

T.C.
İSTANBUL 29 MAYIS ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
SİYASET BİLİMİ VE ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER ANABİLİM DALI

İRAN'S MILITARY AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON IRAQ: THE HAIDER
AL-ABADI GOVERNMENT (2014-2018)

(YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ)

Sena Betül YILMAZ

Danışman:
Prof. Dr. Michelangelo GUIDA

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TEZ ONAY SAYFASI

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SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ MÜDÜRLÜĞÜNE

Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Anabilim Dalı Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler (İngilizce) Tezli Yüksek Lisans Programı'nda 200820YL07 numaralı Sena Betül YILMAZ'ın hazırladığı "*Iran's Military And Political Influence On Iraq: The Haider Al-Abadi Government (2014-2018)*" konulu yüksek lisans tezi ile ilgili tez savunma sınavı 19/09/2024 günü 10:00-12:00 saatleri arasında yapılmış, sorulan sorulara alınan cevaplar sonunda adayın tezinin başarılı olduğuna oy birliği ile karar verilmiştir.

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BEYAN

Bu tezin yazılmasında bilimsel ahlak kurallarına uyulduğunu, başkalarının eserlerinden yararlanılması durumunda bilimsel normlara uygun olarak atıfta bulunulduğunu kullanılan verilerde herhangi bir tahrifat yapılmadığını, tezin herhangi bir kısmının bu üniversite veya başka bir üniversitedeki başka bir tez çalışması olarak sunulmadığını beyan ederim.

Sena Betül YILMAZ

19.09.2024

ÖZ

Bu tez, Orta Doğu bölgesinde kilit role sahip olan İran'ın İslam devriminin ardından çizdiği dış politika çerçevesince Irak üzerindeki askeri ve siyasi etki alanını incelemektedir. Özellikle Irak'ta Haider Al-Abadi yönetiminin olduğu dönem (2014-18) süresince İran'ın askeri ve siyasi olarak etkisini nasıl kullandığı ve ne ölçüde bir etkilenme olduğu analiz edilmektedir. İran'ın nüfuz politikası, 2014 yılında ortaya çıkan ISIS tehdidi ile birlikte oluşan güç boşluklarını askeri ve siyasi alanda doldurmaya yönelik şekillenmiştir. Böyle bir dönemde yönetime gelen Al-Abadi'nin reform vaatleri ve Irak'ı dış müdahalelerden arındırarak daha bağımsız bir ülke haline getirme vizyonu İran'ın etki alanındaki daralma için bir ihtimal doğurmuştur. Fakat reel siyaset neticesinde bu vaatlerin gerçekleşmesi mümkün olmamış, aksine IŞİD'e karşı mücadele için kurulan ve Devrim Muhafızları Ordusu ile eş zamanlı çalışan Haşdi Şabi örgütü İran'ın Irak üzerindeki etkisini güçlendiren kuvvetli bir araç rolü üstlenmiştir. Bu bağlamda Irak başbakanının İran'ın etkisini kırma hususunda ne kadar etkili bir pozisyonda olduğu değerlendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

İran, Irak, Haydar Al-Abadi, Siyasi Nüfuz, Vekil, DMO

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Iran's military and political influence over Iraq, during the tenure of Haider Al-Abadi (2014-18), within the framework of its foreign policy shaped after the Islamic Revolution. It analyzes how and to what extent Iran utilized its military and political influence in Iraq during this period. Iran's influence policy aimed to fill the power vacuums in military and political spheres that emerged with the ISIS threat in 2014. Al-Abadi's rise to power with promises of reform and a vision to make Iraq more independent from external interventions posed a potential challenge to Iran's sphere of influence. However, these promises could not be fulfilled. On the contrary, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), established to combat ISIS and working concurrently with the IRGC, became a powerful tool that reinforced Iran's influence over Iraq. In this context, this thesis evaluates the effectiveness of the Iraqi Prime Minister in countering Iran's influence.

Key words:

Iran, Iraq, Haider Al-Abadi, Political Influence, Proxy, IRGC

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The thesis is not just the result of the educational process it underwent, but encompasses the entire life journey that has brought me to this point. The completion of this thesis today is the culmination of the music I began listening to, the films I started watching, and the books I began reading as a child. The core of my curiosity about Iran is hidden in the music and movies that my father opened. My journey of curiosity, which started in a place far away from academic studies, extended to the field of politics. Although the thesis writing process is often seen as an individual endeavor, I have experienced that it is, in fact, a collective process. I owe a debt of gratitude to everyone who supported and contributed to this work.

First and foremost, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my thesis advisor, the esteemed Prof. Dr. Michelangelo Guida, for his unwavering support in all circumstances, for instilling in me the belief that I could succeed through his confidence in me, for patiently guiding me, and for being a mentor not only in my thesis journey but also in my life journey.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my esteemed professor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Serhan Afacan, who provided invaluable support in every aspect, from the determination of my thesis topic to its completion, who answered all my questions with utmost kindness, who made me love this field even more, and who enriched it with his own works.

I am also deeply grateful to my esteemed Dr. Bilal Patacı and my sister Melek Ugar. They made my thesis writing process easier, instilled in me the belief that I could succeed, and offered all his support to facilitate the process.

I would like to thank my dear friend Şüheda Nur Seven for motivating me with all her strength and always being by my side, just as she has in every stage of my life, during this process as well.

I sincerely thank my beloved, my father, my mother, and my sisters, who took on all my stress and fatigue, dispelled my sadness with their smiles, supported me in everything I did, and made my world more beautiful with their love.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt and endless gratitude to my dear husband, Enes Furkan Sancak who has enlightened my life and made this journey more meaningful with his presence, for his patience, faith and all his sacrifices.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq
AQI	Al-Qaida in Iraq
CPA	The Coalition Provisional Authority
GC	Guardian Council
INA	Iraqi National Alliance
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KH	Kataib Hezbollah
OPEC	The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
QF	Quds Force
SCIRI	Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SLA	State of Law alliance
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
UAE	The United Arab Emirates
UIA	United Iraqi Alliance
UK	The United Kingdom
WMDs	Weapons of Mass Destruction

INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran reshaped the balance of power in the Middle East. The revolution not only changed the domestic political system but also reorganized foreign policy of Iran. In the new political order that Iran created on the basis of Shiite ideology, it positioned the institution of religious leadership at the top equating religious and political leadership. This approach created a new balance in the region and redefined Iran's relations with neighbouring states. With its Shiite population, the Gulf region has been major focus of Iran's foreign policy. Iraq, as the second country in the region with the largest Shiite population, has been at the center of Iran's foreign policy strategy. Due to their borders with each other, Iran and Iraq have experienced both alliances and tensions throughout history, with the Shatt al-Arab waterway dispute being a significant factor influencing their relationship.

As a result of the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, a mission to spread Islamic order worldwide was declared, and a new approach was adopted toward this end. Shortly after the revolution, the war between Iran and Iraq became focused on exporting the principles of the Islamic Revolution to Iraq in accordance with the ideals of the religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini, and on overthrowing the Ba'ath regime and Saddam Hussein's leadership in Iraq. The war, which resulted in significant losses for both sides, had no clear winner. The relationship between Iran and Iraq transitioned from hostility to a period of alliance. With the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, a new phase began in bilateral relations, altering the political dynamics of the Middle East and reshaping the balance of power. By 2003, Iran seized the power vacuum in Iraq as an opportunity and increased its influence in Iraqi politics due to the population density of Iraqi Shiites. Through its affiliated Shiite militia forces, Iran established both military and political influence over Iraq and managed Iraq's dependency on Iran in the most pragmatically beneficial manner.

Iran's security has been closely tied to Iraq's security. In line with its pragmatic goals of ensuring its own national security and gaining power over the region, Iran has tended to gain a level of influence in Iraqi politics sufficient to guide the country's governance. This influence has been solidified through groups that were exiled to Iran due to the repression of Shiites under Saddam Hussein's regime and later institutionalized

in Iran. After the U.S. intervention, these groups returned to Iraq, maintaining their loyalty to Iran and taking actions in favour of Tehran. Parallel to the official military in Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established after the revolution and played a significant role in foreign policy. The Quds Force unit of the IRGC, which has become the primary institution executing Iran's influence policies, has implemented Iran's influence policies, through the provision of equipment, financing, and training support of militia forces in Iraq.

This study examines how Iran's military and political influence strategies were shaped during Haider al-Abadi's tenure as Iraq's Prime Minister. Unlike other studies on Iran's influence strategies, this research highlights that influence is not solely a product of Iran's policies but also relates to the space afforded by the affected country itself. It has been observed that most studies in this field focus primarily on Iran's proxy wars and influence strategies, with a noticeable lack of research that examines influence zones from a more centralized perspective. Therefore, this study focuses on Iraq, where Iran has gained significant influence, analysing Iraq's impact on the implementation of Iran's policies and testing the possibility of limiting Iran's influence within Iraq's political hierarchy, where the Prime Minister plays a decisive role. In this context, the study seeks to answer the question, "To what extent are the Iraqi government and Iran's political vision influential?" and investigates how Haider al-Abadi, who positioned himself as more inclusive and moderate, affected Iran's influence strategy. Does the Prime Minister limit Iran's influence strategy?

Iran's military and political influence in Iraq has been shaped by the success of the political parties it is affiliated with and the effectiveness of the militia forces. When Nouri al-Maliki came to power in 2006, he created an opportunity for Iran to strengthen its influence by pursuing policies aligned with Iranian advice and support. However, in 2014, Haider al-Abadi, who succeeded Maliki as prime minister, positioned himself as a more inclusive and reformist leader. Upon taking office, al-Abadi received congratulations from the United States and the United Kingdom and aimed to change and transform the country's military and political Dynamics. However, despite his efforts to implement these changes, the outcomes fell short of his goals. During this period, Iran's military and political influence over Iraq was further consolidated. The growing threat of The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Iran's role in addressing this threat made Iran's influence

more visible. Iran sought to capitalize on the power vacuums that emerged during this time to deepen its influence over Iraq.

In this respect, the al-Abadi administration was a critical period for Iraq's internal and external policies. The increasing threat of ISIS further deepened sectarian divisions in the country and prompted efforts to maintain national unity. Analysing Iran's influence on Iraq during this period is important to understand the transformation of relations between the two countries and how the regional balance of power was affected. In such a period, The Popular Mobilization Forces, established to combat ISIS, institutionalized the militia groups supported and connected to Iran, and al-Abadi, despite his ideal of an independent and sectarian reconciled Iraq, was unable to combat this entrenched influence. Several factors contributed to this situation, but it became evident that the Prime Minister's personal vision and mission were insufficient to break Iran's entrenched influence. Pragmatic relationships have evolved based on mutual needs. The ethnic and sectarian diversity in Iraq's social structure has determined Iran's strategic moves, and the rise of Shiites to power in Iraq has strengthened Iran's interests. Iran's influence in Iraq has progressed beyond officially recognized state institutions, guided by militias, societal demands, and political directions, and al-Abadi's personal vision did not effectively limit this influence. Despite al-Abadi's inclusive and reformist goals, the steps he has taken to establish national security have strengthened Iran's influence.

In this thesis, which is divided into three sections, we examined Iran's foreign policy approach, focusing specifically on its relations with Iraq and its military and political influence during Haider al-Abadi's era.

In the first section, we analysed Iran's foreign policy approach and its strategy concerning the Gulf region. We also discussed the institutions influential in Iranian foreign policy-making, highlighting the key institutions with a decisive role in Iran.

The second section explored the process of Iran's influence policy over Iraq from a historical perspective. After the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, Iran aimed to eliminate the Ba'ath regime in Iraq, setting it as an ideal target. The aggressive stance of Saddam Hussein led to one of the bloodiest conflicts in history, the Iran-Iraq War. Examining the Iran-Iraq War is crucial for understanding the current state of bilateral relations, as it laid the foundation for present-day interactions. This section also covered

the U.S. intervention in Iraq and how the bilateral relations evolved under Nouri al-Maliki's administration.

In the final, third section, we first analysed Haider al-Abadi's political vision. We then evaluated how Iran achieved military and political influence and how this influence evolved during al-Abadi's tenure.



CHAPTER 1

FOREIGN POLICY OF IRAN

Understanding Iran's policy of influence over Iraq requires a broader perspective. It is essential to grasp Iran's foreign policy approach, which institutions are influential in Iran's foreign policy making and the framework it adopts at the regional level in order to comprehend Iran's motivations and behaviour towards Iraq. Examining the key institutions that shape Iran's foreign policy reveals which political actors its strategies are built upon. The Gulf region occupies a central place in Iran's foreign policy priorities. It plays a central role in Iran's security, political and economic calculations. More specifically, Iraq has a key role in determining Iran's domestic and foreign policies, both because of its neighbourliness to Iran and its large Shiite population. The Shatt al-Arab waterway crisis is also addressed in this section, as it is a fundamental issue in bilateral relations and regional dynamics. In this respect, this chapter will address Iran's basic foreign policy approach, its regional objectives, the institutions that shape its foreign policy, and the role of the Gulf region in general and Iraq in particular in Iran's foreign policy.

1. Iran Foreign Policy's Main Principles

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, established by the revolution in 1979, has been determined according to the principles formed by integrating with the new paradigm of the state. At this point, the ideological approach adopted by the state has been an influential factor in foreign policy making. Certainly, ideology alone cannot be the determining element of a country's foreign policy. However, it affects the shaping of its stance in the international arena. Nevertheless, states have to take into account their economic interests, security issues and regional dynamics in order to preserve their existence. In this context, Iran's foreign policy approach is sometimes characterized by a prioritization of revolutionary principles, while at other times a more pragmatic policy is envisioned, leaving these principles behind to ensure its own survival. The interaction among these factors results in a complex understanding of foreign policy. R. K. Ramazani, scholar of Iranian foreign policy, has written that the balance between

ideology and pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy decisions is one of the most enduring and complex issues in Iranian history.¹ Certainly, this is also related to the fact that the euphoria of the early years of the revolution was replaced by geopolitical and economic concerns.

The Iranian revolution was not only a revolt against internal dictatorship but also against an unjust world order. The assumption that the two superpowers that existed at the time were acting in their own interests and did not aim to provide justice and security to the international system was one of the ideas underlying the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Thus, the idea of independence and national sovereignty became a fundamental principle of Iranian foreign policy making. Iran has historically enjoyed a dominant position in the region due to its vast territory and its location at the east-west transit point. In the light of the teachings of historical experiences, Iran has emphasized an independent and strong state by adopting a defensive attitude against foreign intervention. Such that one of the main slogans of the revolution was “*Esteqlal, Azadi: Jomhuri Eslami*” (“Independence, Freedom: Islamic Republic”).²

2. Main Actors in the Foreign Policy Making Process

The Constitution determined the structural framework of Iran's foreign policy. The Constitution was framed within the new political order that emerged after the Islamic Revolution. It was shaped around the principles put forward by Ayatollah Khomeini. The limits and objectives of foreign policy are designated in Articles 152, 153 and 154 of the Constitution. It grounded on the protection of the territorial integrity and independence of the country. It put forward the principle of refusal of the domination of any state in any form. Whereas the experiences of the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule, was seen as an era of subjugation. Also, it stated the necessity of the state to support all the oppressed in the world against the oppressors. During the revolution, Khomeini asserted an anti-imperialist foreign policy approach with the slogan "Neither east nor west, only Islam".

¹ R.K. Ramazani, “Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy,” *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (October 1, 2004): 549, <https://doi.org/10.3751/194034604783997123>.

² Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “The Foreign Policy of Iran,” n.d., 285.

He claimed that they would defend the rights of all Muslims, not just Iranian Muslims, by prioritizing being on the side of Muslim people.

Although the constitution sets out the main objectives of Iran's foreign policy, it is not the only factor that plays a role in shaping it. The Supreme Leader has the strongest role in Iran's theocratic rule. He has the power to have the last word, on all key issues. For instance, relations with U.S. and Israel and nuclear issues. Supreme Leadership Authority has the highest official position in Iran's power structure. Another institution that formally plays an important role in the steering of Iran's foreign policy is the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). It is the organ responsible for the coordination of foreign policy decision making processes.³ SNSC was established in 1989 along with the revision of the constitution. Article 176 outlines the missions of SNSC. Its purpose of establishment is 'to ensure national interests, to protect the Islamic Revolution and territorial integrity'. The president nominally presides at the SNSC. All decisions must be approved by the Supreme Leader. Formally, both the Supreme Leader and the SNSC are two institutions that are the head of making foreign policies. They have a direct role in steering the foreign policy of Iran. In practice there are institutions that have indirect role. For instance, Guardian Council (GC) has a role behind the scenes in shaping Iran's foreign policy.

The Guardian Council is an efficient government body with significant authority and power. The Council has a total of 12 members, half of whom are *foqaha* (Islamic jurists) and the other half are jurists, as they carry out religious and legal inspections. Six clerics are appointed by the Supreme Leader, while other members are appointed by the assembly, based on the advice of the head of the judiciary appointed by the Supreme Leader.⁴ As a result, all members, though indirectly, are dependent on the Supreme Leader. The GC checks whether the laws passed by the parliament follow the Shariah and then with the constitution. For a law to come into force, the Council must approve it. Therewithal, the Council examines whether the president candidates are

³ Przemyslaw Osiewicz, *Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Between Ideology and Pragmatism*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020), 62, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003018285>.

⁴ Charlotte Lynch, Frederic Wehrey, and RAND Corporation, "Formal Structures of the Islamic Republic," 2023, 29.

dependent on the Islamic regime and qualified to run for office. A candidate not approved by the Council cannot participate in the elections.

3. The Gulf in Iranian Foreign Policy

The Persian Gulf is crucial in the global energy traffic due to its strategic geographic location. Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are countries along the coast of the Gulf and are rich in fossil fuels. Energy products are transported from the Gulf to countries around the world. The Gulf holds a unique position in terms of energy transportation with no alternatives. The Gulf countries hold more than half of the world's oil reserves. Saudi Arabia has the largest reserves in the region, followed by Iran. This makes the Gulf the central hub of global energy. The revenues that countries in the region earn from energy influence their foreign relations with other nations. Energy resources function as a tool in foreign policy. Ensuring the security of these resources and exporting them to other countries affects the positions of resource-owning nations on the global stage. Therefore, dominating the Gulf region entails significant global influence.

In its foreign policy approach, one of Iran's fundamental goals is to be a dominant power in the Gulf region. One of the main sources of Iran's economy is the export of oil and natural gas.⁵ Revenue from oil constitutes the government's most important income stream. Oil revenues are also crucial for maintaining and developing Iran's military power. These resources play a key role not only in domestic matters but also in sustaining armed conflicts abroad. Oil is a fundamental determinant in all economic and social aspects of the country. Therefore, any development adverse to Iran in this region would put the country in a unfavourable economic and military position. In this context, ensuring the security of the Strait of Hormuz, which serves as a crucial transit point, and being the dominant power in the region are among Iran's primary policies.

The Strait of Hormuz separates Iran from Oman and is located between the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. It is one of the world's most important transit points for

⁵ Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Ticaret Bakanlığı. "İran Ekonomisinin Sektörel Değerlendirilmesi." Ticaret Bakanlığı, <https://ticaret.gov.tr/yurtdisi-teskilati/guney-asya/iran/raporlar/musavirlik-raporlari/iran-ekonomisinin-sektorel-degerlendirilmesi>. (accessed August 5, 2024).

oil transfer. In 2018, the average daily oil flow through the strait was reported to be 21 million barrels.⁶ This figure represents approximately one-quarter of global liquid oil consumption, highlighting the critical importance of the Strait of Hormuz in global energy traffic. Given its significance, maintaining control over the Strait of Hormuz is one of Iran's primary objectives. Particularly after the Islamic Revolution, Iran has used its dominance over the strait as a tool in its struggle against the United States, which it views as an adversary. At times, Iran has threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz as retaliation against U.S. and European sanctions. Considering the U.S. military presence in the region and the presence of Saudi Arabia, which Iran sees as a rival, the Gulf region and the strait are also crucial for Iran's military defence. Any event adverse to Iran in this region would put the country in a difficult position not only in terms of energy but also economically, militarily, and politically. For Iran, the security of the region is an integral part of its national security.

For Iran, the Gulf region holds significant strategic and sectarian importance. Not only is it an irreplaceable area for global oil markets, but it is also the centre of Shiite Islam. Approximately 14% of the 2 billion Muslims in the world are Shiites, with Iran holding the largest Shiite population at 92%.⁷ The perspective established by Ayatollah Khomeini plays a crucial role in shaping the Shiite understanding in the region. Shiism manifests both ideologically and as a socio-political movement in the region.⁸ After the Islamic Revolution, Shiism became integrated with the doctrine put forth by Ayatollah Khomeini. The fundamental goal is to protect the rights of oppressed peoples and ensure the existence of states governed by religious leaders through the dominance of Islam. In this context, powerful states that hold global dominance are seen as adversaries for Iran. There is a need to combat states in the Gulf region that develop relationships with powerful countries such as the U.S. or Israel. It is particularly important for countries with

⁶ U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). "The Strait of Hormuz is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint." *Today in Energy*, April 21, 2023.
<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=42338#>. (accessed August 1, 2024).

⁷ World Population Review. "Muslim Majority Countries 2024." *World Population Review*.
<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/muslim-majority-countries#:~:text=Earth%20is%20home%20to%20more,among%20a%20few%20smaller%20denominati> ons. (accessed July 15, 2024).

⁸ Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Independence without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 241.

Islam as their official religion to accept the Islamic perception represented by Iran and to view Iran's enemies as their own.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran was a result of popular uprising against the Shah's regime and foreign domination. Shiism emerged as a socio-political and activist movement during this period. It evolved from being merely a religious sect to a political movement. During the revolution, Khomeini's supporters promoted this movement against the Shah's regime, and today, it continues as a movement supported by Shiite groups against Sunni states.⁹ It can be viewed as a social movement of Shiite groups under Sunni dominance, based on the emphasis on equality and justice.

Shiism is a significant force in the Gulf region. All Gulf countries have Shiite populations, making Shiism a critical factor in their inter-state relations. Examining the Shiite proportions in the Gulf countries, Iran has the largest Shiite population with approximately 90%, followed by Iraq with about 55%. Bahrain, with a Shiite population of around 55%-60%, is also among the countries with a Shiite majority in the Gulf.¹⁰ The proportions in other Gulf countries are approximately: Kuwait 20%, Saudi Arabia 12%, UAE 10%, Qatar 10%, and Oman 6%.¹¹

The proportion of Shiite population in the region holds strategic importance for Iran's efforts to maintain its presence and establish dominance. It can be used as a tool in the competition with other states in the region to Iran's advantage. However, this issue is not without its drawbacks. Sectarian differences in the region are often a root cause of conflicts that arise. Countries in the region tend to pursue their own security measures in response to Iran's sectarian approach and policies. Particularly, the Islamic Revolution in Iran has been a source of hope for Shiite groups seeking rights in other countries. Iran wields considerable influence over the behaviour of Shiite groups both within and outside its borders. Gulf countries with a notable Shiite population perceive this situation as a threat to their security and attempt to keep these groups under surveillance.

⁹ Ramazani, 241.

¹⁰ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, "İslam Kaynaklı Mezheplerin Ortadoğu'daki Coğrafi Dağılımı Ve Tahmini Nüfusları," 2013, 324.

¹¹ Pew Research Center. "Mapping the Global Muslim Population." Pew Research Center, October 7, 2009. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>. (accessed July 5, 2024).

The Iranian Revolution is perceived as both an internal and external threat by the Gulf Arab countries, whose populations are predominantly Sunni Muslims. Iran considers it its duty to protect the rights of Shiite groups in the states of the region. This duty also serves as a crucial tool for increasing its influence and activities in the region. Naturally, this approach by Iran is seen by other states in the region as an element that must be resisted and countered.

The political and diplomatic significance of the Shiite-Sunni divide has increasingly become a fundamental cause of inter-state competition in the region. The pronounced Saudi-Iranian rivalry is based on ideological grounds, which can be interpreted as sectarian division. Saudi Arabia has adopted a Sunni Islamic understanding and has a governance system aligned with this perspective. The tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran has affected the political and security dynamics of the region. It highlights that sectarian division is a significant factor in shaping the policies and strategies of Gulf Arab countries. Any conflict arising in the region, whether sectarian or for other reasons, has the potential to negatively impact Iran's internal and external security. Therefore, Iran cannot pursue a purely ideological foreign policy approach. One reason the Gulf region holds a primary position in Iran's foreign policy is that stability and security in the region are necessary for its own security.

3.1. Iran – Iraq Border Dispute: The Shatt Al-Arab Dispute

One of the crucial waterways in the Gulf region is the Shatt al-Arab, also known as the Arvand Rud by Persians, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers converge. Throughout history, states have fought to gain dominance over this region. The historical background of the Shatt al-Arab issue can be traced back to conflicts between the Persians and Babylonians. The issue has been approached differently according to the interests of the time under various regimes. The scale of the dispute has varied over different periods. In the context of Ottoman-Iranian relations, the Shatt al-Arab issue, or the border issue, has played a significant role. It has been one of the underlying causes of wars and treaties between the two states. Due to its geostrategic and geoeconomic importance, the Shatt al-Arab issue has not only been a concern for the bordering states but has also attracted the

interest of colonial powers seeking to advance their own interests. This issue can be examined from many angles, but here it will be discussed in the context of the relationship between Iran and Iraq.

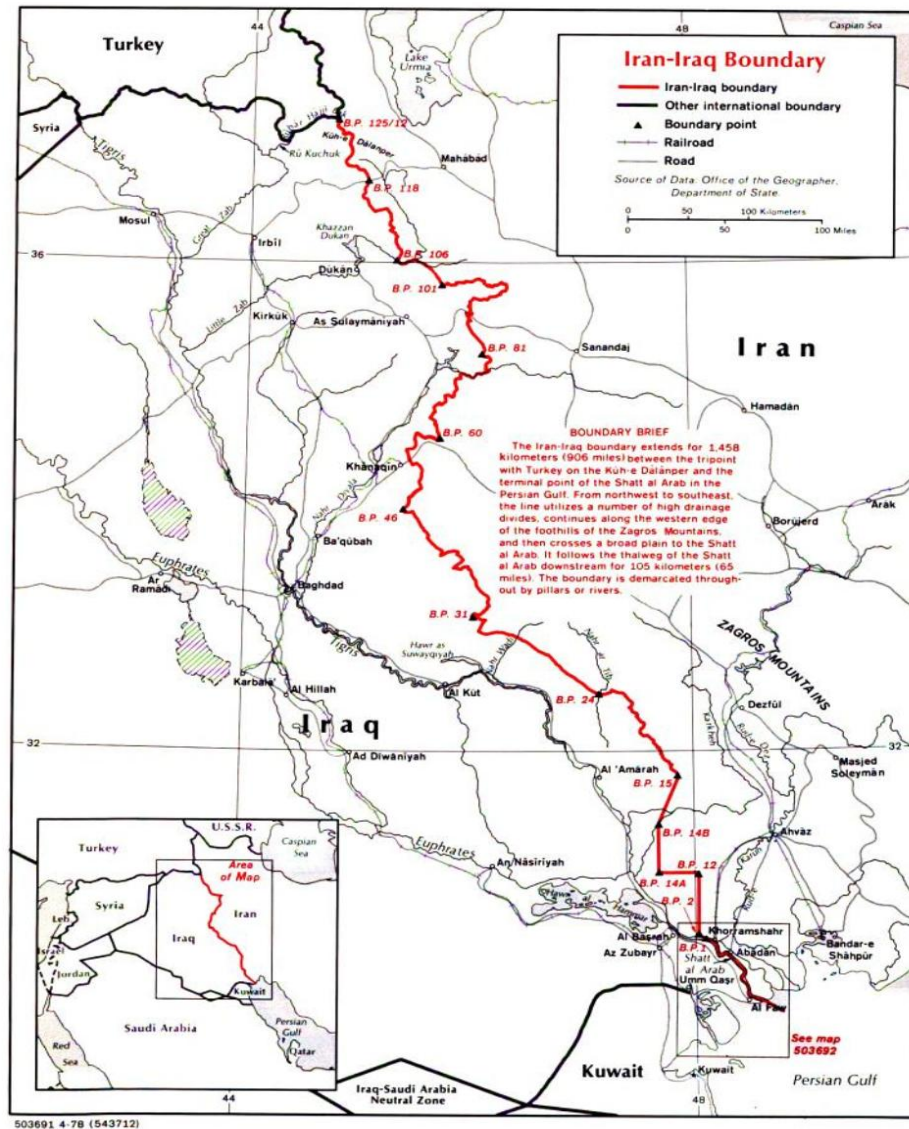


Figure 1 Iran-Iraq Boundary¹²

Iran refers to the Shatt al-Arab as Arvand Rud. This dispute extends to the area where the river flows into the sea. While Iran names the Gulf as the 'Persian Gulf,' Arabs refer to it as the 'Arabian Gulf' or simply 'the Gulf.'¹³ The disagreement between the two

¹² International Boundary Study, no. 164, 1978.

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=SiHYWZ10uFIC&dq=editions%3A6mPv8G7A_RkC&pg=RA1-PA3#v=onepage&q&f=false. (accessed July 10, 2024).

¹³ Osiewicz, *Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 79.

countries has persisted regarding the rights over the region. After World War I, Iraq entered a process of gaining independence. However, according to Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, it was anticipated that a state would remain under the mandate of another state until it achieved the capacity for self-governance. In 1920, Iraq became a semi-independent state under British mandate.¹⁴ Although Iraq had not yet achieved full independence, Iran rejected Iraq's control over the Shatt al-Arab by claiming that the Thalweg principle of the 1913 Istanbul Protocol was accepted as the international border.¹⁵

In 1932, Iraq gained full independence by ending British mandate rule. Iraq sought to redefine its path, addressing issues inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Iran and Iraq then attempted to resolve their issues as sovereign states. In 1934, Iraq took the Shatt al-Arab issue to the League of Nations in an effort to resolve the border dispute with Iran. Iraq argued that the Thalweg principle was not universal and rejected previous agreements made by Iran.¹⁶ Although Iran presented its arguments, they did not have a strong legal foundation. In 1936, both states agreed to withdraw the issue from the League of Nations and to negotiate directly. However, in October 1936, a coup occurred in Iraq. Global events, such as the rising threat of fascism, led to a new phase in relations between the states.¹⁷ Adopting a cooperative stance against external threats, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Turkey signed the Saidabad Pact to ensure regional security.

During these discussions, Iranian and Iraqi delegates agreed that the Shatt al-Arab would be open to all countries and that the middle line of the river would be considered the international border, thereby accepting the Thalweg principle.¹⁸ This agreement marked a step towards cooperation and reconciliation between the two countries. Although it was not a long-term solution, it was a major step towards regional security. The domestic and foreign policies of states cannot be considered independent of the external world. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Gulf countries entered a new phase. The occupation of Iraq and Iran during the war led to a pause in the Shatt al-Arab

¹⁴ İsmail Şahin, Cemile Şahin, and Samet Yüce, "Birinci Dünya Savaşı Sonrası İngiltere'nin Irak'ta Devlet Kurma Çabaları," *Gazi Akademik Bakış* 8, no. 15 (December 1, 2014): 117, <https://doi.org/10.19060/gav.96300>.

¹⁵ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 9.

¹⁶ Zafer Yıldırım, *Türk Basınında İran-Irak Savaşı* (İstanbul Üniversitesi, Doktora Tezi, 2005): 30.

¹⁷ Hiro, *The Longest War*, 1991, 10.

¹⁸ Hiro, 10.

issue. After the war, Iran and Iraq, as fully independent states, sought to align with the West due to concerns over Soviet power and the potential for Soviet dominance over the USA. They attempted to maintain a reconciliatory relationship.¹⁹ In this context, the Treaty of Good Neighbourly Relations signed in 1949 between the two countries was a diplomatic step towards reconciliation. In 1951, the Baghdad Pact was signed among Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and the UK, forming a military alliance and further improving relations.²⁰ However, this period of reconciliation and peace ended with the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy.

In 1958, General Abdul-Karim Qasim overthrew the monarchy in Iraq and established a republic. Although the first leader, General Qasim, initially adopted a pan-Arabist approach, he later distanced himself from this stance and withdrew from the Baghdad Pact. Additionally, General Qasim's permitting communists into state positions disturbed and was perceived as a threat by Iran. Towards the end of that year, the new regime in Iraq rejected the offer to participate in the boundary-setting commission and invalidated the 1937 agreement.²¹ During this period, the dispute centred on the use of the Khosrowabad port. Iran claimed the right to use the port based on the 1937 boundary agreement. The ambiguity in the agreement contributed to the ongoing unresolved dispute. Additionally, increased oil production and export activity heightened the significance of the Shatt al-Arab. Thus, the Shatt al-Arab issue continued to be a primary source of contention.

The new regime did not last long, and in 1963, the Ba'ath Party seized power in Iraq. By the end of that year, deep divisions between Ba'ath and Nasserist elements within the government led to a coup supported by the army. Nasserist elements came to power, and a new government was established under the leadership of nationalist and Nasserist Abdul Salam Arif.²² However, Abdul Salam Arif's death in a plane crash in 1966 led to Abdurrahman Arif taking over. During this period, tensions between Iran and Iraq decreased, and an official visit to Tehran occurred in 1967.²³ During this period,

¹⁹ Efraim Karsh, "Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War," 1990, 261.

²⁰ Hiro, *The Longest War*, 1991, 11.

²¹ Todd Ruffner, "Identity and Border Relations between Iraq and Iran in the 20th Century: The Cases of Khuzestan and Shatt al-cArab," n.d., 91.

²² U. Zaher, "Political Developments in Iraq 1963-1980" *Saddam's Iraq : revolution or reaction?* 1989, 55.

²³ Karsh, "Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War," 263.

insufficient emphasis on nationalism and worsening economic conditions began to trouble radical Arab nationalists and other segments of the public. On July 17, 1968, the Ba'ath Party, with the help of military officers, carried out a coup and returned to power. The 10-year period between 1958 and 1968, marked by three coups and five different governments, resulted in significant political instability in Iraq. The rise of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party brought about stability.

These developments in Iraq were not viewed positively by Iran. The rise of the Ba'ath Party displeased Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who believed that the party served Soviet objectives.²⁴ Consequently, the Shah reintroduced the Shatt al-Arab issue politically. Due to the lack of willingness to reconcile between Iraq and Iran, Iran unilaterally declared the 1937 agreement null and void.

The Shatt al-Arab, valuable both strategically and economically for both states, became a powerful tool. Iraq emphasized its historical narrative, while Iran argued that it violated international norms, highlighting the damage to the Iranian economy as a source of mutual threats. As both countries underwent internal transformations, the Shatt al-Arab issue became a means for each to challenge and assert their identities against one another. In 2019, Iraq's call to return to the 1975 Algiers Agreement indicated improved relations between the two countries, yet the Shatt al-Arab issue has still not been fully resolved.

²⁴ Yıldırım, *Türk Basınında İran-Irak Savaşı*, 36.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON IRAN-IRAQ RELATIONS

Understanding Iran's current influence over Iraq is only possible by examining the conditions under which this influence developed and how the bilateral relations between the two countries have transformed. Therefore, we aimed to analyse the trajectory of bilateral relations, particularly following the Iranian Islamic Revolution, and the key turning points that shaped these dynamics. In this context, we addressed the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. intervention in Iraq, and the subsequent tenure of Nuri al-Maliki to explore the historical transformation of Iran-Iraq relations.

1. Iran-Iraq War

1.1. The Origins of Conflict

The relationship between Iran and Iraq has always been turbulent, marked by periods of both conflict and rapprochement. Throughout history, the two states have experienced various disagreements as well as moments of rapprochements. Factors such as border disputes, religious and ethnic diversity, economic objectives and the desire to exert influence over the region have been determined the course of their relations. By 1979, the Islamic revolution in Iran was successfully concluded with Ayatollah Khomeini, the pioneer of the revolution, becoming the first leader of the new regime. In the same year, Saddam Hussein, a member of the Baath Party, assumed control of the Iraqi government. The Ba'ath party, which basically adopted Arab nationalism and socialist policies, ideologically advocated that the Arab states should unite under a single state. In the context of Iraq's ethnic diversity, the Ba'athist ideology prioritizes Sunni Arabs. Therefore, in terms of political and ideological views, the two states have positioned themselves far from reconciliation, bringing them closer to a state of war. When the origins of the Iran-Iraq war are analysed, it is observed that there are numerous factors acted as catalysts. In fact, the war has deep roots that extend in multiple directions: ideological, economic, geopolitical and security.

Among these elements, the border dispute stands out as a very influential element that has caused tensions between the two states to rise from time to time and has been at the root of diplomatic disagreements. The issue of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, the Iran-Iraq border dispute mentioned in the first section, has often emerged as a source of tension due to the claims of both states' territorial claims over the region. Since, the Shatt al-Arab waterway plays a key role for Iraq's access to the Gulf and for both states to facilitate oil exports. The long-standing dispute over the division of the Shatt al-Arab has been the main point of rivalry and tension between the two states, especially in the 1970s. However, as a result of the Algiers Treaty signed in 1975, the matter was ostensibly resolved by agreeing to Iran's claim for the division of the river along the thalweg line. Yet, this agreement could not last long and was annulled by Iraq following Saddam Hussein's rise to power. This annulment was a significant reason that led the two states to war.

In terms of ethnic and religious composition, Iran and Iraq are not on the same line. The majority of Iran's population consists of Shia Muslims, and the foundation of Iran's governing ideology is rooted in Shia Islam. Therefore, Shiite Muslims within Iraq were perceived as a potential internal threat by Saddam Hussein. Indeed, the uprisings that broke out in cities such as Najaf and Karbala, which are considered holy in Shiite doctrine, following the Iranian Islamic Revolution raised concerns.²⁵ In fact, after Khomeini came to power, he emphasized the Shiite-based understanding of Islam and Persian nationalism as the ideal of the revolution in his discourses and policies. According to the vision outlined by Khomeini, Saddam, being secular, was a leader who should not be in power for the new regional order.²⁶ Consequently, the Iran-Iraq War was not merely a military struggle; it was also a fierce battle of ideologies and identities. Arabs clashed with Persians, Sunnis with Shias, and Pan-Arabism with Pan-Islamism. Due to the Iraqi regime's emphasis on Sunni Arab identity, it expected support from other Arab states in the region. In the war, Saddam assumed the role of the representative and protector of the

²⁵ Ceren Yücealtay, "İran-İrak Savaşı ve Türkiye Üzerine Etkileri," *BELLEK Uluslararası Tarih ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4, no. 1 (June 30, 2022): 26, <https://doi.org/10.52735/bellek.1129480>.

²⁶ Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 36.

Arab nations and drew attention to his relations with the Arab countries.²⁷ On the other hand, Khomeini, in line with his vision, emphasized Islam before nationality, assuming the mission of rescuing the state if Islamic governments were not adequate and authentic.

When viewed by Saddam Hussein, the revolution in Iran created a regional power vacuum favourable to Iraq. Iran, seen as militarily weak as a newly revolutionized country and also it posed a perceived threat to neighbouring states. On the Iranian side, there were statements advocating the necessity of adapting the Iranian revolutionary model for other states and calling on the Iraqi people to overthrow the Ba'ath regime.

1.2.The Iran-Iraq War Process

The revolutionary regime coming to power in Iran and Iraq's perception of this situation as a threat caused security concerns, and war became inevitable in this environment where peace and security could not be fully ensured. Saddam's claim that Iraq had rights over the Shatt al-Arab waterway, by nullifying the 1975 Algeria agreement, emerged as a concrete reason for the beginning of the war. Although there were various conflicts in early 1980, the war, which officially started on 22 September 1980 with Iraq's attacks on Iran, recorded in world history as one of the most destructive wars of the Middle East. The war, which lasted for 8 years, can be divided into three periods; 1980-82 can be defined as the early years of the war when Iraq invaded Iranian territory, 1982-86 when Iran launched offensives against Iraq and the war intensified, and 1987-1988, which represents the last phase, can be defined as the period when ceasefire attempts, and peace negotiations took place.²⁸

1.2.1. The Initial Years of the Iran-Iraq War: 1980-1982

On September 22, 1980, the Iraqi government launched air and ground attacks against Iran. While the air force targeted Iran's oil facilities and military bases, the ground forces

²⁷ Lawrence G. Potter and Gary Sick, eds., *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.

²⁸ F. Gregory Gause, Iii, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818264>.

attacked along the country's borders. The Khuzestan region, especially on the southern front, was the main focus of the attacks.²⁹ Initially, the Iraqi government planned that the Iranian army was weakened after the revolutionary process in Iran and that it would easily achieve victory. Indeed, although Iran defended against Iraqi attacks, more formidable than the Iranian army in terms of equipment and numerically. However, due to operational errors, they were unable to make more progress than expected, despite having the resources.³⁰ Following a month of conflict, the Iraqi army was able to capture only one major city, Khorramshahr. In fact, at the end of 1980, in response to Iraq's ceasefire proposal, Iran did not approach peace, assuming the responsibility of protecting Islam. Iran formed a counterforce by reinforcing these post-revolutionary units, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) "*Pasdaran*" and the Basij.³¹ Saddam expressed his dissatisfaction with his army during this process by stating that "Unfortunately, we have a lack of discipline in our army."³² Despite issues with discipline and operational tactics, the Iraqi army maintained a stronger position compared to the Iranian army.

In 1981, Ayatollah Khomeini dismissed Iranian President Beni Sadr from office, allowing the Revolutionary Guards and other units to play a more active role in the war strategy and expand its scope. In September 1981, Iran lifted the Iraqi siege of Abandan and subsequently pushed back Iraqi forces on the northern border, demonstrating its strength against Iraq. By the first half of 1982, Iran recaptured Khorramshahr, the only major city captured by Iraq.³³ This shift in events altered the course of the war, moving it from Iranian territory into Iraqi territory.

During this period, countries in the region strategically assessed how they would position themselves by calculating the impact of the war. As a result, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia provided support to Iraq. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, viewing the Iranian revolution as a threat, encouraged regional states to adopt a stance against Iran.³⁴ Jordan and Egypt also

²⁹ Gause, Iii, 76.

³⁰ Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods, *Saddam and the Iran–Iraq War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38.

³¹ F. Gregory Gause, Iii, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818264>.

³² Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods, 39.

³³ Gause, Iii, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 2009, 66.

³⁴ Potter and Sick, *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, 177.

sided with Iraq. Jordan's economic dependence on Iraq made it a significant supporter during the war, while Egypt's dissatisfaction with the Islamic revolution prompted its support for Iraq. However, Syria emerged as Iran's ally in the region.³⁵ Saddam Hussein utilized the support received during this period to strengthen and expand the Iraqi army, starting with 200,000 troops, the army grew to 475,000 troops by 1983.³⁶

1.2.2. The Changing Course of the War: 1982-86

During the second phase, which started at the end of 1981, military superiority passed to Iran. Iran moved the war to the Iraqi front and insisted on continuing the war despite pushing Iraq back and calls for a ceasefire. Khomeini's mission of export the Islamic revolution to other countries and the desire for an Islamic government to be established in Iraq led Iran away from a conciliatory approach. Also, an Islamic government in Iraq in line with Khomeini's vision emphasizes the possibility of expanding Iranian domination. The motivations of spreading Islam, overthrowing Saddam and gaining power over the region caused the war to last longer and cause greater losses and destruction. This situation created turmoil in Iranian domestic politics. With the dismissal of Beni Sadr, leftist groups stood against the Revolutionary Guards and the voice of internal opposition in the country increased. The regime responded by attempting to suppress internal dissent through arrests and executions.

From mid-1982 to the end of 1984, Iran launched large-scale offensives. These offensives were not successful in breaking through the Iraqi line and caused heavy casualties. However, the largest of the offensives, which resulted in small territorial gains, took place on the southern front over Basra, but no major success was achieved.³⁷ Due to the lack of sufficient armoured, artillery, and air forces, Iran conducted these offensives primarily with infantry. However, they were unable to make tactically sound decisions.³⁸ In contrast, Iraq demonstrated stronger performance in defence than in offense. By conducting more regular operations and using its air superiority, Iraq demonstrated a

³⁵ Gause, Iii, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 2009, 71.

³⁶ Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods, *Saddam and the Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 41.

³⁷ Gause, Iii, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 2009, 74.

³⁸ Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, Essential Histories (Oxford: Osprey Pub, 2002), 40.

strong defence against Iran. This situation should not be considered only as a result of the strength and operational success of the Iraqi army. Unlike Iran, the Iraqi government has received financial support from the Gulf countries, accessed the international arms market and acquired advanced missiles and aircraft. The success of the defence is directly proportional to this situation.³⁹

By 1983, Iraq had introduced the use of chemical weapons in its struggle against human wave attacks. These weapons targeting the civilian population caused the people to leave the cities and seek shelter. This situation posed a significant political cost to Iran as the conflict continued. In 1984, although Iran captured the strategically important Majnun Island, they were repulsed by the chemical weapons used, but they still managed to hold the island in their hands. However, thousands of Iranians lost their lives during the attacks.⁴⁰ Until 1984, Iran continued its operations in order to overcome or weaken Iraq's defence line. However, they failed to achieve a visible victory. The war had turned into a stalemate, resulting in even greater losses.⁴¹

In 1984, another significant event was Iraq's attacks targeting tankers travelling to and from Iran. This war, which was initiated against maritime trade, targeted oil tankers, adversely affected shipping and caused great economic damage. Prior to the Tanker War, attacks on commercial ships had already occurred, but not on such a wide scale. In strategic terms, this war was not only about aggression, but also carried the hope that foreign powers would intervene and bring a resolution to the conflict.⁴² Between 1984 and 1985, Iran's attacks continued. In 1986, the scope of the Tanker War expanded, with Iran threatening to block passage through the Strait of Hormuz in response, particularly targeting Gulf countries that supported Iraq.⁴³ During this period (1984-86), the movement on the fronts became more stagnant, and the war for economic interests took place over the oil fields. In response to the bombardments organized by Iraq, Iran targeted

³⁹ Gause, Iii, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 2009, 75.

⁴⁰ Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, 42.

⁴¹ Annie Tracy Samuel, *The Unfinished History of the Iran-Iraq War: Faith, Firepower, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 142.

⁴² Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, 50.

⁴³ Strauss Center for International Security and Law, "The Strait of Hormuz and the Tanker War." <https://www.strausscenter.org/strait-of-hormuz-tanker-war/> (accessed February 18, 2024).

ships sailing to Iraq, ships serving Kuwait and Saudi ports, thereby posing a threat to Kuwait, a key ally of Iraq among the Gulf countries.⁴⁴

In response, Iraq aimed to weaken Iran economically by launching air strikes on oil facilities. Additionally, Iran pursued a strategy of dynamic defence by attacking Iranian territory. In May 1986, Iraq seized Mehran, which is strategically important in the south of Iran. Saddam attempted to regain the Faw Peninsula, which Iran had captured, through a swap offer, but Tehran responded negatively. In response to this offer, Iran launched a major offensive to reclaim Mehran, in order to take back both its territory and this bargaining chip from Iraq.⁴⁵ Iran reaffirmed its military superiority, bringing the possibility of Iranian victory closer to the forefront of world attention as the war approached its end.

1.2.3. Towards the End: 1987-88

Iran continued its attacks and took control of the Basra region. Following Iran's attack on Kuwait, Kuwait requested assistance from the United States and the Soviet Union. After negotiations with the Soviets, the US responded by providing protection to Kuwaiti tankers. In 1987, US forces intervened in the war by attacking and capturing an Iranian ship that laying mines, resulting in a lower-level naval conflict between Iran and the US. Apart from the military component, the US also played an active diplomatic role by requesting a Security Council resolution to the UN to end the war. In July 1987, the Security Council adopted Resolution 598.⁴⁶ According to this resolution, a ceasefire was to be declared and forces were to withdraw to their own territories. While Iraq accepted this resolution positively, Iran approached it cautiously. In 1988, Iraq changed the course of the war by launching intense airstrikes on Tehran. In April 1988, it took control of the Al-Faw Peninsula.⁴⁷ They used chemical weapons in their attacks, causing significant destruction. The balance of power in the war shifted, leading Iran to abandon its aggressive stance.

⁴⁴ Corentin de Favereau, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Carly Probert (50Minutes.com, 2016.), 34.

⁴⁵ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 172.

⁴⁶ Gause, Iii, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 2009, 82.

⁴⁷ Gause, Iii, 84.

In 1988, as a result of increased attacks by Iraq and the United States, the Iranian leadership decided to end the war. Ayatollah Khomeini likened this decision to “drinking poison” and publicized it as an obligatory decision. Although Saddam did not immediately accept approaching a ceasefire, he agreed to it on August 6th. On 20 August 1988, the resolution entered into force and the war officially ended.⁴⁸ The war ended where both countries started. The war ended where it had begun for both countries. With hundreds of thousands of deaths, the war had no clear winner.

1.3. New Period in Iran-Iraq Relations :1989-2003

The Iran-Iraq war is a turning point in the relations between the two countries. After the war, in which a great enmity and great losses were experienced, the direction of bilateral relations was highly uncertain and intriguing. When Iran's approach after the war is analysed, it is evident that the hostile attitude gradually transformed. Iran's concern to ensure its security and its aim to establish its sphere of influence in the region have created a new attitude for itself. As a matter of fact, Iraq is seen as a powerful tool in the formation of its sphere of influence in the region. As such, the security situation in the region is quite unstable. In such an unstable environment, creating a secure atmosphere is only possible with the support of regional countries. Therefore, Iran needs to open a new page with Iraq in the context of its own interests and security concerns. Both in the past and today, Iran's security policy is closely related to Iraq. Certainly, Iraq's approach to Iran is also critical for the relations between the two countries. Especially the course of Iraq's relationship with the US has a decisive role.

1.3.1. The Gulf War

After the war, which caused a great destruction, were occupied with repairing the damage. In the years following the war, the new diplomatic process and relations progressed in a more temperate atmosphere. The lack of a clear hegemonic power in the Persian Gulf region after the war led to increased security concerns and instability in the area. In such

⁴⁸ Gause, Iii, 85.

a situation, the states played a rival role against each other to fill the emerging power vacuum.⁴⁹ Iraq, declaring itself the winner of the war, ambitiously attempted to become a hegemonic power in the region by turning the regional power balance in its favor. As a result of this endeavour, the Gulf War in 1991 marked a turning point for Iraq.

After the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi army, which had received support from many countries, was strong enough to enter into another conflict. Indeed, during this period, Iraq aims to realise reforms that will provide restructuring in the economy. However, the existing foreign debt, estimated at between 80 to 100 billion dollars, complicated efforts to take economic measures.⁵⁰ During such a period, the long-standing border dispute between Iraq and Kuwait, Iraq's desire to overcome its economic crisis by obtaining oil wells and investments through Kuwait, its effort to demonstrate military power, and its ambition to become a strong regional actor, led to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Additionally, the decline in oil prices due to the excessive oil production of some Gulf Arab countries, including Kuwait, above the limit set by the Organisation of the Petroleum-Exporting Countries (OPEC), triggered economic difficulties by causing a decline in Iraq's income from oil. Therefore, the already existing historical tensions increased and continued during this period.

Iraq's post-war rearmament initiative increased regional security concerns, sparking fears that Iraq's aggressive stance could disrupt the balance of power in the region. Any actor that emerged as a dominant force in the region was considered a source of concern by global hegemonic powers, in line with their own interests. Iraq, on the other hand, brought the border dispute issue to the agenda of the Arab League, increased its rhetoric of claims over Kuwait. On August 2, 1990, Iraq acted on its rhetoric by invading Kuwait. Many states condemned the invasion and took a stance against Iraq. The United States, in particular, viewed this invasion as a threat to energy security and responded by leading the international community in opposition. The stance against this war, which would have significant global repercussions, was also carried out on a global scale.

When the changing world conjuncture is analysed, the war played a key role in shaping the new world order during this period of global transformations. The fall of the

⁴⁹ Mohsen M. Milani, "Iran's Post-Cold War Policy in the Persian Gulf," *International Journal*, 49: 2, (1994), 338.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 339.

Soviet Union eased the US intervention in the region, allowing it to strengthen its alliances and stabilize the balance of power in the region. The Bush administration in the U.S. spearheaded the formation of a global coalition and took the initiative against Iraq.⁵¹ Accordingly, the UN Security Council condemned Iraq and called for an end to the conflict and demanded the withdrawal of its troops. Additionally, it adopted Resolution 661, which imposed sanctions and an embargo on Iraq.⁵² At the same time, the Bush administration sent troops to Saudi Arabia to support the defense against Iraq.

1.3.1.1. Iran's Approach to the Gulf War

Iran's stance on the invasion of Kuwait significantly influenced the trajectory of Iran-Iraq relations. The period during which the Gulf War occurred coincided with a time of political change in Iran. In 1989, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini marked the beginning of a new era for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following Khomeini, Ali Khamenei was elected as the second *Veli-i Faqih* (Supreme Leader), and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani became the president of Iran.⁵³ The first decade of the Republic, which adhered to Khomeini's idealistic rhetoric after the revolution, gave way to a pragmatic period that envisaged economic recovery. In the wake of the devastating war, economic recovery was seen as essential for the state to ensure its security, development, and legitimacy. Recognizing the need for economic reform, Rafsanjani implemented political changes in both domestic and foreign policy.

Rafsanjani, focusing particularly on foreign policy, sought to address the serious consequences of Iran's diplomatic isolation in the international system for the status of Iran. Therefore, the ideological and rigid stance of the Khomeini era was softened by Rafsanjani, shifting to a more pragmatic approach. In order to improve its international position and preserve its regional status, Rafsanjani pursued integration into the international system, seeking dialogue and cooperation with various states. By calling for cooperation with the Gulf Arab states and other Arab states, Iran expressed that its goal

⁵¹ Orrin Schwab, *The Gulf Wars and the United States: Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2009), 45.

⁵² Walid Khalidi, "The Gulf Crisis: Origins and Consequences," 1991, 14.

⁵³ Osiewicz, *Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 171.

in the region was not dominance but the establishment of security and stability. The Kuwaiti invasion occurred at a time when Iran was trying to normalise tensions in its relations with regional actors and western states.⁵⁴ Therefore, Iran's stance during this crisis is of critical importance to its foreign policy objectives and regional status. Rafsanjani's pragmatic foreign policy approach also significantly shaped his attitude towards this issue.

Iran's actions and statements during the Gulf War reflect a realist perspective on the issue. Iraq's invasion threatened the security and stability of the region. Iran's attempt to improve its relations with the West and the Gulf countries and its diplomatic negotiations have given Iran an important role in this invasion. At the onset of the attack, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement rejecting the breach of borders and condemned the invasion. Iran called for Iraq to withdraw its troops and voted in favour of the UN Security Council resolution demanding Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. With Resolution 661, the UN imposed sanctions on Iraq, and U.S. forces were deployed to the Gulf.⁵⁵ During this crisis, Iran sought to demonstrate its position and advance the Rafsanjani administration's mission by continuing diplomatic negotiations.

Iraq is also involved in these negotiations. Saddam Hussein offered Tehran to comply with the 1975 Algiers Agreement on the Shatt al-Arab border dispute, withdraw its troops and engage in a prisoner exchange. With Iran accepting the proposal, the border was redefined, and Iraq withdrew from the occupied territories.⁵⁶ This situation can be seen as a measure by Saddam Hussein to ensure his safety from Iran and effectively prevent Iran from being involved in the matter. Although Iran accepted Iraq's offer, it did not change its stance that Iraq needed to withdraw from Kuwait. Iran approached the issue from a realist perspective and chose to remain neutral in the crisis. However, Iran did not show any opposition to the international intervention led by the US. Instead, Iran changed its image on a global scale by turning the issue in its favour and Iraq, which was perceived as the most important threat in the region, became isolated in the international system.

⁵⁴ Ehteshami, Anoushiravan. *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 145.

⁵⁵ Dr Christin Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2003), 107, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203417928>.

⁵⁶ Duygu Dershan Orhan, "İran'ın Irak'a Yönelik Dış Politikası: İdeoloji ve Realizm Arasında Üç Savaşın Analizi," *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi* 7, no. 19 (2019): 397, [Marschall, 111](#).

During the war, Iran tried to prevent the outbreak of conflict in the region, recognizing that it could not be involved economically and militarily in any war situation. It emphasised the necessity of a more conciliatory method to ensure its national security and stability in the region. Radical groups, believing that it was necessary to support Iraq and wage jihad against US, exerted pressure on the Rafsanjani government. However, Iran was not prepared for steps that the United States might take against it.⁵⁷ By conducting numerous diplomatic negotiations to prevent a ground offensive, Iran demonstrated its significant role in the international system through diplomacy. Although these initiatives did not yield results, they helped Iran evolve from its isolated situation to a more favourable position.

1.4.The U.S. invasion of Iraq and Iran-Iraq Relations

Following the September 11 attacks, the US adopted a new approach in its foreign policy making and targeted the fight against terrorism and in this framework, the Bush Doctrine was issued in 2002. In line with this doctrine, the right of pre-emptive strike was put forward in order to prevent terrorism and direct intervention against states harbouring terrorist groups and developing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) was legitimised. In this context, according to the New World Order defined by the U.S., Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq had no place. The US publicised the allegations that Saddam possessed WMDs and had links with international terrorist groups and argued that it was necessary to intervene in Iraq and disarm Saddam. Thus, on 20 March 2003, the United States and the United Kingdom, with the support of several other countries, invaded Iraq and defeated the Iraqi army within a span of three weeks.⁵⁸ Although there was some resistance at certain points, it was quickly suppressed. When the US occupation forces approached Baghdad, the majority of the Iraqi armed forces had already been disbanded. While volunteer troops tried to fight against the occupation forces, it resulted in great losses. On 09 April 2003, the occupation forces left an unforgettable symbolic mark on

⁵⁷ Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy*, 111.

⁵⁸ Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press, 2009), 242.

history with the toppling of a massive statue of Saddam Hussein in the centre of Baghdad.⁵⁹

The war resulted in a regime change in Iraq for reasons that cannot be definitively known, although many analyses and speculations have been put forward as to the actual cause of the war. The invasion took place despite the lack of strong evidence regarding Baghdad's potential possession of nuclear weapons and other claims. The primary source of legitimisation was the rhetoric of bringing democracy to Iraq and establishing freedom. Indeed, Scott Ritter, the head of the UN inspectors in Iraq, stated before the invasion that Saddam was unarmed, and after the invasion, a report published by a US research team in 2004 confirmed Ritter by stating that there was no evidence that Baghdad had resumed chemical weapons production after 1991.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the greatest beneficiary of the invasion was Iran with the opening of the Iraqi gates to Iran.

For Iran, a balance of minimal risk and great opportunities has emerged over Iraq. As a result of this balance, Iran envisages a loyal alliance with Iraqis, who have been in exile in Iran for a long time due to the oppression of the Baath regime, and a friendly government. The democratic system that the U.S. attempted to establish in Iraq brought Shiites into power and created new Shiite geopolitics in the region. It has also enabled Iran, one of the most important representatives of Shiism, to come to the fore at the regional level. In this respect, Iran has been supportive of Iraq having a democratic system, aligning with the U.S. to some extent. On the other hand, the overthrow of the Baathist regime, which was anti-Iranian and composed of Sunni elements and therefore a significant threat to Iranian national security, was a result that Iran would welcome, while the presence of the US in its neighbouring country on the Iranian border was a serious threat. Therefore, Iran's main objective in such a conjuncture has been to prevent the permanence of the U.S. presence and to ensure the establishment of a friendly Iraqi government.

Following the invasion, the U.S. assumed hegemonic power in Iraq and took on administrative responsibilities. Until the transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqis on 28 June

⁵⁹ Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2007), 89.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Cook, *Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East* (Pluto Books, 2015), 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs4kq>.

2004, the U.S. directly governed Iraq through the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). L. Paul Bremer, an experienced diplomat, was appointed as the head of the CPA and an attempt was made to rebuild a state that had suffered a serious military and social collapse. The Sunni minority's doubts about its representativeness due to the loss of power led to resistance against US forces, especially north of Baghdad, and the infiltration of support from neighbouring countries. Bremer's decrees disbanding the Iraqi military forces and banning Baath party members from the public sphere were strategic mistakes in terms of timing and led to an increase in the intensity of the attacks.⁶¹ It had consequences that seriously hampered the reconstruction of the state. The Shiites coming to power after the elections marked the beginning of a new process.

Although Iran initially adopted a more neutral stance, it later pursued a policy of developing a strategy to minimise the threat posed by the U.S., in line with the threat-opportunity balance. Although the US has tried to legitimise its presence in Iraq, Iran contended that the goals presented by the U.S. were merely a façade, arguing that the true objectives were to serve its own interests and thereby delegitimise the U.S. presence in the region. Indeed, in the first year of the invasion, Iranian President Rafsanjani delivered a sermon during Friday prayers criticizing the U.S. objectives. According to Rafsanjani, the US carried out this occupation in line with its goals such as completely dominating Iraq, owning Iraq's oil and becoming more influential in world politics through OPEC, closing its own energy deficit, establishing military bases in order to maintain its long-term presence in the region, and strengthening Israel and claimed that such an invasion cannot be legitimised in any way.⁶²

Iran as a national security threat and raised concerns that Iran might be the next target after Iraq. On the other hand, Iran used the deterrence method through its influence on Iraq, and at the same time, it took an active role in the formation of the new government and the determination of policies in order to prevent the US from providing decisive control.⁶³ In this way, Iraq was also assigned the role of defence line. Iran maintained its policy of active neutrality during the occupation of Iraq and continued its efforts to

⁶¹ Dawisha, *Iraq*, 244.

⁶² Iqraa. "Gündem Rafsanjani." Accessed March 8, 2024. <http://www.iqraa.de/gundem%20rafsanjani.htm>. (accessed March 8, 2024)

⁶³ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (September 2003): 115–29, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016366003322387145>.

strengthen the Shiite elements indirectly and to consolidate its own presence without directly engaging in a conflict. Ironically, after the invasion, a door was opened for Iran to continue its influence over Iraq for at least two decades. Both the US and Iran had concerns about the new government to be formed, and Iran tried to use its influence in the most active way in order to form a government close to itself in order to eliminate the consequences of the formation of a government allied to the US, and in fact, it succeeded in this regard. Given the initial objectives set by the U.S., the outcomes significantly deviated from those goals.

1.5.From Competition to Alliance: The New Era of Shiite Sovereignty and Nouri al-Maliki's Rule (2006-2014)

The US intervention in Iraq in March 2003 was a turning point in the political history of the country. Iraq, which had been governed under dictatorship, was attempted to be transformed into a democratic system. Although the results show that the goal was not fully achieved, the fact of transformation cannot be ignored. In June 2003, the interim government took over the administration of Iraq, and in January 2005, a provisional national assembly was formed, followed by the establishment of an interim government. Following the approval of the constitution, the first democratic parliamentary elections were held in the same year, which resulted in the increased influence of the Shiites in Iraq's political structure. This was a significant development as it was the first time that Shiites were included in the power structure in Iraq. In the previous periods, they did not have an effective role in the balance of power. In this respect, it is possible to say that a substantial transformation took place.

As a result of the elections, Ibrahim al-Jaafari assumed the position of Prime Minister, the most powerful position in the government, while the presidency was filled by Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani.⁶⁴ This reflects the fact that different ethnic and sectarian elements have gained power in different parts of the state and the aim is to create an environment of consensus. Although al-Jaafari won another

⁶⁴ Kenneth Katzman and Carla E Humud, "Iraq: Politics and Governance," *Politics and Governance*, n.d., 4.

term as Prime Minister following the elections in December 2005, he faced opposition within the US administration, and Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite appointed by President Talabani, took office on April 20, 2006. U.S. Ambassador to Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, believed that the Prime Minister should be someone distant from sectarian identity, though he doubted this was possible. Instead, he supported Maliki, thinking that at the very least, he would be less aligned with Iran and pursue a policy favouring a Shiite Iraq.⁶⁵ The rise of Nouri al-Maliki to the highest political office of the state can be considered as the beginning of the Shiites' active role in the balance of power. Thus, the Shiites have successfully used most of the country's population in their favour. This was a harbinger of a new chapter in Iran-Iraq relations.

The Maliki administration rose to power in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Baath regime and the collapse of central authority following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Under Saddam's rule, sectarianism had deepened, and in such a conjuncture, sectarian identity became more prominent. As mentioned earlier, Saddam's stance towards the Shiites was marginalizing and antagonizing, so that after his overthrow, the reaction to this fear of marginalization propelled the Shiites to the top of the political hierarchy. This process demonstrates how a marginalized community became a central actor in the political system.

Upon coming to power, Maliki emphasized national unity as an alternative to his sectarian image. In line with this, his cabinet included Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani as president and Sunni Tariq al-Hashimi as vice president. In fact, Sunni Arabs were allegedly satisfied with their representation during the early years of the Maliki government. However, when he came to power, he had neither sufficient state institutions nor enough experience in governance. In order to strengthen his own power, he surrounded himself with the “Malikiyoun” group, which he formed from his relatives with strong ties to him and members of his Dawa Party with strong ties to him.⁶⁶ For instance, his son Ahmed served in the chief of staff's office, overseeing security services

⁶⁵ Ned Parker and Raheem Salman, “Notes from the Underground: The Rise of Nouri Al-Maliki and the New Islamists,” *World Policy Journal* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0740277513482618>.

⁶⁶ Toby Dodge, “State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change: The Rise of a New Authoritarianism,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (March 2013): 245, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12016>.

and ensuring his father's security. Over time, he became an important power by gaining command authority of military units.⁶⁷ This can be considered as an example of how he expanded his personal network over official state institutions. Also, by increasing the power of the prime minister's office, Maliki's efforts can be viewed as an attempt to place his authoritarian control at the centre of state power. In late 2006, he established the Commander-in-Chief's office, directly reporting to him and filled with loyal individuals, thereby securing centralized control over Iraq's security forces. This institution, which has no legal basis, has also been able to override the influence of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior.⁶⁸ Thus, the attempt to establish a democratic regime gradually shifted toward an authoritarian approach by reducing parliament's influence on policymaking.

1.5.1. Iran's Policy of Iraq in the Maliki Era

The US intervention in Iraq ironically created a broad opportunity for Iran, offering it a weighty sphere of influence. In line with Iran's vision, its policy of exporting revolution on the basis of Shiite ideology and the dynamics of regional competition led Iran to be perceived as a serious threat, especially under Saddam. This threat perception was not limited to Iraq, but also in the countries in the region, especially those with Shiite populations, continued to perceive Iran as a threat. To this end, Iran sought to establish alliances through non-state elements. Indeed, Iraq, with its high Shiite population, has been one of the most suitable countries for such an alliance. The feasibility of such a strategy is directly proportional to the influence it has gained in the country. A deepening influence on society and politics will strengthen the alliance. The Maliki era, on the other hand, enabled the realization of the strategy and made room for Iran in its government. The rise of Shia parties, supported by Iran, expanded and deepened Iran's sphere of influence.

The coming to power of the Shiite Nouri al-Maliki in 2006 created an opportunity for Iran to form alliance with Iraq, establishing a friendly relationship between them. The

⁶⁷ Parker and Salman, "Notes from the Underground," 72.

⁶⁸ Marisa Sullivan, *Maliki's Authoritarian Regime*, Middle East Security Report 10 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, April 2013), 11.

Maliki administration has been a period of opportunities for Iran. The possibility of the U.S., perceived as a threat by Iran, intervening in Iranian affairs became highly unlikely due to the deepening civil war in Iraq, weakening the perception of this threat. In this process, Iraq is in a situation where the Shiite-Sunni divide is at the highest levels, high-tension conflicts have emerged and anti-US uprisings have increased. In this period of high level of security deficit, there was a serious public pressure on the US. This situation brought discussions of U.S. withdrawal from Iraq to the forefront, signalling an opportunity for Iran. The visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Iraq in 2008, the first visit of an Iranian president to Iraq in this period of developing Iran-Iraq relations, is of particular importance.

Ahmadinejad blamed the U.S., stating, "Iraq's security is Iran's security, and this does not suit the enemy because they do not want stability in the region. So, they can continue to interfere in their affairs and justify their military presence." Also, he argued that this visit would enhance Iraq's security.⁶⁹ The visit was also symbolically intended to show that Iran is significant power in Iraq.

In Baghdad, where conflicts were on the rise and no progress was seen, it needed Iran's support in terms of trade and domestic politics. In 2008, with the Obama administration in the U.S., plans to withdraw American military forces from Iraq were initiated, creating a potential larger power vacuum that could benefit Iran. Iran's relations with Maliki became closer during this period and played a significant role in the 2010 elections for Maliki's second term in office. By 2011, Maliki further centralized power and fuelled the sectarianism, and it was during this period that U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq. This was seen as a significant development for Iran. With the departure of its greatest adversary, Iran seized the opportunity to enhance its influence in the region, especially with the outbreak of uprisings in Syria, a key ally, and intervened there to protect its ally and increase its regional influence.

A week after the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq, Iranian Chief of Staff Hassan Firouzabadi stated that Iran was ready to strengthen and expand its military and security ties with Iraq, adding, "I hope that the humiliating failure of the United States after nine years of occupation of Iraq will be a lesson for them not to think of attacking

⁶⁹ France 24, "Ahmadinejad on historic Iraq visit." <https://www.france24.com/en/20080302-ahmadinejad-historic-visit-iraq-iran> (accessed August 10, 2024).

another country again.”⁷⁰ With the power vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal, Iran has pursued a policy of filling it in order to strengthen its ties with the Shiite-led government in Iraq and expand its influence. In this respect, 2011 was a turning point for Iran in Iraq. During this period, Iran shifted its focus from the political sphere to the security sector.



⁷⁰ Al Arabiya, "Iran says ready to expand military links with Iraq."
<https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011%2F12%2F25%2F184500> (Accessed August 12, 2024).

CHAPTER 3

IRAN'S MILITARY AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON IRAQ: THE HAIDER AL-ABADI GOVERNMENT (2014-18)

With Haider al-Abadi becoming Prime Minister, there was speculation about how this might affect Iran's influence. Despite being a Shiite himself and opposing Shiite dominance, al-Abadi's efforts were insufficient to break Iran's influence.

However, the emergence of the ISIS threat in 2014 and the subsequent establishment of the PMF (Popular Mobilization Forces) can be seen as institutionalizing Iran's influence over Iraq. Iranian-backed militia forces in Iraq successfully fought against ISIS and presented themselves as heroes in front of national public opinion and made up for the fragility of the regular Iraqi army units. The Fall of Mosul on 10 June 2014, where 30,000 regular soldiers and another 30,000 federal policemen were unable to confront a 1,500-attackers of the Islamic State, is a symbolic event. Despite American training and supplies, poor morale and corruption were determinant to the collapse of the regular army. The rapid expansion of ISIS, and the reluctance of Western countries to deploy troops made Iran an inevitable ally but also legitimized further Iranian influence. Despite al-Abadi's calls for reform, dismantling the entrenched influence of Iran was (still is) not easy.

In this chapter, we will analyse al-Abadi and his government but also the military and paramilitary institutions within Iraq that in those years strengthen Iranian influence.

1. Haider Al-Abadi's Political Vision

Born in Baghdad in 1952, al-Abadi became a member of the Islamic Dawa Party, Nuri Al-Maliki's political bloc, at the age of 15. His father, Jawad al-Abadi, a well-known doctor, served as a inspector general at the Iraqi Ministry of Health. However, when the Ba'ath regime came to power Saddam Hussein forced al-Abadi and his family into exile due to their political conflicts. As a result, al-Abadi lived in the United Kingdom and completed his Ph.D. in electrical engineering at the University of Manchester. In the UK he worked as a specialist in rapid transit technology, which was also the subject of his doctoral thesis. In 2003, after the overthrow of the Saddam regime, al-Abadi returned to

the country and held various ministerial positions in the Iraqi government. In 2003, he served as the Minister of Communications in the Iraqi Interim Governing Council, while al-Abadi, who was a member of parliament from 2006 until his presidential term, chaired many parliamentary committees, including in the fields of finance and economy.⁷¹

The reactions increased against Nouri al-Maliki, due to his weak response to the fight against ISIS, raising concerns within the international community that a government led by Maliki would jeopardize the country's unity and stability. Consequently, the Iraqi Parliament held a session where Fuad Masum, elected as the President of Iraq, did not assign Maliki the task of forming a government. The National Alliance, which brings together almost all Shiite parties, nominated Haider al-Abadi as the prime minister candidate instead of Nouri al-Maliki with the signatures of 127 deputies. Following this, President Fuad Masum assigned Haider al-Abadi the task of forming a government. Parliament approved al-Abadi's government with a vote of confidence on 8 September 2014 and he became the prime minister of Iraq.⁷²

Al-Abadi has portrayed a more conciliatory and inclusive figure in contrast to the sectarian approach of his predecessor, Maliki. Although both belong to the Islamic Dawa Party, they come from different backgrounds. Maliki grew up in a rural village and spent his exile in Iran and Syria, which led to a distrustful and suspicious attitude towards the West.⁷³ In contrast, al-Abadi's more urban background, proficiency in foreign languages, and experience living in the United Kingdom (the UK) have contributed to a more conciliatory and moderate approach towards the West. Indeed, following al-Abadi's appointment as Prime Minister, U.S. President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden called to congratulate him. Obama described the appointment as an important step towards uniting Iraq's communities. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry also stated that the U.S. would support the Iraqi people's fight against terrorism.⁷⁴ Such that, the

⁷¹ The Guardian, Chulov, Martin. "Profile: Haider al-Abadi: from exile in Britain to Iraq's next prime minister" <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/11/haider-al-abadi-profile-iraqs-next-prime-minister> (accessed June 5, 2024).

⁷² Bilgay Duman, "Nouri El-Maliki's Resignation and New Government Formation," ORSAM, August 15, 2014, <https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/nouri-el-maliki-s-resignation-and-new-government-formation/>.

⁷³ Ali, Othman. "Who Is Pushing Al-Abadi Out of the Power: The Iranians or the Americans and Why?" ORSAM. <https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/who-is-pushing-al-abadi-out-of-the-power-the-iranians-or-the-americans-and-why/>. (accessed June 20, 2024).

⁷⁴ CNN, "Iraq's Nuri al-Maliki digs in as President nominates new Prime Minister." https://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/11/world/meast/iraq-crisis/index.html?hpt=hp_t2 (accessed June 6, 2024).

deepening Shiite-Sunni divide and the rise of the radical group ISIS during Maliki's tenure had posed serious threats to the stability and security of Iraq and the region. al-Abadi's more inclusive stance has positioned him as a reformist.

Haider al-Abadi prioritized ensuring representation for all ethnic and religious groups in the government formation process. Baha al-Araji, a Shiite Sadrist, Rawsch Shaways from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Salih Mutlak, a Sunni leader, filled the deputy prime minister position. Outgoing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, who advocated for national unity in Iraq, and former Speaker of the Parliament, Usama al-Nujaifi, filled the three vice president positions. This indicates that Maliki still played a role in the political arena.⁷⁵ However, the position of Speaker of Parliament, which is a powerful role after the Prime Minister and President, was filled by Salim al-Jabouri from the independent Arab Sunni party. Al-Abadi's approach to forming the government demonstrates his attempt to consider ethnic and religious balances. Particularly, he has sought to adopt a more inclusive approach to the Sunni, Kurdish, and Shiite divisions that deepened during Maliki's tenure. For instance, the appointment of Kurdish-origin Hoşyar Zebari as Finance Minister and Sunni-origin Hadi al-Ubeydi as Defence Minister can be seen in this context. However, despite these efforts, winning the trust of Sunnis and Kurds will not be easy. Building a government that is inclusive and based on national reconciliation will require managing the Dawa Party and the Shiite bloc, which is a challenging task. Establishing stability in the country, protecting territorial integrity and ensuring security against terrorist attacks, carrying out economic reforms and replacing sectarian divisions with national reconciliation are significant and difficult challenges for the government. In this context, the influence of Iran on Iraq will be closely related to how much room the new government allows for external influences.

Ranj Alaaldin, who specializes in Iraqi politics, has stated that it is unlikely that al-Abadi, whose supporters are Shiites from the south, can pursue a policy independent of sectarian approaches. In this sense, expecting a radical change during al-Abadi's term seems unrealistic. Of course, this does not mean that there have been no efforts in this direction.

⁷⁵ Phebe Marr and Ibrahim Al-Marashi, *The Modern History of Iraq*, Fourth edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), 288.

1.1. Al-Abadi's Reform Plan

Opposition voices started to increase within Iraq and became a determining factor in al-Abadi's approach. In such an environment, Iraqi people raised their voices against this sectarian order and corruption and voiced their demands for the reform of the government. Although al-Abadi considered the need for reform, the possibility of implementing reforms was deemed unrealistic during a period when ISIS controlled almost a third of the country. For such steps to be taken, it was necessary for the public to raise their voices and organize protests against the system. In response to these mass protests against his government, al-Abadi announced a reform package titled seven-point plan, which in itself can be described as a bold step.

The public protests included not only opposition groups but also Shiite factions that supported the government. These demonstrations reflected the extent of anger across the country, further underscored by Iraq's position at 170th out of 175 countries in the 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index, making such mass protests almost inevitable.⁷⁶ Moreover, the call by Shiite religious leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani for the government to be brave and resolute in implementing reforms expedited the release of the reform package. Indeed, after nearly a month of protests, on August 9, 2015, al-Abadi announced the reform package, which promised to regulate Iraq's political system and eliminate corruption. This step, particularly following Sistani's call, indicated that al-Abadi was far from being a charismatic and courageous leader.

The reform package announced by al-Abadi basically includes the following points: abolishing the presidency and deputy prime minister's offices, reducing the number of ministries and limiting their powers, reducing the number of bodyguards allocated to state officials and cancelling the exceptional budgets allocated to them, focusing on the fight against corruption, as well as ensuring merit and justice in state institutions and all senior positions and realising an appointment away from sectarian

⁷⁶ CBS News, "Iraq PM Haider al-Abadi Announces Sweeping Anti-Corruption Plan." <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-pm-haider-al-abadi-sweeping-anti-corruption-plan/> (accessed September 5, 2023).

divisions.⁷⁷ Al-Abadi's plan was unanimously passed by the parliament on 11 August and was welcomed by the people. However, the main issue is how much these reforms will improve the political and social order. As a matter of fact, this reform decision, which removed former President Maliki from politics, was ruled unconstitutional by the Iraqi federal court in 2016 regarding the abolition of the vice presidency.⁷⁸ Unfortunately, the period following the announcement of the reforms did not show improvement and led to the perception that the measures were merely steps to temporarily calm the public.

2. ISIS: Obstacle in front of Haider al-Abadi

2.1. Background of ISIS

In June 2014, when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized vast territories in Iraq and Syria, both the global community and the countries in the region were taken aback and concerned, leading to efforts to halt the group's momentum. While ISIS is not a group that suddenly emerged in 2014, it has undergone a development and transformation process extending back approximately a decade.

ISIS emerged in 2003 under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from the group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad. The group was an Islamist militant organization operating under the banner of Sunni Salafi Islam, originating in Jordan. In 2004, as Zarqawi's group grew and developed, it declared allegiance to Osama bin Laden and was recognized by al-Qaeda, becoming its affiliate in Iraq. After undergoing structural changes, it became known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and expanded its activities following the American invasion.⁷⁹ The group then reached a broader audience and, by uniting with other Sunni resistance groups, declared the "Mujahideen Shura Council."⁸⁰ Following the death of AQI leader Zarqawi in a U.S. airstrike in 2006, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi took over

⁷⁷ ORSAM, "Protests in Iraq: Reform Package and the Government's Situation."

<https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/protests-in-iraq-reform-package-and-the-government-s-situation/> (accessed August 18, 2024).

⁷⁸ Anadolu Ajansı, "Irak'ta Cumhurbaşkanı Yardımcıları Görevine Geri Dönüyor." August 11, 2016. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/irakta-cumhurbaskani-yardimcilari-gorevine-geri-donuyor/662049> (accessed September 15, 2023).

⁷⁹ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 1 (January 2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12183>.

⁸⁰ Sarkan Salman Abubaker, "Hilafet'ten Terör Teşkilatlanmasına Dönüş: IŞİD" 3, no. 2 (2019), 145.

leadership and, with the support of other Sunni resistance groups, established the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The Shia-dominated government's marginalization of Sunnis paved the way for the expansion of this organization. The rise of these groups prompted the U.S. to recognize the need for intervention and to weaken the resistance groups through soft power initiatives. Unable to counter the increased U.S. military presence, the group experienced an operational decline. The U.S. also sought to co-opt fighters by providing salaries, which led to a claim that the number of ISIS fighters, which had approached 15,000, fell to around 1,000 by 2011.⁸¹

By 2011, this situation gained momentum from decline to resurgence. As a result of the 'Status of Forces Agreement' (SOFA) signed between the US and the Iraqi government, US troops withdrew from the country by the end of 2011. This created a security vacuum, that ISI was quick to exploit. Additionally, the outbreak of the civil war in neighbouring Syria and the increasingly sectarian approach of al-Maliki's administration facilitated this new momentum. In 2010, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, like Zarqawi, was killed in a US airstrike. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who took over the leadership, immediately resumed operations with the withdrawal of US troops. In mid-2011, in response to the civil war in Syria, al-Baghdadi sent ISI forces to Syria to establish the al-Nusra front.⁸² As the scope of the war expanded, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi unilaterally announced the formation of the ISIS in April 2013. However, this unilateral formation was deemed erroneous by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the central leader of al-Qaeda. Disagreements over central leadership persisted between the two groups, with al-Zawahiri attempting to limit al-Baghdadi's operations to Iraq.⁸³ Al-Baghdadi, rejecting this limitation, continued to lead and expand the group in terms of numbers, prosperity, and finances. Indeed, from November 2011 to May 2014, ISIS reportedly conducted over 19,000 military operations in Iraq alone.⁸⁴ In December 2013, ISIS initiated a large-scale

⁸¹ Abubaker, 147.

⁸² *Iran's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2022), 105.

⁸³ Al Jazeera, "Qaeda Chief Annuls Syrian-Iraqi Jihad Merger," <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/6/9/qaeda-chief-annuls-syrian-iraqi-jihad-merger> (accessed March 8, 2024).

⁸⁴ Muhammad al-'Ubaydi et al., "The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State:" (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, December 1, 2014), 4, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA619696>.

offensive in Iraq's Anbar province, which continued into 2014, allowing the group to gain control over extensive territories extending to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.⁸⁵

With these military successes, the organisation has provided serious propaganda, showcasing the brutality it inflicted and attracting foreign fighters, making itself more visible on the international stage. It rapidly expanded geographically and was able to hold onto the territories it had seized. In early 2014, it officially severed its ties with Al-Qaeda, and in the summer of that year al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph and his territory a caliphate.⁸⁶

2.2. Iraqi Politics after the Emergence of ISIS

The rise of ISIS coincides with the period when Al-Maliki was prime minister. Al-Maliki's sectarian policies led to an increase in polarisation within the country and Sunni groups taking a stance against the government, thus allowing ISIS to easily gain power in predominantly Sunni areas. The general elections during this period, marked by growing dissatisfaction among Sunnis and the serious security threat posed by ISIS, made forming a government difficult. In these elections, which saw a 60% voter turnout, Al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition won 94 out of 328 seats. As a majority of 165 seats was required to form a government, Al-Maliki was unable to establish a government on his own and sought to form a coalition with different political parties. Following the elections, a delegation of representatives from all Shia parties visited Iran to discuss government formation⁸⁷, which can be seen as a step towards strengthening Iran's influence over the political balance in Iraq.

In such a political conjuncture, ISIS launched an attack on Mosul, the second largest city of Iraq, on 6 June 2014. It was captured four days later, and ISIS then advanced towards Kirkuk, an oil-rich city in the north of Iraq.⁸⁸ The combination of Iraq's

⁸⁵ *Iran's Military Interventions*, 105.

⁸⁶ Reuters. "Al Qaeda Breaks Link with Syrian Militant Group ISIL." <https://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/03/us-syria-crisis-qaeda-idUSBREA120NS20140203/>. (accessed April 15, 2024).

⁸⁷ The 2014 Elections, ISIS Operations And The Future Of Iraq, ORSAM Report No: 190 June 2014, p. 18.

⁸⁸ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 33.

consternation and the weakness of the Iraqi army made the situation even more alarming. After Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced his goal of capturing Baghdad, al-Maliki realised that it was not possible to protect every front and concentrated his efforts on protecting Baghdad. It can be said that ISIS was partly in favour of al-Maliki's re-election. Indeed, the Shiites' traumatic experience of the Baathist regime and the concern that this spirit would be revived, and a Sunni-dominated government would be re-established made them consider Shiite domination as a necessary option.

Before seizing Mosul, ISIS captured Fallujah in Anbar province, where the population is predominantly Sunni, and took control of strategic points in Ramadi. After Mosul, ISIS quickly advanced to Tikrit, the capital of Salahaddin province, and also took over the cities of Suleiman Beg, Shirqat, and Baiji. Subsequently, it headed towards Diala on the Iranian border and captured Baquba, the centre of Diala.⁸⁹ This expansion of the scope of the operations has brought Baghdad to a threatening level. The fact that ISIS has made so much progress in such a short period of time has clearly revealed the failure of the Al-Maliki administration and the inadequacy of the Iraqi military to counter the threat. It is also necessary to underscore the failure of the US, which invaded Iraq after 2003 to ensure the construction and military formation of the country. Therefore, the al-Maliki government, which came under serious pressure, was politically opposed by the Shiite groups, and members of his own Dawa Party rejecting his leadership. Thus, Haider al-Abadi, who presented a more conciliatory approach, was appointed Prime Minister, opening the door to reforms.

Although Haider al-Abadi is a member of the Dawa Party, his background offers him a broader, more inclusive perspective. Al-Abadi envisions forming a government that transcends sectarian and partisan lines, preventing corruption, and making Iraq more liberated through reforms. However, the legacy inherited from al-Maliki presents a significant barrier to achieving these goals. When the al-Abadi government came to power, discussions and various assessments were made about the realism of the proposed reforms.

⁸⁹ ORSAM, *The 2014 Elections, ISIS Operations and the Future of Iraq*, ORSAM Report No: 190 (June 2014), 19.

3. Iran's Military Influence

Iran maintains a position as a country capable of exerting influence over Iraqi politics. The sectarian conflict across Iraq has strengthened Iran's military influence in the country. Through its unconventional military power, Iran's support for Shia militias has positioned it more advantageously in the region and specifically in Iraq. The desire to protect itself from the existing U.S. bases in the region and potential Israeli attacks, as well as the ambition to gain influence over the region, has led Iran to adopt a military training system that encompasses asymmetric warfare techniques. Iran has had to adopt the asymmetric approach both to provide defence and to counterattack. Especially the Iran-Iraq war, which started immediately after the revolution, played an important role in shaping Iran's military strategy.

Iran's military doctrine has been predominantly characterized by defensive principles around the objectives of regime protection, territorial defence, demonstrative deterrence, i.e. showcasing its military strength, and retaliatory deterrence, i.e. the demonstration of readiness to attack. Following the revolution, Iran has sought to extend its influence abroad within the context of its policy of exporting the revolution.⁹⁰ To this end, it has created proxy forces, such as the Shiite militias in Iraq, in order to strengthen and protect the Shiite doctrine as well as securitize the country through the technique of retaliatory deterrence against rivals.

The institutionalization of Iran's dual military power occurred when Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a force loyal to the revolution, parallel to the national army (*Artesh*), which was founded in 1921. The IRGC, which is the executor of Iran's proxy policies, had to start professionalisation especially during the Iran-Iraq war. In 1990, the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) was established to conduct Iran's foreign operations.⁹¹ The IRGC-QF is responsible for gathering intelligence against adversaries, supporting Shia militias, and conducting

⁹⁰ Matthew McInnis, "The Strategic Foundations of Iran's Military Doctrine," (The American Enterprise Institute, 2016.), 4.

⁹¹ United States, ed., *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance* (Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), 57.

operations abroad. In this context, the IRGC-QF has become the primary instrument of Iran's military influence in Iraq.

3.1. IRGC-Quds Force (نیروی قدس)

Iran employs various instruments to achieve its foreign policy objectives. In this context, the IRGC and the Quds Force serve as significant tools. The IRGC is composed of militias loyal to the revolution, providing active support and directly reporting to the Supreme Leader. Over time, it has institutionalized and evolved into a quasi-regular military unit with naval, ground, and air forces, a hierarchical structure, and military training centres.⁹² However, the IRGC should not be seen solely as a military organization. Founded with the idea of protecting the new regime, the IRGC has become a deeply rooted actor in politics, economy, and social spheres. It holds a powerful position in Iran's upper-level political system, with the president, most ministers, many parliament members, and local administrators having roots in the IRGC. Economically, it influences a wide range of sectors, from dam and pipeline construction to automobile manufacturing. Additionally, its mission extends to nearly every aspect of societal life, including strengthening society's loyalty and allegiance to the regime, managing media resources, and overseeing educational activities.⁹³

In addition to its effectiveness in domestic politics, the IRGC undertakes the mission of exporting the revolution beyond Iran's borders. This mission, which is characterised by more proactive activities, is undertaken by the IRGC-Quds Force. The Quds Force is the external arm of the IRGC, and its commander reports directly to the Supreme Leader. Acting with the mission to oversee all militant Shia organizations and groups associated with the Islamic Republic operating outside of Iran, the Quds Force has recruited, trained, and armed approximately 200,000 young Shia militants across the

⁹² Hamza Demirel, "Assessing the Role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Extraterritorial Activities in Attaining Iran's Foreign Policy Goals" ([object Object], 2016), 103, <https://doi.org/10.25777/MFAB-PF41>.

⁹³ Frederic M. Wehrey, United States, and National Defense Research Institute (U.S.), eds., *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, Rand Corporation Monograph Series (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2009), xii.

Middle East, organizing them into ground forces known as Shia militias.⁹⁴ The US military and diplomatic presence in the region has been the biggest obstacle to one of the main goals of Iran's foreign policy approach, which is to become a hegemonic power in the region.

In this context, Iran's security is directly proportional to breaking the US influence in the region. The activities of the IRGC are also shaped around this framework. In this context, Iran's security is directly proportional to the reduction of U.S. influence in the region. The activities of the IRGC are shaped within this framework. The Quds Force, tasked with implementing an asymmetric warfare strategy against potential attacks from the U.S. or another adversary like Israel, also serves the purpose of assisting the Islamic world in self-preservation. To prevent direct military action from conventionally powerful enemies, it employs a strategy of retaliatory deterrence through proxy forces.

Within the framework of the 'threat against threat' doctrine, Iran attempts to maintain balance by conducting asymmetric operations to deter threats. For this reason, Iran has formed its own axis of resistance through network of a series of allies and proxy forces outside its borders. Additionally, the IRGC aims to deter foreign intervention in countries within the axis of resistance, such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, through passive deterrence. By supporting large paramilitary groups like the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, Iran solidifies its influence over these countries' security apparatuses. This, in turn, deters external military or political efforts to remove these states from Iran's sphere of influence.⁹⁵

The Quds Force enabled the consolidation of the IRGC's foreign operations under a single command. In April 1990, the year the Quds Force was established, Mohsen Rezai, commander of the IRGC between 1981 and 1997, explained the reason for the establishment of the Quds Force in an interview as follows:

The Qods Force, which is for assisting Muslims, Islamic states or Islamic governments, should they ask for help in training or advice. That is now a global custom. If an Islamic state, government or people need to be put through some training, well, the corps will go there and give them training; it will take measures to provide training support for world Muslims or Islamic states. There was a need for a force to perform this task, and the

⁹⁴ Nader Uskowi, "Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East," p.17.

⁹⁵ Mcinnis, 27.

Eminent Leader commanded the corps to set it up. This force is now being set up and is mainly for helping Islamic governments and Islamic nations when there is a need to train them and transfer experience to them.⁹⁶

With a personnel strength of approximately 5,000, the IRGC-QF serves as a powerful tool used to provide financial, training, and material support to regional Shia militant groups that are ideologically aligned with Iran. The funding for the IRGC-QF is officially provided through Iran's defence budget. Additionally, it increases this budget through networks of affiliated companies.⁹⁷

3.1.1. IRGC-QF Activities in Iraq

Since the 1979 revolution, Iraq has been one of Iran's greatest foreign policy challenges. Its significant Shia population has led Iran to see Iraq as a potential sphere of influence and attempt to spread the concept of *Velayat-e faqih*. Therefore, Iran and Iraq became two rivals in the post-revolutionary hegemonic war over the region, culminating in an eight-year war. After the U.S. intervention in Iraq, there was a direct risk of a security threat to Iran's territory, economy and people, and Iran's increasing influence over Iraq was considered as a policy that had no other option. The regional power balance significantly shifted with the fall of the Saddam regime following the occupation of Iraq. By establishing an allied Iraqi government, Iran sought to turn this occupation to its advantage and capitalize on the opportunities arising from it. The presence of an allied government in Iraq, in addition to those in Syria and Lebanon, would facilitate Iran's increased influence over the Arab world. This would create a new power balance in favour of Iran, positioning it more strongly on the international stage. In this context, Iran's influence over the Shia population in Iraq has become its tool and strength in shaping Iraqi politics. The instability in Iraq and the presence of foreign forces in the region pose a threat to the entire area. Therefore, Iran has tried to implement its policy of establishing close relations with all Shiite factions by adopting the idea of an allied Iraqi government shaped by its own hand. To this end, through the IRGC and the Quds Force, Iran has

⁹⁶ Afshon P Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," n.d., 137.

⁹⁷ United States, *Iran Military Power*, 57.

organized, trained, and armed Shia groups militarily.⁹⁸ In this way, it drew attention to its ability to strike asymmetrically and created a deterrent effect. Transforming Iraq, perceived as a security threat, into a strategic ally became Iran's main focus after Saddam. The repression of Shias during Saddam's era already laid the groundwork for Iran to strengthen its relations with Shia groups.

Since 2003, Iran has played a constructive role in state-building and was the first state in the region to recognise the new authority by sending an official delegation to Baghdad.⁹⁹ Iran announced its support for Iraq in financial and infrastructure projects. Beyond these official ties, Iran has exerted greater influence through unofficial means. Following the U.S. invasion, Iran developed a wide-ranging network of allies, extending from intelligence operatives to armed militias and politicians within Shia parties. Due to the repression faced during Saddam's regime, many leaders of the main Shia parties, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Dawa Party, lived in exile in Iran until their return to Iraq in 2003. SCIRI's militia, the Badr Brigades, was trained and equipped by the IRGC. Iran also developed relations with Muqtada al-Sadr and his movement and supported Sadr's Mahdi army, which clashed with the US troops, and then trained its political and military cadres.¹⁰⁰ As a result of the financial support and aid provided by Iran, Iraqi Shia parties have attracted a significant voter base. Iran's relationships with these Shia groups intensified particularly from the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. Besides supporting these groups, Iran encouraged their leaders in their efforts to form political movements and militias. Consequently, it is unlikely that a new government established by these tightly knit groups in Iraq would be completely independent of Iran's support and vision.

Thus, Iran's planned influence operations in Iraq, bolstered by the militias it supports, increase its resilience. At the same time, they provide various solutions to counter elements that threaten its interests in Iraq and the region.

⁹⁸ Demirel, "Assessing the Role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Extraterritorial Activities in Attaining Iran's Foreign Policy Goals," 145.

⁹⁹ Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2006): 60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20032041>.

¹⁰⁰ Nasr, 61.

3.2. Power Extending from Iran to Iraq: Popular Mobilization Forces (قوات

(الحشد الشعبي)

The seriousness and magnitude of the threat became clearer following ISIS's capture of Mosul. Subsequently, a pivotal moment was marked by the "Jihad Fatwa" issued by Ayatollah Sistani, one of the highest Shiite religious authorities in Iraq, born in Mashhad, Iran. Announced during Friday prayers, the fatwa called upon Iraqis from all sects to fight against ISIS, declaring it a duty for Iraqis to revolt against ISIS. Ayatollah Sistani warned that everyone would regret it if this group was not expelled from the country.¹⁰¹ His representative, Ahmed El-Safi, added in his Friday sermon, "This call was directed to all citizens without distinction of any sect." Despite the sectarian fragmentation in the country, the reception of the fatwa remained a subject of curiosity, with responses coming in later. In response to Sistani's fatwa, many volunteers turned towards Iraqi security forces and allied militias; despite its emphasis on being above sectarianism, most of the group were Shiites, with minorities including Sunni, Christian, and other minority communities in Iraq.¹⁰² Unexpectedly, an estimated 60,000 to 90,000 citizens volunteered¹⁰³ for military service. However, despite Sistani's directive not being sectarian, nearly all volunteers were Shiites determined to defend the country from ISIS's Sunni militants. Indeed, fear of Sunni dominance, the near collapse of the state, and the realization of a religious command were influential factors.

In addition to the positive response from the public to the fatwa, Sistani has also faced criticism. The Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq, a Sunni Arab religious authority, criticized Sistani's fatwa, alleging in their statement that the government was implementing Iran's domestic plans and seeking the consent of the southern Iraqi people through such an approach. They claimed that the current government and militias were using this fatwa to commit crimes described as sectarian genocide against vulnerable

¹⁰¹ Al Jazeera, "Muslim Scholars in Iraq Criticized the Mobilization Fatwa."

<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2014/6/20/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7> (accessed March 4, 2024).

¹⁰² The Century Foundation, "The Man Who Saved Iraq." <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/the-man-who-saved-iraq/> (accessed August 16, 2024).

¹⁰³ Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23.

civilians.¹⁰⁴ However, Sistani approaches Iran-backed militias with suspicion rather than trust. Therefore, the consistency of such criticism is debatable.

Despite Sistani's preference not to involve himself heavily in politics and his absence from any meetings with Iraqi officials for about four years, he met with al-Abadi and urged the people to maintain unity among their components and fight against corruption.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, his issuance of the fatwa was a sign of his involvement in politics and a interesting move. Additionally, his call to voters not to allow the return of the Maliki government in 2014, based on demands for political change and reform, also underscored his expanding influence in politics. This transformation, which potentially limits Iran's manoeuvring space, may not be viewed favourably in terms of Iran's influence strategy. Sistani's more traditional Shiite approach contrasts with Iran's *Velayat-e Faqih* doctrine. Despite being ethnically Iranian, he has not been able to reconcile his views on the role of religion in politics with the clerics in his own country,¹⁰⁶ advocating instead for the establishment of a constitutional democracy for Iraq's future.¹⁰⁷ He has also approached Iran-backed Shiite militias with suspicion, hesitant to trust these forces due to their prioritization of Iraq's national interests. Nevertheless, out of necessity, he issued a call to resist ISIS's expansion, resulting in the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known in Arabic as *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, comprising a coalition of armed groups.

Following the capture of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014, the Iraqi government acknowledged the weakness and inadequacy of the Iraqi army in this struggle and in

¹⁰⁴ Al Jazeera. "علماء المسلمين بالعراق تنتقد فتاوى."

<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2014/6/17/%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%89>. (accessed March 10, 2024).

¹⁰⁵ Al Jazeera, "السيسيستاني يلتقي العبادي ويدعوه للانفتاح على الآخرين."

<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2014/10/20/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%87> (accessed June 5, 2024).

¹⁰⁶ TRT World. "Are Divisions Deepening Between Shia Leadership in Iraq and Iran?"

<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/are-divisions-deepening-between-shia-leadership-in-iraq-and-iran-42811>. (accessed March 12, 2024).

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group. "Iraq: Clerics and Militias." Accessed March 8, 2024.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-clerics-and-militias>. (accessed March 8, 2024).

response to Ayatollah Sistani's call for defensive jihad against ISIS, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were officially recognized. After the fall of Mosul, al-Maliki established the Popular Mobilization Commission, the first institutional nucleus of the PMF, to manage the PMF. In this respect, Sistani's fatwa calling Iraqis to join official security services to counter this growing threat with a security-focused approach led to the PMF becoming popular, expanding, and significantly institutionalizing. However, the establishment of a new institutional structure, outside the existing predominantly Shia security apparatus, was initially contrary to Sistani's vision. The notion of a supra-sectarian call and the idea that Iran-backed militias posed an obstacle to national unity and stability did not align with the resulting outcome. The formalization of these unofficial military actors and their dominance over the security sector also led to their political protection and financial gain by benefiting from the state budget. To comprehend its impact, it is necessary to examine the military units it comprises.

When examining the elements within the PMF, it can be categorized into three main groups despite having 40 main units: Iran-affiliated proxy forces, the Peace Brigades loyal to Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Abbas Division controlled by Sistani. The Iran-affiliated proxy forces, known for their strong ties with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), are supported by financial flows from Iran and operate according to its directives.¹⁰⁸ This group, referred to as "Hashd Soleimani,"¹⁰⁹ is organized and overseen by Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. His media presence and successes against ISIS have contributed to his perception as a hero in both Iran and Iraq, thereby strengthening Iran's position. Significant units within this group include Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which, in addition to being major Iranian proxies, constitute the main units of the PMF. In addition to that, the Badr Organization, led by Hadi Al-Amiri, is one of the most important and influential Iranian proxies. These organizations, which can be considered extensions of the IRGC, are closely tied to former Prime Minister Al-Maliki and religious leader Khamenei. Consequently, the institutionalization of the PMF and its perception as a reliable force among the public

¹⁰⁸ EA WorldView. "Iraq Feature: What are the Popular Mobilization Forces?" <https://eaworldview.com/2016/12/iraq-feature-popular-mobilization-forces/>. (accessed April 5, 2024).

¹⁰⁹ International Crisis Group. "Iraq: Clerics and Militias." Accessed March 8, 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-clerics-and-militias>. (accessed March 8, 2024).

have ensured the continuation of Al-Maliki's influence, which is a situation that needs to be addressed or broken. This makes it challenging for al-Abadi to implement and realize his mission and vision effectively. These groups, which make up more than half of the PMF, have been the strongest foundation for the PMF's successes and existence. To further elaborate on Iran's strong military influence over Iraq, the aforementioned three groups will be examined in more detail.

Mukhtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades, سرايا السلام), which is more aligned with Ayatollah Sistani focusing on national interests, and ISCI, a Shiite political party and militia group that does not align closely with Iran, are distinct. The Mahdi Army (Jaish al-Mahdi, JAM), renamed as the Peace Brigades, does not have a direct support relationship with Iran. This army, which has a more nationalist structure, has criticized Iran's sphere of influence and taken a stance against it. Although they issued a joint statement in 2014 with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah against the U.S. intervention¹¹⁰, they have acted according to the situation and necessity. It is estimated to have a structure of about ten thousand personnel. Additionally, Iran has supported divisions within the group by not fully controlling it, and Qasem Soleimani has been involved in such efforts.¹¹¹

The third group within the PMF is known as *Hashdi Sistani*, which adopts a more apolitical stance and pledges allegiance to Sistani. Primarily aimed at protecting holy sites from ISIS, this formation prioritizes compliance with Sistani's will. Composed largely of young male volunteers who are somewhat loosely organized, this group lacks extensive military training and thus has not achieved significant successes, with many members meeting fatal outcomes. They particularly lacked sufficient motivation to reclaim Sunni areas.¹¹² Predominantly consisting of Shiite volunteers from Iraq's southern regions, this group has received funding from independent trusts managing shrines in Kerbela, Najaf, and Baghdad. Significant groups within this category include Saraya al-Ataba al-

¹¹⁰ Stanford University, Mapping Militants Project. "Badr Organization." Stanford University, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/57>. (accessed June 15, 2024).

¹¹¹ Rawabet Center. "Popular Crowd Forces in Iraq (Al-Hashd al-shaabi) .. Origin and Future "Survey"." Rawabet Center, <http://rawabetcenter.com/en/?p=1037>. (accessed June 5, 2024).

¹¹² International Crisis Group. "Iraq: Clerics and Militias." Accessed March 8, 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-clerics-and-militias>. (accessed March 8, 2024).

Hussainiya and Ali al-Akbar Brigade, totalling approximately 18,000-20,000 volunteers.¹¹³

3.2.1. The position of the PMF within the State

In a context where the state is under pressure, internal sectarian divisions are deepening, sovereignty is weakening, non-state actors are gaining influence, and an economic crisis is unfolding, the emergence of informal security actors and the state's inability to control them are considered inevitable. In such a scenario, the steps the state takes between minimizing harm and maximizing benefit are crucial about the results.

Members and leaders of groups under the PMF had already influenced Iraqi politics and official security institutions before 2014. However, militia forces operated informally outside such institutional frameworks. During his tenure as prime minister, Haider al-Abadi adopted a stance against militants, aiming to bring these paramilitary groups under state control and integrate them. Certainly, this demand was part of Haider al-Abadi's vision to prevent uncontrolled increase of Iranian influence and to establish Iraq as a nation-state without external intervention.

In a statement made in March 2015, Haider al-Abadi declared that armed groups would not be allowed to operate outside the framework set by the state. He emphasized that the actions of their members would be controlled according to laws, and necessary sanctions would be applied in case of any violations.¹¹⁴

An effort was made to establish a legal framework for the PMF, despite its irregular structure, as a regular force supported and trained by the Iraqi government. In 2016, al-Abadi officially declared that the PMF was part of Iraq's Security Forces through an order named Office Order 91, aimed at bringing the Hashd under control. However, its public announcement took approximately five months, indicating that negotiations

¹¹³ Hassan Abbas, *The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces)* : Way Forward, 2017 p.5

¹¹⁴ Al Jazeera. "العبادي يتعهد بنزع سلاح أي فصائل شيعية ترفض الطاعة." <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2017/10/26/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%B2%D8%B9-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A3%D9%8A-%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9> (accessed March 7, 2024)

were not straightforward. In addition to its fragmented structure, the PMF were institutionalized by the al-Abadi government, and a separate budget allocation was made.¹¹⁵

According to the first article of the document stating the PMF's official status as a security force, "Hashd al-Shaabi will be an independent military formation and will be subordinate to the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces as part of the Iraqi armed forces." It will be led by a commander appointed by the Prime Minister. In November, the Iraqi Parliament passed the Popular Mobilization Authority Law, thereby placing the PMF within the jurisdiction of the National Security Council. Thus, the PMF became an official part of the state's security apparatus, operating alongside but not under the jurisdiction of the security ministries. This setup resembles the dual military system present in Iran, where a paramilitary organization coordinates with the state's military forces.

Although the organization is officially under the authority of a de jure official body, it is evident that it is not effectively under state authority in practice. It is possible to say that al-Abadi failed in this regard. Although he managed to appoint Falih el-Fayyad as the National Security Advisor, Fayyad was unsuccessful in establishing official authority and instead highlighted Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was trained by the IRGC and founded Kata'ib Hizbullah with its support, and who is the deputy head of the PMF. Due to al-Muhandis's success in public lobbying, starting from 2015, his attempts to secure a share of the state budget resulted in directing allocated funds to groups aligned with his own agenda, leading to his increased power.¹¹⁶ At the same time, the legal status granted by the state and the budget allocated to the PMF has helped lighten Iran's burden. In 2017, the budget allocated by the Iraqi government to the PMF amounted to 1.63 billion dollars, which covers about 6% of the total security budget.¹¹⁷

The PMF's approach to the state is not one that threatens the state but rather one that shapes and directs it. It can be seen as a competitor seeking to gain power within the

¹¹⁵ Serhan Afacan, "Haşdi Şa'bi Sorunu ve Irak'ın Geleceği." *Kriter* 1, no. 7, 2016.

¹¹⁶ Toby Dodge, "Understanding the role of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq's national and transnational political field" *Challenges to the Middle East North Africa Inclusionary State*, The Project on Middle East Political Science, 2020, p.8.

¹¹⁷ *Iraqi Security Forces And Popular Mobilization Forces: Orders Of Battle*, Institute For The Study Of War, 2017, P.29

state rather than pursuing a revolutionary ideal. While the state exists as a weak actor, the PMF is defined as a defensive power on this stage. Therefore, the relationship between the state and the PMF, especially in the early periods, is seen as a cooperative one. This entity, which has low accountability, tends to act contrary to the government's directives when its own interests are at stake, not just according to the government's demands. Consequently, although it has protected the state against the ISIS threat, a new threat within the state has emerged.

3.2.2. Iran's Relations with the PMF

Iran expands its sphere of influence in the Middle East through proxy groups that are an extension of its foreign policy by asserting its power and influence through indirect means. Instead of directly intervening in regional conflicts or events, it uses intermediaries to project its power. Thus, it achieves maximum impact by minimising the risk. In 2014, Iran's security strategy against ISIS, which threatened its border and interests in the region, was shaped around this method.

As mentioned above, Iran chose not to engage directly and actively against ISIS but instead preferred to provide support from the background. It has put the idea of protecting Iraq's national unity at the centre of this struggle and built its policies on this basis. Because a divided Iraqi state would fall short of safeguarding Iran's interests. Additionally, Iran's direct intervention may be perceived by the Iraqi people as encouraging the division in Iraq. Therefore, Iran, through the IRGC-QF, provided military and financial support to the proxy units it already supported. This support not only ensured the security of its own borders but also contributed to the successful outcome of Iraq's fight against ISIS.

According to the established official command structure of the PMF, the Prime Minister holds the highest rank. Therefore, while it was expected to be an organisation directly subordinate to Haider al-Abadi, political realities and the balance of power have created a new chain of command that is indirectly accountable to the IRGC-QF and indirectly to the Iranian government. As a result, Iran has actively used the tools at its disposal to establish dominance, increasing its control over Iraq and attempting to reshape

its image. Despite efforts by al-Abadi and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to create a space for manoeuvre based on their directives, the key factor has been the willingness of proxy commanders to implement these orders. Decisions have been made and new approaches adopted based on their preferences.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Hadi al-Ameri, two of the PMF's top commanders, are known to be close to Iran. Muhandis openly stated that he received military guidance and material support from Iran. Hadi al-Ameri, in the same open manner, stated that Iraq's liberation from ISIS would not be possible without Iran's support, and appreciated their support by saying "Iranians are fighting alongside us."¹¹⁸ However, he has always emphasised that these soldiers belong to the Iraqi army and that this is not an Iranian army. It is important that this situation is portrayed to the public in this manner. The public naturally demands that Iraq's national interests be prioritized over Iranian support. Avoiding the propaganda of being pro-Iranian, which is a major point of division among Shiites in Iraq, is essential from both a military and political strategy perspective. Although this propaganda has lost its credibility, it can still be seen as a method for Iran to gain from the situation and suppress the reactions of the Iraqi people.

3.2.2.1. Badr Brigade (منظمة بدر)

During Saddam Hussein's rule, Iran hosted many Shiite groups. One of these was Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, an Iraqi Shia leader who went into exile in Iran due to the Ba'athist regime's oppression and persecution. When the Iran-Iraq war broke out, al-Hakim and his supporters began to organise and supported the war on the Iranian side. Under al-Hakim's leadership, the SCIRI (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and the Badr Brigade were formed with the idea of establishing a new political party and militia supported by Iran and the IRGC. Al-Hakim, who embraced Ayatollah Khomeini's religious doctrine, became the most important Iranian influence during and after the war as a loyalist to the revolution. The IRGC played an important role in establishing and commanding the Badr Brigade throughout the Iran-Iraq War. In

¹¹⁸ "Exclusive interview of Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the Iraqi Shia Badr organization" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9srWO5tAK4>

the aftermath of the conflict, the SCIRI and the Badr Brigade, thanks to strong support from Tehran, became key tools in Iran's Iraq policy.

Founded in late 1982, the Badr Brigade was composed of Shia soldiers who had deserted the Iraqi army. The brigade, which initially had 500 fighters, increased in number as a result of the recruitment of Iraqi Shiite prisoners of war and Iraqi Army deserters.¹¹⁹ Thus, it became the military arm of the Shiite opposition political party SCIRI. The Badr Brigade, composed of Iraqi Shias, was created to act effectively on behalf of Iran, with the goal of establishing a strong militia dependent on Iran that would help Iran create as much influence as possible over Iraq.

After the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime, the Badr Brigade changed its name to "Badr Organization" to symbolize that it was not only a military unit but also a political entity. After the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, they returned to Iraq with 16,000 members and operated as an armed militia for about a year. Approximately 13 years later, the number of members is estimated to have increased nearly sixfold, with around 100,000 fully armed members.¹²⁰

Although most of the members of the Badr organisation are Iraqi, it has become a force loyal to Iran due to its sectarian and ideological approach. Additionally, the fact that the leader of the organisation is appointed by the Iranian guide shows that it has a two-way influence. Iran, which provided organizational and financial support in the establishment of the organization, continued to provide direct support even after its return to Iraq in 2003. According to the Jordanian news site al-Malaf, published in 2005, the Badr Organization received \$3 million monthly from Tehran.¹²¹ After the assassination of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim in 2003, the new leader, Hadi al-Amiri, expressed the support provided by Iran in 2014 by stating, "If it weren't for Quds Force commander

¹¹⁹ Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 128, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29418-2>.

¹²⁰ Al Jazeera. "بدر.. مليشيا عراقية حاربت صدام وقتالت مع الأسد." <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2016/2/10/%d8%a8%d8%af%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%b4%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%b9%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%82%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%ad%d8%a7%d8%b1%d8%a8%d8%aa-%d8%b5%d8%af%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%88%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%aa%d9%84%d8%aa-%d9%85%d8%b9>. (accessed May 5, 2024).

¹²¹ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development." <https://mappingmilitants.org/node/342/> (accessed August 31, 2024).

Qassem Soleimani, the Iraqi government would be in exile, and Iraq wouldn't exist."¹²² In an interview, he also said, "We want to thank Iran first and foremost because they helped us greatly when we needed it the most. Iran helped the Iraqi government and established an air bridge that provided us with support," indicating that Iraq's liberation was dependent on Iran. 'Continuing the interview, he responded to the US support request by saying, "Why should we accept the US support request when Iran is here? American experts sit in dark rooms, but Iranians are here on the ground, advising us and providing us with information."¹²³ His reverence and appreciation for Iran strengthen Iran's position.

Al-Amiri, whose wife is Iranian, holds both Iraqi and Iranian citizenship. He is also well-known for his close friendship with Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani.¹²⁴ Additionally, by 2014, he had become one of the most important leaders of the PMF. The structures led by Al-Amiri, who recognizes Iran's Supreme Leader as a political and religious authority, would heed the words of Supreme Leader Khamenei more than those of the Iraqi president. It can be said that he prioritizes the unity of the Shia Muslim community over the emphasis on Iraq's national integrity. This situation demonstrates the extent to which Iran's influence strengthened Iraq.

The presence of units so loyal to Iran should not lead to the assumption that all Shias in Iraq are pro-Iranian. The groups that find it ideal for Iraq to be an independent country and to be structured internally without foreign intervention offer a critical approach to these formations. Accordingly, in 2007, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)¹²⁵, aiming to distance itself from the approach of exporting the Islamic revolution and its roots in Iran, and to adopt a more national approach. Following such a transformation, the Badr Organization seized the opportunity to form its own identity and adopted a more separate stance from ISCI. Continuing its mission to be active in politics,

¹²² Al Jazeera, "مسيرة قتال بدأت وانتهت بالعراق.. إليكم مهمات حاسمة قام بها الجنرال قاسم سليماني", <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2020/1/3/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-2> (accessed June 5, 2024).

¹²³ "Exclusive Interview of Hadi al-Ameri, Leader of the Iraqi Shia Badr Organization." YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9srWO5tAK4> (accessed August 29, 2023).

¹²⁴ Al Jazeera. "Hadi Al-Amiri... Iran's General in Iraq." <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2016/2/28/%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A>. (accessed June 5, 2024).

¹²⁵ Guido Steinberg, The Badr Organization Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq, 2

while the ISCI supported Ayad Allawi in the 2010 parliamentary elections, Badr leader Al-Amiri supported Maliki and took part in his rule of law coalition.¹²⁶ In 2010, he was appointed Minister of Transport by Nouri al-Maliki. He continued to maintain his allegiance to Iran, allowing Iran to use Iraqi air as a powerful intermediary to supply arms to Syria.¹²⁷ By providing training headquarters for their militias at vital locations, including Baghdad Airport, the Ministry placed all its capabilities at the disposal of the Badr Corps and the Revolutionary Guards.

In 2012, the Badr organization officially announced that it had left the ISCI.¹²⁸ As a result, it rebranded itself as a political party and participated in the 2013 local elections as part of the State of Law coalition.¹²⁹ In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the Badr Organization won 22 out of 328 seats. Although this success increased the likelihood of Al-Amiri being appointed as the Minister of the Interior, Haider al-Abadi appointed Sunni MP Jaber al-Jaberi as Minister of Defence and Shia MP Riyadh Gharib as Minister of the Interior to fill these critical positions. However, Parliament rejected this al-Abadi's appointment, who pursued a more inclusive policy, aimed to curb the growing influence of Iran. However, institutional formations and entrenched powers hinder the realisation of such transformations. In this case, it is necessary to add the belief that the candidates are not qualified for these positions. Iraqi analyst Sajad Jiyad considered the parliament's rejection reasonable in this context.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, the Badr Organization within the coalition rejected al-Abadi's appointments because they believed these positions were their right. Consequently, about a month later, Badr Organization member Muhammad Salem al-Ghabban was appointed as Minister of the Interior, and Sunni politician Khalid al-Obeidi was appointed as Minister of Defence.

¹²⁶ Shahabi, Hatim. "Breaking Badr: Iraq's Divisive Shia Politics." TRT World, March 8, 2019. <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/breaking-badr-iraq-s-divisive-shia-politics-24768>. (accessed August 15, 2024).

¹²⁷ Aida Arosoaie, "Hadi Al-Amiri's Grip on Iraq" 7, no. 10 (2015): 20.

¹²⁸ "Iraq News. 'Urgent: SIIC, Badr Organization Announce Their Official Split.'" Iraqi News, <https://www.iraqnews.com/baghdad-politics/urgent-siic-badr-organization-announce-their-official-split/>. (accessed August 10, 2024).

¹²⁹ Parker, Ned. "Iraq's Badr Organization Maintains Its Longtime Ties With Iran." Musings on Iraq, <https://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2013/07/iraqs-badr-organization-maintains-its.html>. (accessed June 10, 2024).

¹³⁰ Middle East Eye, "Iraqi Parliament Rejects Abadi's Nominations for Top Ministerial Posts." <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqi-parliament-rejects-abadis-nominations-top-ministerial-posts> (accessed August 14, 2024).

It can be considered a successful move aimed at appearing and feeling inclusive and comprehensive. Although Al-Amiri was expected to be appointed as Minister of the Interior, the appointment of Al-Gabban can be characterised as a compromise with the Sunni parties. In this regard, it appears that al-Abadi took a stance against Shia domination but could not entirely ignore its influence. Although he has tried to reduce Iran's influence, the current conjuncture and the decisions taken have, in some ways, strengthened Iran's impact. The threat of ISIS has forced the Iraqi government to rely on Shia fighters. However, this threat has been an opportunity for the Badr Organization.

3.2.2.2. Asaib Ahl al-Haq (عصائب أهل الحق)

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) is a major Iraqi militia formed in 2006 after breaking away from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, with support from the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah. Sadr's political and religious transformation led to the splintering of some Mahdi Army factions, resulting in new formations. Previously linked with Iranian support for Shia militias, Sadr shifted to a more independent stance by 2006-2007, opting for political activity over military engagement.¹³¹ However AAH, supported by Iran, continued military operations against the U.S., becoming a significant Iranian proxy. As key figures in AAH's establishment included Yussef Hashim and Ali Mussa Daqduq from Lebanese Hezbollah.¹³² By 2006, Iran had utilized Lebanese Hezbollah in Iraq as a tool to increase its influence and extend its impact. Thus, Ali Mussa Daqduq, who trained Iraqi militants in Iran with the Qods Force, facilitated AAH's operations.¹³³ This training played a crucial role in AAH's effectiveness against the U.S. and the Iraqi government. Under the leadership of Qais Khazali, AAH conducted its first attacks in southern Lebanon as retaliation against Israel.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Al-Monitor, "The Rise of 'Cleric Militias' in Iraq." <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/07/shiite-cleric-militias-iraq-fears.html> (accessed August 30, 2024).

¹³² James N. Watts, *Iranian Influence in Iraqi Shi'a Groups* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, June 2012), 40.

¹³³ Frederick W. Kagan, Ahmad K. Majidyar, Danielle Pletka, and Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War, May 2012), 64.

¹³⁴ Marisa Cochrane, "Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Khazali Special Groups Network," Institute for the Study of War, January 13, 2008, 4.

AAH, which aims to promote the religious and political principles of the Iranian Revolution within Iraq, is one of Iran's most important tools for increasing its military and political influence in Iraq. In this context, AAH seeks to totally eliminate the U.S. presence in Iraq. The group positions itself as a Khomeinist organization due to its strong advocacy of the concept of Velayat-e Faqih, which forms the core vision of political Islam in Iran, and its allegiance to Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei.¹³⁵ In contrast, the Sadrist movement has demonstrated a more distant allegiance to Iran. Although Muqtada al-Sadr called on AAH members to rejoin his movement in 2008, the AAH leaders rejected this call and continued their loyalty to Iran.¹³⁶ After the 2010 elections, al-Sadr engaged in discussions with Iran about forming a coalition with Maliki's Rule of Law bloc for political advice, but he does not regard Iran's political system as an ideal model.¹³⁷

Conversely, Iran has provided AAH with weapons, training, and financial support. According to a news report from 2012, Iraqi and U.S. intelligence officials estimated that Iran sent approximately \$5 million in cash and weapons to AAH each month.¹³⁸ In return for this support, AAH maintains its allegiance to Iran. Indeed, following Iranian directives, AAH has deployed fighters in Syria, particularly in Damascus and Aleppo.¹³⁹ It has also continued its support for Iran through its cross-border activities, positioning itself as a supporter of the Assad regime.

While continuing its armed resistance, AAH also planned to involve itself in the Iraqi political process. This intention was publicly announced following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. In this context, Qais Khazali, the group's leader who decided to halt the armed resistance, stated that his group would lay down its arms but would not surrender them to the Iraqi government.¹⁴⁰ At that time, Prime Minister Maliki

¹³⁵ Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq", Middle East Security Report 7 (published by the Institute for the Study of War, 2012), 10.

¹³⁶ Marisa Cochrane, "Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Khazali Special Groups Network," n.d., 5.

¹³⁷ Islamist Gate, Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. "Iraq: Who are Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Islamists?." <https://www.aymennjawad.org/14510/iraq-who-are-asaib-ahl-al-haq-islamists> (accessed August 26, 2024).

¹³⁸ Indian Express, "Iran Ayatollah is Poster Boy for Influence in Iraq." <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/print/iran-ayatollah-is-poster-boy-for-influence-in-iraq/> (accessed August 25, 2024).

¹³⁹ <https://www.aymennjawad.org/14510/iraq-who-are-asaib-ahl-al-haq-islamists>

¹⁴⁰ Kagan, Majidiyar, Pletka, ve Sullivan, *Iranian Influence*, 67.

showed considerable tolerance towards AAH and facilitated their integration into the political process. Through its political participation, AAH has maintained Iran's influence and facilitated Iran's infiltration into the political process. As a result, it has enhanced the Iranian regime's influence in political and social networks. In other words, AAH's involvement and expansion in the political arena have enabled Iran to intervene in Iraqi politics and authorities. While AAH itself may not be a primary source of influence, it has become a significant component of Iran's broader strategy for Iraq.

In 2014, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) decided to participate in the elections and officially entered the political contest under the Sadiquun bloc. This involvement, which supported Maliki and fragmented the votes against the Sadrist movement, resulted in AAH securing one parliamentary seat. In the 2018 elections, AAH increased its representation to 15 seats.¹⁴¹ The AAH was also involved in the Syrian War at Iran's instigation and became part of Hashd al-Sha'bi, which was formed in 2014 to fight against the emerging ISIS threat. This made AAH a key element in expanding and maintaining Iran's influence within the PMF.

3.2.2.3. Kata'ib Hezbollah (كتائب حزب الله)

Kataib Hezbollah (KH) is a Shiite militia group operating mainly in Iraq and aligned with Iran. While there is no precise information on when it was founded, Iraqi security expert Walid Al-Rawi suggests that its emergence followed the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88.¹⁴² However, considering its institutional development, the group is believed to have formally emerged in 2007 under the leadership of Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, also known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. He was the deputy head of the PMF and a key figure in the Badr brigade. Al-Muhandis held a strong relationship with Iranian security circles and was a loyal supporter of Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and the concept of Velayat-e Faqih.

¹⁴¹ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Profile: Asaib Ahl al-Haq." <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0> (accessed September 10, 2023).

¹⁴² Al Jazeera, "حزب الله العراق.. ارتباطات غامضة." <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2011/8/11/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B6%D8%A9> (accessed June 2, 2024).

Like other pro-Iranian Shiite militias, the KH's loyalty to Iran has been integral to its leader, having strong ties and close coordination with the IRGC-QF and Qasem Soleimani.¹⁴³ The idea that al-Muhandis was a soldier of Soleimani is widely accepted. As a result, KH received significant financial and equipment support from Iran, which facilitated the flow of this support into Iraq.

In this regard, KH poses a threat to U.S. interests, continuing its attacks against the U.S. and rejecting its presence while acknowledging Iran as its sole ally. KH has been actively fighting against U.S. presence not only in Iraq but also in Syria.¹⁴⁴ In fact, the KH forces were the first group of Iranian proxy forces to join the Syrian war.¹⁴⁵

Al-Muhandis' contacts with Iran were not limited to the Quds Force and Qasem Soleimani. Al-Muhandis continued his contacts with wider contacts and held open meetings with representatives of the Iranian regime, including a meeting with Iranian Defence Minister Major General Amir Hatami through official diplomatic channels.¹⁴⁶

4. Iran's Political Influence on Iraq

Iran-Iraq relations, which entered a new era after the Iran-Iraq war, proceeded through the balance of opportunities and threats created by Shiite domination. Iran's policy towards Shiite groups that were exiled during the war shaped the future balance of power. Under Saddam Hussein, Iran gave asylum to many Iraqi opponents of the regime and organized them. Iran's influence over Iraq today is the result of the fact that many of the people who shape the political structure in Iraq have lived in Iran and developed a network of personal and ideological relationships.¹⁴⁷

The return of the Shiite groups supported by Iran to their country in the process that started with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 and their having a

¹⁴³ Philipp O. Amour, ed., *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East: Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 276, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45465-4>.

¹⁴⁴ Diane Maye Zorri, Houman A. Sadri, and David C. Ellis, *Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis*, JSOU Report 20-5 (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU University Press, 2020), 44.

¹⁴⁵ Matthew Levitt, "Kataib Al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS," n.d., 3.

¹⁴⁶ Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," n.d., 20.

¹⁴⁷ Yoel Guzansky, "'Made in Iran': The Iranian Involvement in Iraq" 13, no. 4 (2011): 89.

say in politics has created a new geopolitical balance in the Middle East. Within this balance, Iran has emerged as a very effective actor in shaping Iraqi politics. It has actively intervened in Iraqi politics through the political parties and military groups it cooperates with. It has provided financial support to its Shiite allies, sent weapons to militia forces and made propaganda inciting hostility against the US. As mentioned earlier, Iran's military influence in Iraq is not separate from its political influence. Indeed, Iran's political influence in Iraq is based on the proxy groups it has created and supported. Thus, it legitimizes its influence strategy by retaining the right of denial against accusations.

The priority of Iran's policy towards Iraq has been to prevent Iraq from becoming a source of threat, both militarily and ideologically. In this context, Iran's effort to ensure Shiite sovereignty in Iraq overlapped with the US effort to promote a model of representative democracy in Iraq. For the Shiite population, which comprises about 60% of the population, this model has worked in Iran's favour, and for the first time in modern Iraqi history, the Shiites have gained power over the state. This creates a great opportunity for Iran to gain power over Iraq, which is able to act as a regional barrier against Sunni domination. Indeed, Iraq serves as a land corridor that facilitates Iran's influence over its allies in Syria and Lebanon. Iran's power over Iraq will strengthen it at the regional level and consolidate its existing power. At the same time, by preventing the US occupation, Iran aims to remove the US presence in Iraq from a permanent status and prevent the formation of a regime dependent on the US in Iraq. To achieve these objectives, it is essential for a Shia-dominated regime with close ties to Iran to be in place in Iraq. The victory of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) that a coalition of Shiite parties in the 2005 elections fulfilled this requirement. Indeed, on July 7 of that year, Iraq's then defence minister Saadoun al-Duwaymi visited his Iranian counterpart in Iran and expressed the need to open a new chapter in relations between the two countries¹⁴⁸, saying, "I have come to apologize to Iran for what Saddam Hussein did."¹⁴⁹ Such a visit was a sign of friendly relations.

¹⁴⁸ UPI, "Iran, Iraq Defense Ministers Meet in Tehran." https://www.upi.com/News_Photos/view/upi/57a113f5da0e066e4be9b1b8dc2d1ced/IRAN-IRAQ-DEFENSE-MINISTERS-MEET-IN-TEHRAN/ (accessed September 1, 2024).

¹⁴⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, "Understanding the Iran Crisis." 2010. <https://www.cfr.org/report/understanding-iran-crisis> (accessed September 12, 2023).

At the same time, Maliki, the Shiite prime minister, made his first official visit to Iran after taking office in 2006. During the meeting, then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that they supported a united Iraq and would provide the necessary support to ensure full security in the country. Indeed, Iran was the first state to recognize the new post-Saddam Hussein government. However, in such a conjuncture, as much as Iran cares about the preservation of territorial integrity in Iraq, it prioritizes the absence of a strong Iraqi state that has achieved full independence. Because dependence on itself has always been a factor that strengthens its influence.

4.1.Iran's Influence on Shiite Parties in Iraq

Iran's intervention in Iraqi domestic politics has been facilitated through its alliances with supported militia groups and their affiliated political parties. After the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq, Iran filled the power vacuum to its advantage through its connections with Shia groups in Iraq, gaining influence in the subsequent political landscape and exerting power to shape decisions in its favour. Indeed, it has been reported that in the 2005 and 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections, Iran provided both financial and advisory support to its preferred candidates.¹⁵⁰

Additionally, following the 2010 national elections, which saw a secular political coalition led by Iyad Allawi secure a majority, delegations from the Iraqi National Coalition, which included Shia parties other than the State of Law Coalition and the Dawa Party, as well as the Kurdistan Alliance, were invited to Iran. Iran encouraged these groups to form a single coalition with the State of Law Alliance (SLA) and the Iraqi National Alliance (INA).¹⁵¹ This situation illustrates Iran's active role in directing Iraqi political elections and reveals public dissatisfaction with the existing government.

A survey conducted five months after the general elections found that 41.2% of 12,000 respondents believed Iran was obstructing the formation of a new government in Iraq. Meanwhile, 19% suggested that the delays in the government formation process

¹⁵⁰ Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, ve Ahmed Ali, *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011), 3.

¹⁵¹ Al Jazeera, "كتلة علوي تعلن فوزها في الانتخابات." <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2010/3/31/%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A-> (accessed June 2, 2024).

were due to external interference.¹⁵² This indicates that the public views Iran with suspicion and accuses it of meddling in Iraqi politics.

Iran's influence has been notably felt not only in elections but also in constitutional arrangements. During the drafting process of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, the preparatory committee was Shia-dominated. Although a Sunni group was included in the committee, the assassination of two Sunni members who opposed the draft proposal, and the abduction and killing of another member, led to their intimidation.¹⁵³ Additionally, during the debate over the constitution's identity provisions, some Shia members demanded that Iranian nationality be included as part of the Iraqi identity, in response to claims that Iraq was an Arab state. This can be seen as a clear example of identity erosion and fluidity, reflecting Iran's policy of emphasizing Shia identity.

Another feature of the 2005 Constitution is the mention of sects, establishing a its broad scope of freedoms, particularly in Article 43, which approves the 'free practice of religious rituals and Hussein (Shia) ceremonies'. Article 41 allows for the establishment of personal status courts for Shia and Sunni communities, leading to religious sect-based definitions for Iraqis.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, as a federal state, Iraq's Constitution prioritizes local authority over central laws in case of any conflict, facilitating Iran's ability to control Iraq's internal and external policies.¹⁵⁵

Additionally, the Constitution did not provide detailed regulations regarding government and ministerial positions, nor did it ensure sectarian division, resulting in key positions being filled predominantly by Shia individuals.

4.1.1. Da'wa Party

Da'wa has become the oldest and one of the most influential Shia political parties in Iraq. The origins and rise of the Da'wa party date back to the early 1960s. The fundamental aim of the Da'wa party was to establish an Islamic way of life and Sharia, ultimately to

¹⁵² Al Arabiya, "Iran meddles in Iraq more than any other: poll."

<https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2010%2F08%2F07%2F115949> (Accessed August 20, 2024).

¹⁵³ Saad Jawad, *The Iraqi Constitution: Structural Flaws and Political Implications*, LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series 01 (London: LSE Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2013), 11.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

ensure God's sovereignty on earth.¹⁵⁶ The party, which led student protests and sought to raise public awareness through its publications and newsletters, faced repression with the rise of the Ba'athist regime. After victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the party gained motivation against the regime. One of the party's leaders, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, used this momentum to expand the party's influence in many regions, thereby broadening its base. The party also established an armed wing to resist, however, the Ba'ath regime criminalized membership in the Da'wa party and executed Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.¹⁵⁷ Al-Sadr, a significant figure, shaped the ideological views of the party through his intellectual work.

As a result of arrests and executions targeting party members, many members of the Da'wa party were forced to flee from Iraq to Iran. Consequently, this situation allowed Iran to exert considerable influence over many of the party's leaders. With the encouragement of Iran and the participation of other Shia groups, Da'wa established the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in Tehran. However, the Da'wa party experienced internal divisions due to criticisms of the Shia ideology and opposition to Khomeini's concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, a scholar and one of the prominent figures of Da'wa and the founder of SCIRI, supported the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, contrary to the criticisms, and many Da'wa members accepted his views.¹⁵⁸ SCIRI has been recognized as a creation entirely of Iran, strategically serving as a means to control both the Da'wa party and the decision-making process.

Although the primary goal of the party was to establish an Islamic state in Iraq, it supported a parliamentary system as its political structure. Indeed, Nuri al-Maliki stated in 2002, "We prefer the democratic process. What the people decide is important, free from sects and ethnic origins. We seek an Islamic—though not a religious—state, as long as the Iraqis voluntarily and willingly support such a state."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ James N. Watts, *Iranian Influence in Shi'a Groups of Iraq* (Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 2012), 26.

¹⁵⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Muqtada al-Sadr". <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muqtada-al-Sadr#ref988281> (Accessed June 3, 2024).

¹⁵⁸ Demirel, "Assessing the Role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Extraterritorial Activities in Attaining Iran's Foreign Policy Goals," 148.

¹⁵⁹ Søren Schmidt, *Shia-Islamist Political Actors in Iraq: Who Are They and What Do They Want?* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies [DIIS], 2008), 23.

The US intervention created great opportunities for Da'wa. Indeed, with the support of powerful groups such as SCIRI and the Sadrists, Nouri al-Maliki was elected prime minister. He subsequently founded an organization called the State of Law, which later changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and maintained close ties with the SCIRI, which preferred to distance itself from Iranian influence. Both parties maintained close relations with Iran, even though they were not on the Iranian line, and Maliki received Iranian support during his presidency. Especially after the December 2005 elections, Iran encouraged Maliki, a Da'wa leader, to become prime minister. Their relations continued with the approach of a strategic ally.

In this regard, the Da'wa party's relationship with Iran has been more distant. Party members who emigrated to Iran were dissatisfied with the unification of the opposition under the SCIRI, so splits occurred and the party continued to operate under three branches: the London branch, the Damascus branch and the Iranian branch under Iranian influence.¹⁶⁰ After the invasion, the Da'wa party re-engaged in the political process. The U.S. intervention created significant opportunities for Da'wa. Indeed, with support from strong groups like SCIRI and the Sadrist movement, Nouri al-Maliki was elected as prime minister. Subsequently, Maliki established an organization named State of Law maintained close ties with the SCIRI, which later changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and chose to distance itself from Iranian influence. Although both parties did not fully align with Iran's agenda, they maintained close relations with it, and Maliki received support from Iran during his presidency. Particularly after the December 2005 elections, Da'wa leader Maliki was encouraged to become prime minister. The relationship continued with a strategic ally approach.

From Iran's perspective, although the Da'wa party has been beneficial, it has not been indispensable or irreplaceable. Due to the lack of complete ideological alignment, there has not been total loyalty. The relationship has been characterized by mutual support as long as they were interdependent. Consequently, during the 2014 elections, Iran did not support Maliki's bid for prime minister and accepted Haider al-Abadi's leadership

¹⁶⁰ İsmail Sarı, "Iran's New Iraq Policy After Saddam: From Sociological Dynamics to Political Realities," *The Journal of Iranian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2021), 434.

instead. In the future, formations such as the Al-Fatah Alliance and others in the 2018 elections are expected to provide more benefits to Iran than the Da'wa party.

4.1.2. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)

Two years after the start of the Iran-Iraq War, in 1982, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim announced the formation of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Based in Tehran, this organization marked a profound ideological shift and transformation for Iraqi Shia groups. Under the influence and intervention of Iran, SCIRI represented a significant change in the vision and mission of Iraqi Islamist groups. They defined their political goal as establishing an Islamic state and forming an Islamic society. In this context, SCIRI adopted Khomeini's concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), acknowledging his religious and political authority and allowing the religious leader to play an active role in both political and social spheres.¹⁶¹

SCIRI, initially organized to unite Iraqi Shia under a common political umbrella, failed to achieve this goal due to ideological differences within its ranks.¹⁶² The most notable of these differences was with Da'wa. Additionally, SCIRI's military wing, the Badr Brigade, which was known for its close ties to Iran, was trained and equipped by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. As discussed in detail earlier, the Badr Brigade became one of the most loyal militia forces supported by Iran in Iraq. However, following its return to Iraq in 2003, SCIRI adopted a defensive stance regarding its origins in Iran. As noted by a senior official, "There is a difference between an organization being established in a particular country and declaring its loyalty to that country. When we left Iraq, the only countries that accepted us were Iran and Syria. The Arabs and Europeans were supporting Saddam's regime. This does not mean that Badr is an Iranian organization or that it is loyal to Iran."¹⁶³ Thus, it is possible to say that SCIRI sought to shed the image of being an Iranian creation.

¹⁶¹ Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 250.

¹⁶² Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 151.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group, *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, Middle East Report N°70 (15 November 2007): 9.

This image change led to both a name changes and a distancing from the Badr Organization. Indeed, the Badr Organization was not only established in Iran but also maintained its loyalty to Iran. In 2007, SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in an effort to distance itself from its militant image. In response, The Badr Organization, under the leadership of Hadi al-Amiri, separated from ISCI to operate as an independent political party. As a result of this leadership, the Badr Brigade gained more power, while ISCI, in contrast, weakened. In 2012, the Badr Organization continued its activities as a party but also maintained an active military wing.

In the 2005 elections, SCIRI, as part of the United Iraqi Alliance coalition, won 30 of the 128 seats that the coalition secured. In 2009, after the death of ISCI's leader Abdulaziz al-Hakim, his son Ammar al-Hakim took over the leadership. However, Ammar al-Hakim was unable to fully consolidate authority, and there was a noticeable decline in respect for the party, resulting in a loss of its leading role.¹⁶⁴ In the elections of 2009 and 2010, a decrease in voter support was observed.¹⁶⁵ In the following years, the party entered an alliance with Muqtada al-Sadr's movement and jointly issued a statement in 2013 calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Maliki.¹⁶⁶ In 2014, under the leadership of Ammar al-Hakim, the party participated in the elections as the Citizen's Coalition (Al-Muwatin Coalition) and won 31 of the 328 seats.¹⁶⁷

4.1.3. Al-Fateh Alliance

Al-Fateh Alliance has become a significant actor within Iraq, heavily influenced by Iran. Many of the groups known for their allegiance to Iran are part of this coalition. By participating in the 2018 elections, the coalition gained some degree of power. Led by Hadi al-Amiri, one of the most prominent pro-Iran figures in Iraq, this alliance secured the second-highest number of votes in the May 2018 elections, winning 48 seats in

¹⁶⁴ Demirel, "Assessing the Role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Extraterritorial Activities in Attaining Iran's Foreign Policy Goals," 147.

¹⁶⁵ Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 152.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 153.

¹⁶⁷ Election Guide, "Iraq Parliamentary Elections, 2014."

https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2425/#_ftn6 (accessed July 27, 2024).

parliament.¹⁶⁸ The "Fatah Coalition" also includes the political wing of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq group. However, this election saw the lowest voter turnout since 2003. Although the government officially announced a turnout rate of 44.5%¹⁶⁹, sources claim that the actual rate was lower.

During the government formation process, an agreement was reached between Sadr, who emerged as the top candidate in the elections, and Fatah, leading to the establishment of a new government under the leadership of Adil Abdul-Mahdi. While Haider al-Abadi was considered for the prime minister position, his support for U.S. sanctions against Iran made him a risk in the eyes of Sadr and Ameri, who opposed the sanctions.¹⁷⁰ Fateh members were also given important ministerial and cabinet positions in the new government formation process. Fuad Hussein was appointed as the Minister of Finance, Ahmed Riad Obeidi as the Minister of Youth and Sports, and Salih Abdullah Jabouri as the Minister of Industry.¹⁷¹ This consolidation allowed them to solidify their power within government institutions.

Unlike previous elections, this election was marked by the emergence of two rival Shiite leaders, Hadi al-Ameri and Muqtada al-Sadr, who formed their own blocs and claimed victories for themselves.¹⁷² The division among Shiites complicated the government formation process and pushed the Iraqi political system into a deadlock. Indeed, protests against political elites increased, and public trust in the government significantly declined. The voter turnout in the elections clearly reflected this situation.

The political presence of Hadi al-Ameri, one of the most important figures of Iran in Iraq, has facilitated Iranian influence. However, Sadr's victory in the elections and his support for Iraqi nationalism and Arabism, in contrast to Iran's stance, raised questions about the extent of Iranian influence. Despite this, Sadr's position against the U.S. and Iran's regional power makes it inevitable for him to establish relations with Iran. According to Hassan Danaeifar, a senior Quds Force official who served as Iran's

¹⁶⁸ Erica Gaston and Douglas Ollivant, *U.S.-Iran Proxy Competition in Iraq* (New America Center, Center on the Future of War, Arizona State University, 2020), 25.

¹⁶⁹ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Opinion Survey Insights on the 2018 Iraqi Election." <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/opinion-survey-insights-2018-iraqi-election> (accessed July 27, 2024).

¹⁷⁰ Renad Mansour, *Iraq's 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction Between Reform and the Status Quo* (LSE Middle East Centre Report, February 2019), 18.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 19.

¹⁷² Ibid. 7.

ambassador to Iraq from 2010 to 2017, the election results were favorable for Iran. He noted that the number of seats held by Iran-supported militia forces within the Fatah Alliance had increased fivefold compared to the 2014 elections.¹⁷³ Thus, while the PMF provided a military framework, the Fateh Alliance has sought to establish a political presence. Ultimately, there is an effort to create a power base within the parliament.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi reasserted Iran's involvement in Iraq's internal political affairs, which he had also argued and criticized during his presidency, by saying that “many regional and international actors intervened in the government formation process” in these elections. Indeed, the presence of external intervention is highlighted by the fact that the British Ambassador to Iraq, Jon Wilks, shared a tweet about his meeting with his Iranian counterpart, which was related to the government formation process.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Middle East Institute, "Muqtada al-Sadr's Victory in Iraqi Elections Raises Alarm in Tehran." <https://www.mei.edu/publications/muqtada-al-sadrs-victory-iraqi-elections-raises-alarm-tehran> (accessed July 27, 2024).

¹⁷⁴ Wilks, Jon. Twitter post. <https://twitter.com/JonWilksFCO/status/1042665131015118848> (accessed July 7, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study evaluates Iran's military and political influence over Iraq, with a particular focus on how this influence evolved during Haider al-Abadi's tenure as Prime Minister. The analysis examines whether the office of the Prime Minister had any limiting effect on Iran's influence and concludes that under the prevailing conditions in Iraq, neither the Prime Minister nor the government had a significant role in constraining Iran's influence. Iran has steered its influence through non-state actors and encouraged their presence within state institutions. This strategy has allowed Iran to intervene in Iraqi politics and use Iraq as a buffer zone to deter elements that could threaten its national security. By maintaining control over Iraq, Iran has facilitated its regional policies and sought to leverage Iraq as a deterrent against its two primary adversaries, the United States and Israel.

In 2014, Haider al-Abadi, who had studied in the UK and adopted a more moderate stance toward the West, became Prime Minister. Upon taking office, he pledged a more inclusive approach, granting representation rights to all groups rather than fostering sectarian divisions. However, Iran's ongoing influence could not be overlooked, and al-Abadi attempted to maintain a balanced relationship between Iran and the United States. During al-Abadi's tenure, the rapid advance of ISIS across Iraq and the Iraqi army's inability to counter this advance necessitated the involvement of militia forces, which were effectively extensions of Iran. Consequently, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were established, incorporating Iranian-backed militias, and institutionalized as a legitimate state entity under the Prime Minister's authority.

During this process, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) played a central role in the defeat of ISIS, providing substantial support to Iraq's war effort. The establishment of the PMF bolstered Iran's influence and projected it as a heroic force. By 2016, the PMF was formally integrated into Iraq's security forces, becoming part of the state's military structure. This step enabled Iranian-backed militias to operate within Iraq's legitimate institutions, granting Iran indirect control over military decisions in Iraq through its proxy groups. Therefore, despite al-Abadi's calls for reform and efforts to secure Iraq's national independence, his decisions inadvertently institutionalized and

legitimized Iran's influence over Iraq. Dismantling Iran's entrenched influence remained a significant challenge despite al-Abadi's reform initiatives.

Haider al-Abadi's efforts to balance Iran's influence proved insufficient in fully curbing its impact, posing a substantial obstacle to Iraq's political independence. Without structural reforms, attempts to limit Iranian interference have been ineffective, underscoring the failure of Iraq's current political system and security structure to counterbalance Iran's influence.

At the same time, Iran has obstructed Iraq's rapprochement with Arab states, thereby increasing Iraq's dependency on Iran. While Iran's presence in Iraq contributed to the country's stability and survival in 2014, foreign influences continue to hinder Iraq's normalization with many of its Arab neighbors. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Iran's response to Israeli assassinations in 2024, Iraq has become a potential battleground for conflicts involving Iran, Israel, and the United States.

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ÖZGEÇMİŞ			
Adı, Soyadı	Sena Betül		YILMAZ
Doğum Yeri ve Yılı			
Bildiği Yabancı Diller	İngilizce		Arapça
ve Düzeyi	İleri		Orta
Eğitim Durumu	Başlama - Bitirme Yılı		Kurum Adı
Lise	2011	2015	Açıköğretim Lisesi
Lisans	2015	2020	Marmara Üniversitesi
Yüksek Lisans	2020	2024	29 Mayıs Üniversitesi
Doktora			
Çalıştığı Kurum/lar	Başlama - Ayrılma Yılı		Çalışılan Kurumun Adı
1.			
2.			
3.			
Üye Olduğu Bilimsel ve Mesleki Kuruluşlar			
Katıldığı Proje ve Toplantılar			
Yayımlar:			
Diğer:			
İletişim (e-posta):			
Tarih İmza		19.09.2024	
Adı Soyadı		Sena Betül YILMAZ	

