



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.92
IJPSG 2025; 7(10): 242-251
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 15-09-2025
Accepted: 17-10-2025

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Sectarianism and ethnic conflict in Iraq: Iran & Iraq Relations post 2003

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i10c.732>

Abstract

Sectarianism and ethnic conflict have been significant challenges for Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime led to the dismantling of state structures, creating a power vacuum that amplified sectarian and ethnic divisions, particularly between the Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish populations. This fragmentation fuelled internal violence and contributed to the rise of extremist groups, such as ISIS. Iran's role in Iraq became increasingly influential following the 2003 invasion, as it sought to expand its geopolitical influence in the region, particularly through its support for Shia militias and political factions. The relationship between Iraq and Iran post-2003 has been shaped by mutual interests, including shared religious ties and a common adversary in Sunni extremism, but also by the complex dynamics of Iraq's internal divisions. This paper explores the intersection of sectarianism, ethnic conflict, and Iran's involvement in Iraq, examining how Iranian influence has both exacerbated sectarian tensions and contributed to the country's ongoing instability. The analysis provides insight into the broader implications for regional security and the future of Iraq as it navigates its post-Saddam identity amidst growing Iranian influence.

Keywords: Ethnic groups, Iraq, Iran, relations, extremism, Kurdish

Introduction

The tension between Shiite and Sunni groups has been a major factor in shaping Iraq's sectarian dynamics, particularly following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. This divide is rooted in both historical and political contexts, and its impact has been profound on Iraq's social fabric and governance.

Historical Background

Iraq is home to a complex religious landscape, with Shiites forming the majority and Sunnis the minority. Historically, Sunni Arabs held power in Iraq, especially under Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. Saddam, himself a Sunni, was deeply involved in suppressing Shiite uprisings and maintaining Sunni dominance through a mix of political repression and patronage. This led to the marginalization of the Shiite population, which felt politically and economically excluded^[1].

Post-2003 Developments

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime created a power vacuum that dramatically shifted Iraq's political landscape^[2]. The U.S. policy of de-Ba'athification removed many of the Sunni political elite and military leaders, and Iraq's new political system favoured Shiite parties. This shift angered many Sunnis, who felt alienated and disenfranchised in the new political order.

Political Fragmentation: The new political system, designed with proportional representation and majority rule, empowered Shiite parties, but it also marginalized Sunni voices. The rise of Shiite parties, particularly those aligned with cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran-backed factions, led to a shift in political power toward the Shiite-majority groups. Sunnis felt that their historical dominance was stripped away, and many turned to insurgency and armed resistance, fueling the Sunni-Shiite divide^[3].

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Rise of Sectarian Violence: Following the U.S. invasion, Iraq experienced an escalation of sectarian violence. Sunni extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda in Iraq (the precursor to ISIS), targeted Shiite civilians, while Shiite militias retaliated in good manner. The violent sectarianism reached its peak during the civil war in 2006-2007, with widespread bombings, massacres, and the displacement of millions.

The Role of ISIS: The Sunni-Shiite divide played a key role in the rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). ISIS, capitalizing on Sunni grievances over political exclusion and marginalization, took control of large parts of northern and western Iraq in 2014. The group's brutal interpretation of Islam and its violent attacks on Shiite communities deepened sectarian tensions, exacerbating the divide and contributing to the instability in Iraq.

Iran's Influence: The Shiite-majority government in Iraq has developed strong ties with Iran, which has further fueled Sunni suspicions. Many Sunni groups view Iran's involvement in Iraq as an effort to establish Shiite dominance in the region, which has made the sectarian conflict not just a domestic issue, but one with regional dimensions. Iran's support for Shiite militias and political factions in Iraq has often been seen by Sunnis as an attempt to shape Iraq's political landscape in a way that strengthens Iranian influence [4].

Current Dynamics

The sectarian divide in Iraq continues to be a key factor in its political and social dynamics. Despite efforts toward reconciliation and nation-building, Iraq still faces challenges in integrating its Sunni and Shiite communities into a cohesive national identity. Many Sunni communities feel left out of the political process, and there is lingering distrust between the two groups [5].

At the same time, Iraq's Shiite-majority government, led by various Shiite factions, remains in power. The role of Shiite militias, some of which are aligned with Iran, continues to be a source of tension, as these militias often operate with significant autonomy and sometimes outside the control of the central government. The challenge of disbanding these militias and integrating them into the formal security apparatus remains a difficult task for the Iraqi government.

Kurdish Autonomy and Iran Iraq Relations

Kurdish autonomy in the context of Iran-Iraq relations is a complex issue shaped by historical, political, and ethnic factors. The Kurdish people, who live in regions spanning across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, have long sought greater autonomy and independence, and their relationships with both Iraq and Iran have been influenced by these aspirations.

1. Kurdish Autonomy in Iraq

The Kurds in Iraq, primarily located in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) area in the north of Iraq, have achieved a significant degree of autonomy since the early 1990s. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), established after the Gulf War and further solidified in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, controls its own government, military forces (Peshmerga), and manages a significant portion of Iraq's oil resources. However, this autonomy is not fully independent. The central government in Baghdad retains authority over issues like

defense, foreign policy, and national security, although the Kurdish region often seeks to assert greater independence, particularly regarding oil revenues and military matters [6].

2. Kurdish Autonomy in Iran

Kurds in Iran primarily reside in the western regions of the country (e.g., Kermanshah and Kurdistan provinces). While Iranian Kurds have pursued greater cultural and political rights, the Iranian government has been highly resistant to any form of Kurdish autonomy or independence. Iran has historically cracked down on Kurdish political movements, fearing that Kurdish autonomy in Iraq or Syria could fuel similar demands among its own Kurdish population. Tehran has also faced armed resistance from Kurdish separatist groups like the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), which operates in the mountainous border regions between Iran and Iraq [7].

3. Iran-Iraq Relations and Kurdish Impact

The Kurds in Iraq have influenced Iranian foreign policy in significant ways [8]. Iran has generally supported Kurdish autonomy in Iraq as a way to counterbalance the influence of the central Iraqi government in Baghdad, especially after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Tehran has established close ties with the KRG, providing political, economic, and military support.

However, Iran's support for Iraqi Kurds is tempered by its fear that Kurdish autonomy could inspire similar movements within its own borders. Iran has often acted cautiously, ensuring that any Kurdish aspirations in Iraq do not jeopardize its security interests.

During the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), the Kurds played a complicated role, with some factions aligning with Iran against Saddam Hussein's regime. After the war, Iran maintained relations with Kurdish political factions in Iraq, but its primary interest was in ensuring that Iraq's Kurds did not move toward full independence or destabilize the region [9].

4. Syrian Kurdish Factor

The situation in Syria has added a new dynamic to the Kurdish question. Syrian Kurds, particularly those affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), have sought autonomy in northern Syria. Iran has supported the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, which has created a tension between Tehran's alliance with the Assad government and its dealings with the Kurds in Iraq and Syria [10].

The Syrian Kurdish forces have had some degree of cooperation with the United States, which has complicated Iran's regional strategy. Tehran is concerned that Kurdish autonomy in Syria could further empower Kurdish separatist movements in Iraq and Iran.

5. Strategic Interests

Iran: Iran's strategic interests in the region often shape its policies toward the Kurdish issue. Iran prioritizes maintaining a secure and unified Iraq to avoid the disintegration of its neighbor, which could lead to the empowerment of separatist movements and create instability in its own Kurdish regions. At the same time, Iran is keen to ensure that Kurdish factions in Iraq remain under the influence of Tehran rather than falling under the sway of Western powers or Turkey.

Iraq: The Iraqi government faces the challenge of balancing Kurdish autonomy with national unity. Baghdad has a complicated relationship with the KRG, particularly regarding issues of oil revenue and control over disputed territories like Kirkuk. Tensions often rise when the Kurds seek to assert their autonomy too strongly or engage in actions like holding independence referenda, as seen in the 2017 KRG referendum for independence, which was opposed by both the Iraqi government and neighboring countries like Iran and Turkey.

6. Current Issues and Tensions

Independence Referendums: The 2017 Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq, supported by the KRG but opposed by Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara, showed the limits of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. The Iraqi government quickly moved to retake control of Kirkuk, a city that both the Kurds and the central government claimed, and tensions flared between the Kurdish and Iraqi forces.

Iran's Security Concerns: Iran's concerns about the rise of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq are also linked to its broader regional ambitions. If the Kurds in Iraq were to pursue full independence, it could encourage separatist movements within Iran, especially in the Kurdish-populated regions near the border. Tehran is wary of any shifts in the balance of power in Iraq that could create instability along its borders.

U.S.-Kurdish Relations: The Kurds in Iraq have often maintained strong relations with the United States, which complicates Iran's strategy. While Iran is supportive of certain Kurdish political groups in Iraq, it is wary of the Kurds aligning too closely with the U.S. or its allies ^[11].

Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq

Iran has been a key supporter of Shiite militias in Iraq, especially since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Iran's involvement is driven by several factors, including religious, strategic, and political motivations. Here's an overview:

1. Religious Ties

Iran, as a predominantly Shiite country, shares religious and ideological affinities with the Shiite majority in Iraq. Iran's support for Shiite militias is often framed as a defense of Shiite interests, especially in the context of sectarian tensions in Iraq ^[12].

2. Formation of Militias

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Shiite militias began to form in Iraq. Some of these groups, such as the Badr Organization (which later evolved into part of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF), were initially established with Iranian backing. These groups aimed to protect Shiite communities and push back against Sunni extremists ^[13].

The Mahdi Army, led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, is another influential group that has received varying levels of Iranian support.

3. Strategic Goals

Regional Influence: Iran views its support for Shiite militias as part of a broader strategy to expand its influence in the region. Iraq is seen as a key component of the so-called "Shiite Crescent" that stretches from Iran through Iraq, Syria,

and Lebanon, all the way to the Mediterranean. This crescent is crucial for Iran's strategic and security interests.

Countering Sunni Extremism: Iran also frames its support for these militias as part of the fight against Sunni extremist groups like ISIS (Islamic State), which gained significant territory in Iraq. Shiite militias, many of which have fought against ISIS, have been seen as vital allies in securing Iraq and preventing the spread of Sunni jihadism.

Proxy Warfare: Iran views these militias as a way to exert influence in Iraq while avoiding direct military intervention. Through these proxies, Iran can challenge U.S. and Western influence in the region and support its allies, such as the Syrian government, by providing logistical and military support ^[14].

4. Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)

In 2014, after ISIS made significant advances in Iraq, the Iraqi government called for the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a coalition of militias, many of which were backed by Iran. While the PMF was officially integrated into Iraq's security forces, Iranian influence remains significant. Groups within the PMF, such as the Harakat al-Nujaba, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, have strong ties to Iran and sometimes operate independently of the Iraqi government.

5. Controversies and Tensions

Iran's support for Shiite militias has been controversial. While it has contributed to the defeat of ISIS, it has also deepened sectarian tensions in Iraq. Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and even some Shiite factions view Iranian influence and militia activities with suspicion. There are concerns about the erosion of Iraq's sovereignty, as these militias often operate outside of the formal state structure.

The U.S. and other Western powers have expressed concern about Iran's role in Iraq, particularly the destabilizing effect of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. The militias have been involved in numerous attacks on U.S. personnel and interests in the region, leading to tensions between the U.S. and Iran ^[15].

6. Post-ISIS Iraq

Even after ISIS's territorial defeat, many of the militias supported by Iran have remained active, further consolidating Iran's influence in Iraq. While the Iraqi government has tried to rein in some of these groups, many remain powerful, and their allegiance to Iran complicates efforts to assert full Iraqi sovereignty.

Iran has backed Shiite Militias in Iraq Implications for Iraq's internal stability and relations with the west. Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq has significant implications for both Iraq's internal stability and its relations with the West. Below are some of the key points to consider:

1. Impact on Iraq's Internal Stability

Militia Influence and Power Dynamics: Shiite militias, many of which operate under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), have significant military and political influence in Iraq. While these groups played a key role in defeating ISIS, their growing power can destabilize Iraq's political landscape, especially as they are often loyal to Iran rather than the Iraqi government. This creates a parallel

power structure that sometimes undermines state authority [16].

Sectarian Tensions: The militias' dominance, especially in Shiite-majority areas, can exacerbate sectarian divisions within Iraq. Sunni and Kurdish groups may feel marginalized or oppressed by the growing Shiite militia presence, potentially leading to further internal conflict. This could destabilize Iraq and reignite sectarian violence.

Corruption and Lack of Accountability: Some militia groups are accused of being involved in corruption, extortion, and human rights abuses. These actions erode trust in Iraq's government, creating a perception that the state is either complicit or too weak to exert control over these groups, further destabilizing internal governance.

2. Impact on Relations with the West

Strained US-Iraq Relations: The US has been critical of Iran's involvement in Iraq, particularly its backing of militias that operate with minimal accountability. The US sees these groups as a threat to Iraq's sovereignty and security, and their presence has often led to tensions between Washington and Baghdad. US military presence in Iraq is often targeted by these militias, leading to a further deterioration in relations with Iraq's government, which at times has been caught in the middle [17].

Complicating the Fight against ISIS: While Shiite militias played an important role in fighting ISIS, their increasing autonomy and involvement in Iraq's internal politics can complicate ongoing counterterrorism efforts. US and Western allies may be concerned that these groups, rather than focusing on the fight against ISIS, could turn their attention to pursuing sectarian agendas, creating an environment less conducive to stability and counterterrorism operations.

European and Regional Diplomacy: For European nations and other Western powers, Iran's influence in Iraq is a concern as it complicates efforts to stabilize the region. Western nations, particularly those invested in Iraq's reconstruction, view Iran's involvement with skepticism, as it undermines efforts to create a neutral, stable Iraq that can cooperate with international partners. Additionally, the US's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran affects Iraq, as it tries to balance relations with both the US and Iran.

3. Geopolitical Implications

Iran's Influence in the Region: Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq is part of its broader strategy to expand its influence in the region, from Iraq to Lebanon (via Hezbollah) and Syria. This poses a challenge to Western and Sunni Arab interests, which see Iran's growing presence as destabilizing for the region. Western countries are wary of a "Shia crescent" that could shift the regional balance of power in Iran's favor.

Iran's Support for Militias as a Leverage Tool: Iran's backing of Shiite militias gives it leverage over Iraqi politics, particularly in influencing the outcome of elections, the selection of leaders, and other national decisions. It also gives Iran a direct presence in Iraq, allowing it to exert influence over regional dynamics [18].

Iran Iraq Relations post 2003 rebuilding diplomatic relations

After the 2003 Iraq War and the subsequent overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iran-Iraq relations underwent significant changes. Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq had been an adversary of Iran, especially during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. However, the post-2003 environment, characterized by the removal of Saddam Hussein and the establishment of a new government in Iraq, allowed for the rebuilding of diplomatic ties between the two nations.

1. Shared Interests

After the fall of Saddam, Iran sought to assert influence over Iraq, which had been under Sunni-led Ba'athist rule. With the establishment of a Shiite-majority government in Iraq, many of Iraq's new leaders had strong cultural and political ties to Iran, particularly within the Shiite community. This created a common ground for cooperation, especially in areas like security, trade, and politics [19].

2. Security Cooperation

Iran played a significant role in the post-Saddam era, especially in countering Sunni extremist groups like Al-Qaeda and later ISIS (Islamic State). Iran's support for Shiite militias, including groups like the Badr Brigade and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, proved critical in Iraq's fight against ISIS after 2014. Tehran also provided military advice, training, and equipment to the Iraqi military and militias, deepening the security cooperation between the two countries.

3. Economic and Trade Relations

Economic ties grew significantly after 2003. Iran and Iraq share a long border, and both countries benefited from trade, including energy, construction, and agricultural products. Iran became one of Iraq's largest trading partners, supplying electricity, natural gas, and various goods. Iraq also relied on Iranian industries to rebuild its war-torn infrastructure [20].

4. Cultural and Religious Ties

Iraq's Shiite population shares deep religious ties with Iran, particularly due to the significance of the Shiite holy sites in Iraq, such as Karbala and Najaf. Iran has provided support for the religious infrastructure in these cities, and millions of Iranians visit these sites for pilgrimage, further strengthening cultural and religious connections.

5. Diplomatic Engagement

The two nations worked to re-establish diplomatic relations following the 2003 invasion. Iran was keen on supporting Iraq's political transition under a Shiite-led government. Diplomatic ties were further solidified through high-level visits, such as the frequent travels of Iraqi Prime Ministers to Tehran and vice versa. Iran's role as a regional power also meant that Iraq was increasingly looking to Tehran for political and military support, especially in the face of regional challenges [21].

6. Challenges and Tensions

While relations were generally positive, there were challenges. Iraq's efforts to balance its relationships with both Iran and the United States, particularly after the U.S. invasion and occupation, created some diplomatic tensions. The U.S. and its allies were wary of Iran's influence in Iraq, especially as Iran's support for Iraqi militias was seen as part

of Tehran's broader regional strategy to expand its influence. Additionally, Iraq had to manage its internal sectarian issues, with some Sunni factions opposed to Iranian influence, fearing that Iraq could become too reliant on Tehran. The Sunni minority, both in Iraq and the broader Arab world, viewed Iran's growing power in Iraq with suspicion.

7. Influence of Regional and Global Dynamics

The broader Middle Eastern geopolitical context, including the Syrian Civil War (which also saw Iran supporting the Assad regime), the rise of ISIS, and U.S. relations with Iraq and Iran, shaped the trajectory of their relations. Iran's involvement in Syria and its alliances with Iraqi Shiite militias became increasingly entangled, with Iran's regional influence growing in ways that influenced Iraq's political and security landscape.

8. Post-2014

After the rise of ISIS, Iran's role in Iraq became even more prominent. Iranian military advisors, alongside Iraqi forces and Shiite militias, were critical in fighting ISIS, particularly in the defense of places like Samarra and the liberation of cities like Tikrit and Mosul. Iranian-backed militias, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), became an important force in Iraq's security structure.

However, the presence of these militias raised concerns both domestically and internationally, as they were seen by some as an extension of Iranian influence. The relationship between Iraq's government and these militias was complex, and their integration into the Iraqi security forces led to tensions with Sunni and Kurdish factions ^[22].

9. Ongoing Dynamics

As of recent years, the Iraq-Iran relationship remains strong, but not without challenges. Iraq continues to navigate its relationship with the U.S., which has been critical of Iran's regional activities. The growing influence of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq has been a point of contention, especially as Iraq strives to assert its sovereignty while dealing with the influence of powerful external actors.

In conclusion, post-2003 Iraq-Iran relations have been marked by a complex mixture of cooperation, economic interdependence, and shared security concerns, particularly in the fight against extremist groups. However, the relationship is also shaped by regional dynamics and internal Iraqi politics, including balancing relations with both Iran and the West ^[23].

Economic Relations after US Invasion

Trade energy and economic cooperation between Iran and Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraq underwent significant changes, including its political landscape, economy, and foreign relations. The U.S. invasion created a power vacuum, which impacted regional alliances and cooperation, including between Iraq and Iran. Here are some key aspects of the economic relations, trade, energy, and economic cooperation between Iran and Iraq post-Saddam Hussein:

1. Trade Relations

After Saddam Hussein's fall, Iraq's economy faced severe challenges, including destruction of infrastructure, reduced oil production, and instability. Iran, which had long

maintained a historical and strategic relationship with Iraq, seized the opportunity to engage in trade and economic cooperation.

Increased Trade: Iran became one of Iraq's largest trading partners. In the years following the invasion, trade between the two countries surged, covering a wide range of goods, including food, construction materials, and consumer goods. Iran also supplied Iraq with medical supplies and various industrial products ^[24].

Border Trade: The two countries share a long border, facilitating cross-border trade, particularly in regions like Kurdistan. Iran's goods were easily transported through this border, providing Iraq with much-needed supplies while boosting Iran's economy.

2. Energy Cooperation

Energy, particularly oil and natural gas, has been one of the most significant aspects of the economic relationship between Iran and Iraq post-2003.

Oil Trade and Infrastructure: Iraq, heavily reliant on oil for revenue, faced challenges in restoring its oil infrastructure after the invasion. Iran has assisted Iraq in rebuilding its oil sector, offering expertise in refining and extraction. Additionally, Iran and Iraq signed agreements to transport Iraqi crude oil through Iranian pipelines to the Persian Gulf, providing Iraq with more export options.

Electricity and Gas Imports: Iraq has long struggled with electricity shortages. Iran became a critical supplier of electricity and natural gas to Iraq. Iran exports electricity to Iraq, particularly to the southern regions, and also provides natural gas for power generation. This cooperation was vital to stabilize Iraq's energy sector, especially after the war ^[25].

3. Investment and Reconstruction

Iran played an essential role in Iraq's reconstruction efforts, focusing on areas like infrastructure, industry, and agriculture.

Reconstruction Projects: Iranian companies were involved in rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure, especially in sectors such as construction, roads, and public buildings. Many Iranian firms invested in projects in southern Iraq, where Shiite populations are predominant, solidifying their presence and influence.

Agricultural and Industrial Cooperation: Iran also provided agricultural products to Iraq, and there was a focus on developing joint industrial ventures in both countries. This cooperation was aimed at reducing Iraq's reliance on foreign imports, especially as the country tried to rebuild its self-sufficiency.

4. Security and Political Relations

Shared Interests: Both countries, particularly their Shiite-majority populations, shared ideological and political interests. Iran's influence in Iraq increased after the fall of Saddam Hussein, especially through its support for various Shiite political parties and militias, some of which also played a role in Iraq's economy. These alliances translated into stronger economic ties as the political and military cooperation deepened.

Security Cooperation: The two countries also engaged in security cooperation, particularly in the face of ISIS's rise in the region. Iran provided military assistance and intelligence to Iraq in its fight against ISIS, further cementing their relationship ^[26].

5. Sanctions and International Relations

Impact of Sanctions on Trade: Despite facing Western sanctions, Iran continued to engage economically with Iraq. Iraq, not subject to the same level of sanctions, became a key outlet for Iranian goods. However, the sanctions regime did create challenges for both nations, as they had to navigate restrictions while maintaining their economic relations.

Political Influence: Iran's involvement in Iraq was often viewed with suspicion by some other countries, including the U.S. and Gulf States, due to Iran's regional ambitions. However, Iraq's dependence on Iran for economic and security cooperation meant that Baghdad was often forced to balance its relationships with both Iran and the West.

6. Post-Saddam Shift in Iraq's Foreign Policy

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq adopted a more inclusive and balanced foreign policy. While Iran became a major economic partner, Iraq also sought to establish ties with other countries, including the U.S., the EU, and Arab Gulf states, in an attempt to avoid over-reliance on any one nation ^[27]. This balancing act often created challenges in Iraq's foreign and economic policy, but Iran remained a significant player in Iraq's economic landscape.

Iran and Iraq improved relationship affect on regional power dynamics and relationship with global power like US, China & Russia

The improvement in the relationship between Iran and Iraq has significant implications for regional power dynamics and for how both countries engage with global powers like the United States, China, and Russia. Here's an analysis of the possible effects:

1. Impact on Regional Power Dynamics

Strengthened Shia Axis: Both Iran and Iraq are part of the larger Shia Muslim bloc in the Middle East. A closer relationship between them could strengthen the Shia axis that includes Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, leading to greater cohesion among these actors. This could challenge Sunni-majority states like Saudi Arabia and their allies in the region, shifting the balance of power.

Reduced U.S. Influence: The U.S. has had a significant military and political presence in Iraq since 2003, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. However, a closer relationship between Iraq and Iran could undermine the U.S.'s ability to influence Iraq's politics, especially given Iran's strategic interests in Iraq. This could limit U.S. leverage in the region.

Challenges to Saudi Arabia: The strengthened Iran-Iraq ties could have negative implications for Saudi Arabia and its broader regional goals. Iraq has been a key area of influence for Saudi Arabia, and growing Iran-Iraq cooperation could further diminish Saudi efforts to counter Iran's regional ambitions ^[28].

2. Impact on Relations with Global Powers

United States

Strained Relations with the U.S.: The U.S. has long considered Iran a regional rival, particularly after Iran's 1979 revolution and its involvement in proxy conflicts across the Middle East. The deepening Iran-Iraq relationship could further strain U.S.-Iraq ties, especially since Iraq hosts U.S. military bases and relies on U.S. aid and security support. Iraq's increasing ties with Iran could complicate U.S. efforts to isolate Iran, especially if Iraq becomes a more vocal supporter of Iranian policies.

Potential for U.S. Withdrawal: A closer relationship between Iraq and Iran could make the U.S. presence in Iraq less tenable. If Iraqi political factions (especially those aligned with Iran) push for the expulsion of U.S. troops, it could lead to a more pronounced U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, reducing American influence in the country ^[29].

China

Increased Economic Influence: China has been increasingly active in the Middle East, focusing on trade, infrastructure projects, and investment through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A stronger Iran-Iraq partnership could benefit China economically, as both countries provide key energy resources. Iraq is rich in oil, which China could access, while Iran, despite sanctions, has oil and natural gas reserves that are crucial for China's energy security. If both countries collaborate more closely, China could gain access to significant energy supplies and increase its footprint in the region.

Less Concern over U.S. Influence: China's growing influence in Iraq, potentially supported by Iraq's closer ties to Iran, could create a counterbalance to U.S. power in the region. China's pragmatic, non-interventionist approach, focused on trade and infrastructure, might appeal to Iraq more than the U.S.'s more politically and militarily interventionist approach.

Russia

Strategic Alliance with Iran and Iraq: Russia has been deepening its involvement in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, where it has worked closely with Iran. A closer Iran-Iraq relationship would likely benefit Russia's broader regional strategy. Both Iran and Iraq are central to Russia's attempts to expand its influence in the region, especially in relation to its military presence in Syria and its efforts to challenge U.S. dominance.

Energy Cooperation: Iraq, like Iran, is a key energy producer, and Russia is already a significant player in global energy markets. Stronger ties between Iraq and Iran could create opportunities for Russian companies to tap into Iraq's oil and gas sectors, and Russia could also act as an intermediary for energy deals between the two countries. This could be beneficial for Russia's influence in OPEC and global energy markets ^[30].

Potential Tensions with the U.S. and Europe: If the Iran-Iraq alliance becomes stronger, especially with Russian involvement, it could lead to further geopolitical tensions with the U.S. and its European allies, who may view this as a challenge to their strategic interests in the region.

3. Broader Implications

Increased Tensions in the Gulf: As Iran and Iraq become closer, it could heighten tensions with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who have long seen Iran as a threat. The alignment between Iran and Iraq could exacerbate the sectarian divide and lead to a further militarization of the region ^[31].

Destabilization of Arab League Dynamics: A closer Iran-Iraq relationship could shift the balance of power within the Arab League, making it more difficult for Sunni-majority states to maintain their influence. The Arab League, which has often taken positions opposing Iranian influence, could face greater internal divisions as Iraq aligns more closely with Iran.

Proxy Conflicts and Influence: Iran has long been involved in supporting proxy groups throughout the Middle East, including in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. A more integrated Iran-Iraq relationship could lead to even greater Iranian influence in Iraqi politics and its regional proxies, especially in the context of ongoing conflicts in Yemen and Syria.

Iran's role in promoting the Shia Crescent refers to its efforts in expanding the influence of Shia Islam and cultivating a network of political, military, and religious alliances across the Middle East. The concept of the "Shia Crescent" describes a region that stretches from Iran through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula, where Shia populations and Shia-backed political groups or militias are influential. This influence is part of Iran's broader strategy to assert regional dominance, counterbalance Sunni powers, and create a network of allied governments and non-state actors.

Key aspects of Iran's role in promoting the Shia Crescent Support for Shia Militias and Groups: Iran has supported Shia militias and political groups across the Middle East, particularly through its Quds Force, a division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) responsible for foreign operations. Prominent groups that Iran has backed include:

Hezbollah in Lebanon: A powerful Shia militant group and political party in Lebanon, Hezbollah is one of Iran's most important allies. Iran provides military and financial support, and Hezbollah plays a central role in Iran's strategy to influence Lebanese politics and resist Israeli actions.

Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq: These are primarily Shia militias that fought against ISIS and now play a significant role in Iraq's security and politics. Iran has supported them both directly and indirectly.

Houthi rebels in Yemen: Though not all Houthi members are Shia, Iran provides significant backing to the Houthis, who follow a branch of Shia Islam known as Zaidi, helping them in their struggle against the Yemeni government and its allies, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Shia militias in Syria: Iran has supported the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam, through the provision of military assistance and by organizing Shia militias from across the region to fight on behalf of Assad's regime.

Ideological and Religious Influence: Iran positions itself as

the center of Shia political and religious authority. Under the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), Iran's Supreme Leader holds both political and religious authority, and this model of governance has been promoted as an alternative to Sunni-majority states. This ideological framework appeals to Shia communities and political groups in the region, which see Iran as a protector of Shia interests and values.

Political Influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria:

Iraq: Iran's influence in Iraq is strong, particularly among the Shia majority. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran has cultivated relationships with various Iraqi Shia political parties, including the Dawa Party and the Sadrist Movement, and has provided support to militias like the PMF. These ties have helped Iran maintain substantial influence over Iraq's political and security landscape.

Syria: Iran has provided military, financial, and logistical support to Bashar al-Assad's regime throughout the Syrian Civil War. This support has included sending IRGC forces, training Shia militias, and facilitating the presence of Hezbollah fighters in Syria. Iran's involvement has helped Assad retain power, and in return, Syria has become part of Iran's wider sphere of influence ^[32].

Lebanon: Hezbollah is the primary proxy for Iran in Lebanon. It plays a dominant role in Lebanon's political and security affairs, often shaping policies in ways that align with Iranian interests. Hezbollah's success in resisting Israeli actions, alongside its role in Lebanon's internal politics, further enhances Iran's regional standing.

Geopolitical Rivalry with Sunni Powers: Iran's actions to expand its influence have caused tensions with Sunni-majority countries, especially Saudi Arabia, which views Iran's regional ambitions as a threat. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has manifested in various regional conflicts, including in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have attempted to counterbalance Iran's influence by supporting Sunni factions and militias, and by promoting an ideological narrative that contrasts with Iran's Shia Islam-based political model.

Strategic Use of the Shia Crescent: The Shia Crescent concept also serves as a strategic tool for Iran to maintain a corridor of influence and military presence, linking Iran to its allies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This allows Iran to establish a more direct route for the transfer of arms, fighters, and other resources, contributing to its power projection across the region. The idea of the Shia Crescent, however, is often seen as a challenge to the Sunni Arab-led order, further exacerbating sectarian tensions in the Middle East.

In Iran, clergy and religious leaders play a central role in both politics and governance, shaping the country's political landscape through their religious authority and political influence. Here are key points outlining their role: ^[33].

Theocratic System: Iran operates under a theocratic system of government where the Supreme Leader—the highest authority is a religious figure, specifically a Shia cleric. This system, known as Wilayat al-Faqih, was established after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and places the clergy at the top of political power.

Supreme Leader: The Supreme Leader is the highest-ranking political and religious authority in the country. The position is held by a senior Shia cleric, chosen by the Assembly of Experts, which is composed of elected clerics. The Supreme Leader has extensive powers over all branches of government, including the military, judiciary, and media, as well as being the final authority on religious and political matters.

Council of Guardians: Another key body influenced by the clergy is the Guardian Council, which consists of 12 members. Six of these members are senior clerics who are appointed by the Supreme Leader, while the other six are lawyers nominated by the judiciary. The Guardian Council is responsible for overseeing elections, approving candidates, and ensuring laws are in line with Islamic principles.

Religious Political Parties: Various political factions in Iran have roots in religious ideology, with some parties and groups advocating for more conservative interpretations of Islam, while others may promote moderate policies. Clerics are often involved in or lead these parties, influencing domestic and foreign policy decisions ^[34].

Role in Legislative Process: The Majles (Parliament), Iran's legislative body, includes a significant number of clerics, though not all members are religious. Clerics often hold prominent positions and play an influential role in shaping laws and policies, particularly on issues related to religion, morality, and national security.

Judiciary and Legal System: The judiciary in Iran is strongly influenced by the clergy. The head of the judiciary is appointed by the Supreme Leader, and many judges and legal officials are clerics who interpret laws according to Shia Islamic teachings. The legal system is a mixture of civil law and Islamic law, and religious leaders ensure that legislation aligns with their interpretation of Islamic law ^[35].

Social Influence: Clerics hold significant sway over the social and cultural fabric of Iranian society. They influence public discourse on issues such as morality, family life, gender roles, and education. They also often play a direct role in issuing fatwas (religious rulings) that can influence government policy and social behavior.

Control over Religious Institutions: The clergy have control over many of Iran's most powerful institutions, such as religious schools (seminaries), charitable organizations, and media outlets. These institutions not only maintain religious education but also play a key role in spreading the government's political ideology.

Public Mobilization: The clergy have historically been instrumental in mobilizing the population, particularly during the 1979 revolution. They continue to have significant influence over public opinion, especially among conservative and religious communities, often using religious rhetoric to justify political decisions and rally support.

Foreign Policy Influence: Clerics also influence Iran's foreign policy, particularly in relation to countries with significant Shia populations or Islamic interests. Their views on issues such as relations with the West, the Middle East,

and Shia Islam's role in global politics shape Iran's diplomatic stance.

In summary, in Iran, religious leaders, particularly the clergy, have a dominant role in politics, often blending religious authority with political power. This unique system makes the clergy not only spiritual guides but also key political figures who help define the direction of the country's governance and policies.

Oil and Gas Trade

Energy politics plays a crucial role in shaping the relationship between Iraq and Iran. Both countries are key players in the energy sector, particularly in terms of oil and gas production, and their economic and political interactions are deeply influenced by their energy ties.

Here are some key aspects of Iraq-Iran energy relations:

1. Oil and Gas Trade

Iran's Role in Iraq's Energy Sector: Iran has been an important partner in Iraq's energy sector, particularly in terms of providing electricity and gas. Given Iraq's energy shortages, especially in the southern regions, Iran has been supplying Iraq with natural gas for power generation. In return, Iraq has become one of Iran's key trading partners, especially in the energy sector ^[36].

Oil Export Routes: Iraq has historically relied on Iran for transportation routes for its oil exports, especially through the southern pipelines connecting Iraq to the Persian Gulf. This is important because Iraq's main oil export port, Basra, is located in the southern part of the country, where Iran's presence influences regional dynamics ^[37].

2. Sanctions and Geopolitical Implications

Impact of US Sanctions: The United States has imposed sanctions on Iran, targeting its oil exports and other sectors. Iraq, despite being an ally of the U.S., has found itself in a delicate position because of its reliance on Iranian energy imports. Washington has occasionally granted Iraq waivers allowing it to import electricity and gas from Iran, but these waivers have created tensions in the broader geopolitical landscape.

Iran's Leverage: Iran has used its position as an energy supplier to Iraq to exert influence. For instance, it has threatened to cut off gas supplies if Iraq does not meet certain conditions, particularly regarding payments. This gives Iran significant leverage over Iraq, as energy is crucial to Iraq's economy and infrastructure ^[38].

3. Energy Cooperation and Infrastructure Projects

Gas and Electricity Supplies: Iran exports natural gas to Iraq for electricity generation, particularly during the summer months when demand for power peaks. This relationship has been vital for Iraq, which has faced chronic electricity shortages due to insufficient domestic infrastructure and technical difficulties ^[39].

Infrastructure Collaboration: Iran has been involved in constructing and upgrading energy infrastructure in Iraq, particularly in the power generation sector. This includes the construction of power plants and supporting transmission lines, which has deepened the energy ties between the two nations.

4. Shared Interests and Strategic Alignment

Regional Stability: Both Iran and Iraq share a common interest in regional stability, especially in relation to their shared border and the fight against ISIS and other extremist groups. Iran has provided military and logistical support to Iraq in its fight against ISIS, and energy cooperation has been a key part of this broader strategic alignment ^[40].

Shia Influence: Both countries have a significant Shia Muslim population, and this religious connection has influenced their political and economic relations. Iran sees Iraq as an important ally in the region, particularly as it seeks to maintain its influence in the broader Middle East.

5. Challenges and Future Prospects

Internal Strains in Iraq: While Iraq is heavily dependent on Iranian energy, this dependence has at times sparked internal political and societal debate. Some Iraqi factions, especially those with closer ties to the U.S. or Sunni Arab groups, have been critical of Iraq's reliance on Iran, arguing that it undermines Iraq's sovereignty ^[41].

Energy Diversification: Iraq has been exploring alternatives to reduce its dependence on Iranian energy imports, including efforts to invest in domestic energy production and explore new energy partnerships, particularly with countries in the Gulf and beyond. However, this is a long-term goal, and Iraq remains heavily dependent on Iranian energy supplies in the short to medium term.

US-Iraq-Iran Relations: The tension between the U.S. and Iran also complicates Iraq's energy politics. Iraq, as a U.S. ally, is caught between maintaining its energy ties with Iran and responding to U.S. pressures to reduce those ties. This balancing act is crucial for Iraq's domestic and foreign policy ^[42].

Conclusion

The sectarian tension between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq is a critical factor in the country's ongoing instability. It shapes everything from political representation to military operations and daily life. Although efforts at reconciliation have been made, the deep-rooted divisions and external influences, particularly Iran's role, complicate the process of achieving lasting peace and stability. Until these sectarian dynamics are addressed, Iraq's future will likely continue to be marked by a struggle for political power and national unity. The issue of Kurdish autonomy is central to the relationship between Iraq and Iran. While the Kurdish population in Iraq has achieved a degree of autonomy, Iran remains concerned about the potential for Kurdish independence or separatism, which could have a destabilizing effect on both Iraq and Iran. The Kurdish issue in the region is further complicated by geopolitics, as the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria continue to navigate a complex web of alliances and tensions with both regional powers and international actors. Iran's support for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq is balanced by its fear of empowering separatism within its own borders, making its approach to the issue nuanced and strategic.

Sectarianism and ethnic conflict have been significant challenges for Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime led to the dismantling of state structures, creating a power vacuum that amplified

sectarian and ethnic divisions, particularly between the Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish populations. This fragmentation fueled internal violence and contributed to the rise of extremist groups, such as ISIS. Iran's role in Iraq became increasingly influential following the 2003 invasion, as it sought to expand its geopolitical influence in the region, particularly through its support for Shia militias and political factions. The relationship between Iraq and Iran post-2003 has been shaped by mutual interests, including shared religious ties and a common adversary in Sunni extremism, but also by the complex dynamics of Iraq's internal divisions. This paper explores the intersection of sectarianism, ethnic conflict, and Iran's involvement in Iraq, examining how Iranian influence has both exacerbated sectarian tensions and contributed to the country's ongoing instability. The analysis provides insight into the broader implications for regional security and the future of Iraq as it navigates its post-Saddam identity amidst growing Iranian influence.

In sum, Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq is part of its broader regional strategy to maintain influence in Iraq, secure its borders, and counterbalance Sunni forces in the region, particularly those associated with groups like ISIS. This support is a key element in Iran's efforts to shape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. In conclusion, Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq creates a complex situation where Iraq's internal stability is challenged by competing interests, sectarian tensions, and a weakened central government. Relations with the West, especially the US, are strained, as the growing Iranian influence complicates broader diplomatic and security goals. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the economic relations between Iran and Iraq grew significantly, driven by trade, energy cooperation, and shared political and security interests.

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