politics, which in many cases fuels internal divisions and prevents the consolidation of states. The policy of exerting indirect influence using proxies has enabled Iran to keep a high profile without a direct confrontational battle, hence continuing to enjoy the competitive edge in this conflict-ridden area.

#### **Table of Data Sources**

| <b>Source Type</b>         | <b>Specific Sources</b>             | <b>Relevance</b>   | <b>Contribution to Study</b>  |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Academic Literature</b> | Gause (2014), Wehrey et al. (2018), | Peer-reviewed journals and books on Iranian foreign policy, Iraq's context, and political dynamics, and perspectives | Provides theoretical grounding, historical context, and scholarly for |

| Source Type                  | Specific Sources  | Relevance   | Contribution to Study   |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Policy Reports / Think Tanks | International Crisis Group, RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution             | Analytical reports on Iraq, Iran, and Middle Eastern security dynamics                  | Offers policy insights, contemporary analysis, and evaluations of Iran-Iraq interactions                      |
|                              | Statements and reports from Iranian and Iraqi ministries, parliamentary records | Official records of foreign policy, security strategies, and diplomatic initiatives     | Supplies authoritative evidence of state objectives, positions, and formal engagement                         |
| Media Sources                | Al Jazeera, Reuters, Guardian, BBC, The   | News articles, interviews, coverage of political events and conflicts                   | Provides timely information on events, and crises, and political developments affecting the Iran-Iraq rivalry |
| Non-State Actor Reports      | Publications from Shia militias, NGOs, local research centers                   | Information on paramilitary activity, militia influence, and hybrid security governance | Highlights the role of non-state actors in shaping security and political outcomes in Iraq                    |
| Secondary Data Analyses      | Historical datasets, conflict timelines, academic compilations                  | Aggregated data on political, social, and military developments                         | Offers background context and allows validation of qualitative findings                                       |

## DISCUSSION

### 1. The Strategic Depth of Iran and Consolidation of Power in the Region

The results of this research support the thesis statement that the involvement of Iran in Iraq since 2011 is mainly conditioned by the desire of the country to develop strategic depth and consolidation of power in the region. On the neorealist front, Iran has successfully used the political vulnerability of the Iraqi nation to grow its influence and overcome the external threats, and most importantly, the United States and their allies in the region. This is consistent with the general academic opinion that the Iranian foreign policy is influenced by both the defensive and the expansionist factors (Gause, 2014). Having entered the Iraqi political and security framework, Iran has gained the strength to project power without taking direct confrontation to its advantage, thus redrawing the equation of power in the region to its advantage (Kirmanj & Sadq, 2018).

### 2. Sovereignty versus Influence: The Balancing Act in Iraq

One of the major themes that arises after the analysis is the conflict between Iraqi sovereignty and Iranian influence. Although Iran has forged strong ties in Iraq, the Iraqi state has been growing to create independence and to pursue balance in its foreign setting. This indicates the argument that Iraq is not just a passive recipient of external pressure but rather an active agent that moves through intricate geopolitical forces (Dodge, 2012). The fact that both institutions co-exist with collaboration and competition between the two state domains underscores the constraint of external intervention amid national political actors. Furthermore, the continued existence of nationalist feelings and occasional opposition to the role of Iran further validates the instability of this relationship.

### **3. Non-State Actors and the Change in Security Governance**

This marked a significant change in the security order in the Middle East, as it shows the strong involvement of non-state actors, especially the Shia militias. Iran has been fostering these groups, and its backing has been critical in empowering the country's influence in Iraq, particularly its resistance against ISIS. Nevertheless, it has also led to the rise of a hybrid security system whereby authority is shared amongst the institutions of the state and informal armed networks (Bagayoko et al., 2016). Although such actors have served a stabilizing position in some conditions, their further sovereignty further challenges the state sovereignty and institutional unity. This bilateralism shows the greater complexity of the largest part of the Iranian influence in the region role as a stabilizing and destabilizing force.

### **4. Sectarian Identity and Its Limitations**

Constructivist details point out the significance of sectarian identity in supporting the influence of Iran in Iraq. The unity by Shia has allowed Iran to establish robust partnerships with relevant players in politics and militia, which strengthens its regional policy (Wehrey et al., 2018). The results, however, also point out that identity-based influence is limited. The rise of Iraqi nationalism and the growing unrest with foreign intervention among citizens depict that sectarian influences in themselves are not enough to provide long-term effects (Al-Qarawee, 2014; Yosufi, 2016). This helps to argue that identity is not a fixed affiliation, but it is a dynamic and contested aspect, which is influenced by the changing political and social environments.

### **5. The Theatre of Regional Competition of Iraq**

Lastly, the discussion touches on the fact that Iraq is a central location of competition between the region and internationally. The presence of external forces of the United States and the Gulf states has pushed the geopolitical competition to an even greater level, adding to the internal dynamics in Iraq. The policy of indirect involvement by the use of proxies has enabled Iran to be very active, without engaging itself directly with other competing entities (Gause, 2014). This is also indicative of a greater trend in the Middle East where regional security is gradually being defined in terms of indirect contests and overlapping spheres of influence (Bilgin, 2019).

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has discussed the perception and the consequence of an Iranian influence on the changing Middle Eastern security order, with the case of the Iran-Iraq political rivalry since 2011. The discussion shows that Iran has been able to increase its footprint in the region, as it has exploited the political weaknesses, institutional weaknesses of Iraq, and sectarianism. By employing a series of political influence, economic relationships, and sponsorship of non-state actors, Iran has gained entrenchment in the state and security institutions of Iraq. This is indicative of a larger strategic goal of acquiring strategic depth and springing back to the external threats, like in the current literature (Gause, 2014).

Nevertheless, Iran does not have absolute and undisputed influence. This has been the case since Iraq has been gradually attempting to enforce its sovereignty as well as a more balanced foreign policy, and this is where a conflict between foreign influence and Iraq Agency remains (Dodge, 2012). The emergence of nationalist influences and opposition to alien interference simply indicates the boundaries of the Iranian strategy as well.

Altogether, the Iran-Iraq relations since 2011 are displayed to be an example of the sophistication of the modern Middle Eastern geopolitics, in which the potentially defined power is not exercised solely by the institutions of the state but also by informal networks and affiliations, grounded on the sense of identity. The article notes that the changing security order is the type of competition in the form of overlapping spheres of influence, indirect competition, and the interaction of material and ideational factors.

### **Policy Recommendations**

To minimize outside pressure and increase the level of sovereignty, Iraq needs to focus on the fortification of political and security institutions. This involves the enhancement of governance, minimization of corruption, and appropriate functioning of state machinery. A good and integrated state apparatus will inhibit external actors from taking advantage of domestic differences (Dodge, 2012). The Iraqi government ought to seek to bring the various militia factions gradually into the umbrella state security systems, coupled with stringent regulatory rules. It is something that would facilitate the revival of the state monopoly on the use of force and minimize the threats posed by parallel security arrangements. Iraq needs to have a balanced and practical foreign policy in the country, and still be able to have constructive relationships with Iran and other regional and international actors. This would ensure that Iraq does not rely on one power, but it would increase its strategic autonomy (Gause, 2014). The regional actors, such as the Gulf states and Iran, need to bring up some dialogue and confidence-building programs to mollify the tension and ensure stability. In Iraq and the Middle East in general, multilateral platforms can also be used to ensure they curb the security issue and reduce the risks of proxy wars. Sectarian polarization in Iraq needs to be minimized by employing inclusive governance and national reconciliation efforts. Strengthening the idea of a national identity will undermine the power of influence, which is based on personal sectarian traits, and help to stabilize the situation in the long term.

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