

# Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Iraq Post 2003

**Saleem Farhan Jathoom**

Ph.d, Faculty of Law, Karbala University, Karbala, Iraq

## Abstract

This article explores the nature of the fundamental variables that have significantly influenced Iranian foreign policy, focusing on its stance toward Iraq in the post-2003 era. Where the demise of the Baathist regime in Iraq presented Iran with an unprecedented and transformative opportunity to recalibrate its relations with a nation that had traditionally been perceived as one of its most formidable adversaries. Iran's ascension and its role as the primary foreign power broker in Iraq materialized through strategic leveraging of its extensive border with Iraq, coupled with its enduring relationships with influential Iraqi political figures, political factions, and various militant groups. This ascent was achieved by harnessing the dimensions of soft power, particularly in domains such as economics, religion, and the dissemination of information. Drawing from neo-realism, it suggests that nations should strengthen their economies, build domestic military capabilities, forge beneficial alliances, and pursue opposing actions on the global stage. According to this theory, Iran aimed to extend its influence in Iraq by supporting and empowering political and armed groups. Leveraging its extensive border and established relationships with Iraqi figures, parties, and armed groups, Iran has become the foremost foreign facilitator in Iraq. Its soft power, encompassing economics, religion, and information, played a crucial role in this expansion. Furthermore, Iran's involvement in Iraq was closely tied to its broader aspirations for a more prominent position in the Gulf region, aligning with its political, economic, military capabilities, and geopolitical significance.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, Armed Groups, Invasion, National Interests, Internal Interference.

## 1. Introduction

According to one definition, "foreign policy pertains to the strategic mechanisms employed by governments to navigate their actions and engagements on the international stage". This comprehensive definition underscores the importance of considering three core components when analyzing a nation's foreign policy: the specific tactics employed, encompassing various techniques and instruments; the overarching objectives, spanning both short-term and long-term aims; and the context of the international environment within the broader global system [1].

This article explores the nature of the fundamental variables that have significantly influenced Iranian foreign policy, focusing on its stance toward Iraq in the post-2003 era. Where the demise of the Baathist authoritarian regime in Iraq presented Iran with an unprecedented and transformative opportunity to recalibrate its relations with a nation that had traditionally been perceived as one of its most formidable adversaries. Iran's ascension and its role as the primary foreign power broker in Iraq materialized through strategic leveraging of its extensive border with Iraq, coupled with its enduring relationships with influential Iraqi political figures, political factions, and various militant groups. This ascent was

achieved by harnessing the dimensions of soft power, particularly in domains such as economics, religion, and the dissemination of information.

Going beyond such one-dimensional analyses, this article examines a key dimension of Iran's foreign policy that may have affected its foreign policy towards Iraq post-2003. Accordingly, this study attempts to analyse the extent of the hard and soft powers of Iran's foreign policy as played out toward Iraq. To undertake such an examination, the following research questions will be addressed:

- a. To what extent has American engagement in Iraq since 2003 altered Iran's foreign policy?
- b. How much interference with Iraq's domestic affairs did the Iranian government make?
- c. How has Iran's use of Iraqi armed groups benefited Tehran?
- d. What other objectives does Iran have in Iraq besides security?

Various secondary data have been gathered in the context of Iranian foreign policy to address these research questions since 2003. Additionally, to explore associated research subjects, the realism and neo-realism theoretical frameworks are employed.

### 1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Iran's two closest adversaries before September 11, 2001, were Afghanistan's Taliban and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Iran and Iraq waged a bloody eight-year war that resulted in terrible losses, including those caused by chemical weapons assaults. Iran agreed to a humiliating cease-fire at the end of the war in 1988, realizing it had lost the conflict partly due to its separation from the broader global community [2]. One of the most important moments in the history of Iran-Iraq relations was the demise of Saddam Hussein's autocratic regime in 2003. The antagonism between Iran and Iraq, however, persisted over the decade that followed the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, and as a result, they came to have a tight relationship (Abdullah, 2016)

The power imbalances between regional and foreign nations caused a political, economic, and security gap in Iraq. The ambitions of its foreign policy and regional strategic goals have also made the regional nations, such as Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, active and influential. Iran had a notable impact on Iraq's internal and external affairs, bolstering its sway in Iraq across many realms encompassing politics, security, and economics. Additionally, through its agents in Iraq who were affiliated with political parties and movements that were part of the Iraqi government, it got involved in political decision-making [4]

Following the US-led overthrow of Saddam's regime, Iran's position in the region has grown stronger and more effective (Abdullah, 2016). Setalani and Vatankhah argued that the Iranian foreign policy toward Iraq after 2003 depended on cooperation and coalition, ensuring Shias in Iraq would have an effective position in the Iraqi political structure and support the central government in terms of controlling the security situation in the country. They argued that this would positively reflect the reduction of threats to Iranian national security [5].

Nevertheless, Khalaf, argued that the engagement of Iran in Iraq might be ascribed to its pursuit of advancing its interests. The observed phenomenon can be ascribed to internal discord within the nation of Iran, which has been further intensified by deteriorating economic circumstances and persistent fights for influence among various factions within the Iranian government. Furthermore, this involvement has a religious and philosophical motivation because it serves to safeguard Shiite sacred sites and shrines in Iraq [6]

The Iranian meddling played a significant role in Iraq and Tehran convinced Shiites to run for office using uniform rolls to leverage their voting power. This allowed Tehran to control the Iraqi government

and parliament. The aforementioned jobs were primarily filled by groups that have affiliations with Iran. The parliamentary elections held on May 12, 2018, witnessed a notable increase in Iranian influence in Iraq, following the unsuccessful attempt by the "Mullah" regime to support candidates associated with PMF militia leaders. Ultimately, the Alliance Toward Reforms Coalition (Saadiron), led by Shiite clergyman Muqtada al-Sadr, emerged as the victor in these elections. As part of Iran's massive regional control strategy to undermine US interests in the area, the leaders of the PMF military organizations ran as candidates in the elections. [7]

Furthermore, Iran had a military role by funding, training, and arming Shia armed groups. Iranian meddling in Iraq has intensified; Tehran controls the country's political landscape and utilizes it as a battleground for proxy warfare, and it dictates the majority of political appointments [6]

According to Khalaf, the US strategy toward Iraq, particularly Obama's policy, promoted Iran's role in exercising an influence on the internal balances in Iraq. Despite not having an official role in the US-led Global Coalition against Terrorism, Iran was welcomed for its involvement in Iraq by the US Administration, giving Tehran the go-ahead to play its regional role [6].

This paper argues that since invading Iraq in 2003, Iran has used several strategies, including both hard power—supporting armed groups and the military—and soft power—fostering political and economic ties—to further its interests and ambitions.

## 1.2 STUDY THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Realism is one of the oldest and most widely used theories of international relations, positing a variety of methods for the study of international politics. All of these strategies have one thing in common: they all assume that nations are the primary actors in international affairs. According to realism, one of the primary goals of the state is to strengthen its authority to legitimize itself, protect national interests, and assure its survival. As a result, security is critical to the notion of realism [8].

Other actors, whether cultural, social, or economic, are essentially unaccounted for due to the nation-state's total dominance under realist theory. According to [3] and Morgenthau, [9] each state has distinct national goals and policies in place to pursue those objectives. Amin et al. [10] argue that because certain national interests must be upheld at all costs, there is no harmonization of interests among states. Despite these objections, realist theorists agree that to lessen instability and conflict, cooperation between states is necessary and that states operate within a network of states. As a result, states work together and forge alliances to fend off adversaries [11]. Therefore, based on existing facts and within the framework of its national interests, their relationships are theoretically feasible and attempt to be adjusted in a way that increases their security and national interests.

Realists say that every state's primary objective should be its existence. That is because, in accordance with Firoozabadi and Ashkezari [12], every foreign invasion of a neighboring country puts the national security and interests of such nations at risk. The 2003 American occupation of Iraq resulted in the overthrow of Baathist's government and the ensuing chaos. Realist theory holds that Iran's negative assessment of the new political upheavals had a significant influence on the creation of the new Iraq, which had a different nature. This viewpoint holds that Iraq's geographic characteristics, population, ethnic makeup, and economic and military potential areas ensure that the nation will always pose a threat to interests in national security. However, Iranian leaders believe Iran could become the next target because of the presence of American soldiers in Iraq. The primary defense is that Iran extended its influence and intervention in Iraq to defend Iranian national security, and interests, and keep the nation safe from any outside threats [6].

Iran is opposed to Iraq posing a new danger. Other potential outcomes might arise from the danger, including the emergence of a sectarian conflict between Shiite and Sunni factions, the formation of an autonomous Kurdish state in the northern region of Iraq, the installation of a Shiite religious leadership that rivals the existing government, or the establishment of a unified government that maintains a strong alliance with the United States. These are just a few examples of the several scenarios that may unfold [2].

Neorealism advocates the use of both hard power (military force) and soft power (peacekeeping force) tools in foreign policy to put things in perspective. Neo-realism aims to establish a balance of power in response to the anarchic nature of the international system and the imperative for states to maintain their ability to defend themselves. As a result, nations are required to deal with the most pressing dangers [13]. Neo-realism holds that countries should therefore work to strengthen their economies, build up their armed forces on the home front from one perspective, form favourable alliances, and do the reverse on the global front [13]. According to this perspective, Iran made an effort to extend its influence in Iraq by bolstering the armed groups and political parties that it supported and encouraged to play important roles in the new Iraq. As a result, Iran's influence in Iraq would increase on one side while its rival ally, the US, would suffer on the other. On the other hand, with the implementation of international sanctions, Iran forged tight economic links with Iraq to exert influence on this market and support its economy.

## 2. IRAN'S ASSISTANCE TO ARMED GROUPES

According to Ansari [14] and Hooglund [15], American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan put Iran's national security in danger. Iranian officials were aware that the American presence in Iraq had a substantial impact on their country's security. They were very concerned about the American invasion of Iraq because they thought Iran would be the USA's next military target [1]. This hypothesis was based on deteriorating relations between Iran and the USA, especially after the US labeled Iran a component of the worldwide "Axis of Evil" in 2002 [2].

In the wake of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, numerous armed groups were formed. Iran provided these groups with funding, guidance, training, and weaponry. Iran takes advantage of this by attacking the American troops in Iraq through these groups [3]. Iraq receives critical military assistance from Iran. According to evidence that Iran manufactured the rockets and EFPs that were reportedly given to Iraqi armed groups in 2008 [16], the majority of the losses suffered by US and Coalition forces were due to Iranian-manufactured weapons. On the other hand, these groups later developed into Iranian military wings in Iraq, giving Tehran the potential to retaliate against US forces there if either the US or Israel attacked Iran's nuclear facilities [17].

The Badr Brigade is one of these groups that was established during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). The Badr Brigade made use of Shiite captives to contact and establish connections with the Saddam government [18]. Shia armed groups like Badr and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq have benefited from Iranian Quds power's training, supplies, and financial backing. The military power of the Mahdi of the Sadrists, which was associated with the particular factions, as well as many Sunni rebellious groups, was added to its support [17]. Several Shiite armed groups are armed, trained, and advised by Iran. Some of these groups engaged in combat with the United States from 2003 to 2011 while using upgraded rocket-propelled munitions supplied by Iran, such as Improvised Rocket Assisted Munitions (IRAMs), which resulted in the deaths of about 500 U.S. military personnel [18].

According to Cigar [19], the number and composition of the Shia armed organizations significantly increased as a result of Daesh's offensive in June 2014. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State as it prefers to be called, and the security crisis that followed in Iraq in 2014 also led to an expansion in the number and significance of Shia armed groups in Iraq, as well as to the attainment of warlords' status and importance to previously unheard-of levels. As a result, it is now impossible to disregard these groups as a key aspect of the nation's security and political environment, and they will probably continue to be a problem in the future.

In reaction to Daesh's rapid expansion in 2014, The Authority (Al-Marja, or his office as Al-Marjaiya), a collection of Shia religious leaders, issued a "fatwa," paving the way for the significant and rapid growth of armed groups[19]. In light of the strongly anti-Shia actions perpetrated by ISIS in the recently captured regions, coupled with their explicit objective to advance towards the Shia holy towns of Karbala and Najaf, Al-Sistani issued a fatwa, which is a religious edict, mandating a collective obligation of jihad (known as jihad kifa'i) for the whole community. The aforementioned phone conversation catalyzed widespread mobilization within the Shia community, commonly referred to as Al-Hashd Al-Shabi or the "Popular Mobilization Forces."

As a result of the fatwa, many more men volunteered than were required. There may be more than 50 Shia armed groups by this point, differing in size, regional affiliation, political orientation, ambitions, and importance. Many of the major armed groups have ties to Iran [19]. There can occasionally be fierce rivalry between armed groups, and in the past, these conflicts frequently resulted in battles between opposing warlords. There exists empirical evidence suggesting that Iran has the capacity and, at times, has undertaken interventions with certain groups in order to resolve issues related to leadership, which are regarded as more salient than ideological factors and territorial dominance.

This has gotten worse as a result of the "Popular Mobilization Forces" being integrated into the primary security system by the Iraqi Parliament. A law that confirms Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's earlier choice to transform the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a coalition of primarily Iranian-backed Shia armed groups that took part in the fight against ISIS, into a legal and separate military corps, was approved by the Iraqi parliament on November 26, 2016, according to several sources, including Middle East Monitor. All the Shia blocs in parliament voted in support of the bill in a session that was boycotted by Sunni community members who reject the deployment of armed forces aside from the army and police.

This is especially relevant given that Iran has a noticeable influence over the PMF and that credible reports indicate that the PMF wants to resemble the Iranian army's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iraq. The IRGC is a military force that runs concurrently with the Iranian army. If it had a structure like the IRGC, the PMF, like its Iranian parent organization, could become more powerful than the more formal tools of state authority themselves. This is the case in Iran, where the IRGC even has its courts. The Shiite armed groups that wield major street power in the south and center of the country, as well as Iraq's emerging security forces, are both strongly integrated with Iranian intelligence personnel [2].

Due to these important connections, Iran has a powerful paramilitary capability in Iraq that it may use should relations between the United States and Iran deteriorate to the point of an open conflict. The number of Shia from Iraq who sought refuge in Iran and then left has increased the informal relations between the two countries' Shia. Additionally, Iran's financial support for several well-known Iraqi groups offers them more power in Iraq than their previous passive impact. Although they are unable to



militarily confront the United States, it is well known that they can train for and launch insurrections against American troops in Iraq. Iran will surely retaliate in Iraq if the United States increases pressure on it about its nuclear weapons program [2].

### 3. IRANIAN INTERFERENCE IN IRAQ'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS

In his scholarly work entitled "The Future of Power", Nye (2004) describes soft power as the capacity to get desired outcomes through appeal and persuasion, rather than resorting to force or financial incentives. It is observed that the foundations of soft power lie in the allure of a nation's culture, political values, and policies. Hence, the capacity of a state to serve as a role model and influence others to embrace its lifestyle and principles constitutes a fundamental element of soft power. Nye suggests that soft power can serve as a viable substitute for the conventional approach of employing coercive measures and incentives by nations to promote their national interests[20].

Since it provides state power credibility and lessens opposition to its objectives, cooperative power is just as important as hard power. In order to promote popular enthusiasm for and willingness to support its national objectives, the state mystifies its ideology and culture to make them appealing [21]. Because of this, countries can increase their ability to influence international affairs by using soft power to build up their reputation.

Iran was eager to not only support the Shiite religious group in Iraq but also to have a say in the internal policies and processes there, thus after Saddam's administration was toppled in 2003, Tehran was able to impose its influence on Iraqi officials. The fundamental objective of this interest was to prevent Iran from giving Iraq any opportunity to endanger its regional interests and jeopardize its national security. Iran imposed its dominance over not only the Shiite land but also the entirety of Iraq due to the previous regime's discrimination and neglect of the Iraqi Shiite [22].

The post-2003, Iraq provided Iran with the opportunity to impose its will on the nation and strengthen its position and influence there and in the neighborhood [16], [18]. A powerful Iraqi state governed by nationalist or pan-Arab forces might pose a challenge to Iran. Tehran has consistently made efforts to stop these groups from capturing power in Baghdad. Iran has backed Shiite organizations in line with the principles of the Islamic Republic as an efficient replacement for Sunni, nationalist, or pan-Arab movements, which typically have an unfavourable image of Iran [23]. Iran made a concerted effort to have a significant impact on Iraqi politics, and this was evident throughout the country's elections in 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022. Iran's primary motivation for meddling in Iraqi politics was to ensure that the alliance of the Shia political faction held sway in Baghdad and prevent the United States from installing a secular democratic government that might one day have close ties and alliances with the United States [2].

Although Iranian influence is pervasive in Iraq, its effects are unclear. Iranian funding helped Shiite-backed political parties win a lopsided majority in the 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 elections in Iraq [2]. As a neighbour, Iran will probably gain from a strong Shiite-dominated government; nevertheless, should a strong Iraqi government come into power, "the new Iraq" may pose a danger to Iran's status as the region's foremost Shiite power. Iran has attempted to exert pressure on Iraqi politics, working with Shiite and Kurdish parties to create a weak federal state that is subservient to Iranian rule and controlled by Shiites [24].

Iranian "soft power" is the most feasible way to ensure that Iraq's Shiite majority has a chance to control the country's politics [2]. Iran developed its soft power in the areas of information, commerce, and

religion. In order to transform their public support into political power and create Shiite rule for the first time, Iran aims to unite the various Shiite parties in Iraq. In addition, Tehran has actively promoted the engagement of its closest friends, namely the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Dawa, and the Sadrists, in the political sphere to influence the development of Iraq's emerging institutions [24].

A stable, pro-Western, secular democracy with good ties to the US, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and ultimately Israel may be established in Iraq, on the other side. The rationale behind apprehension regarding this prospective consequence is readily apparent. Various factions, including hardliners and reformist elements, exhibit a strong desire to expand Iranian influence within the region. This inclination is particularly pronounced in light of the removal of Saddam Hussein from office and the probable rise of Shiite dominance in Iraq, which may herald a new era.

The potential outcome of isolating Iran might arise from the development of a stable Iraq that aligns itself with Western values and focuses on economic growth by establishing connections with the Arab Middle East. This scenario becomes more likely if hard-line factions in Iran continue to acquire influence and if ties between Iran and the United States remain strained. By competing for the expanding oil export market, an Iraq that supports the United States would likewise have enormous influence over Iranian economic interests [2].

Several media sources, which are owned and financially supported by Iran, employ a discourse aimed at augmenting Iranian influence within Iraq. These institutions have gained significant recognition both domestically and internationally. Among them are the "Al-Itijah" channel, which is associated with the Iraqi Hezbollah militia, the "Al-Nujaba" channel, affiliated with the al-Nujaba faction that is actively involved in the Syrian conflict, the "Al-Ghadir" channel, which is linked to the Badr Organization faction, and the "Al-Ahed 1" and "Al-Ahed 2" channels, associated with the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq faction, which has also participated in the Syrian conflict [25]. In actuality, the main goal of these media outlets is to propagate Iranian discourse for Wilayat al-Faqih (Ayatollah Khomeini) to be included in newscasts. As a means of obtaining political allegiance on a sectarian basis, these Iranian media outlets in Iraq play a significant part in the sectarian polarization of Iraqi Shiites [3].

Religious tourism has inherent linkages with both political and commercial aspects. Ahmed and Massad (2009) assert that a considerable proportion of Iranian pilgrims, over 40,000 individuals, partake in pilgrimages to the Shiite shrines situated in the Iraqi municipalities of Najaf, Kazimiyah, and Karbala. Likewise, a significant proportion of Iraqi individuals engage in pilgrimages to the Shiite shrines located in the Iranian cities of Qum and Mashhad [3]. Pilgrims make a significant economic impact on the local community through their utilization of various hospitality establishments such as hotels, restaurants, transportation services, and other enterprises associated with the tourist industry. According to Lee, it has been stated that the Iranian government provides an annual contribution of approximately \$20 million towards the development of tourism infrastructure in the city of Najaf [3]. Iranian religious institutes and construction businesses are hard at work building mosques, schools, and clinics in Baghdad, Najaf, and other Shi'a-populated localities.

#### **4. IRNIAN ECONOMIC INTERESTES IN IRAQ**

Since Saddam Hussein's administration fell, there has been a major improvement in the economic links between Iran and Iraq. Iran is undoubtedly a crucial economic partner for Iraq alongside Turkey, and trading between the two nations has increased by about 30% since 2003 [3]. Iran's main objective was to increase the size of the Iraqi market for Iranian goods in order to lessen the effects of the economic

sanctions placed on Iran by the United States and other Western nations due to its nuclear aspirations [26]. The bilateral trade between Iran and Iraq has experienced a substantial increase over the years. Specifically, the trade volume rose from \$1.5 billion in 2006 to \$2.8 billion in 2007, further reaching \$4 billion in early 2009, and eventually reaching \$11 billion in 2012 [3]. Major investments from Iranian state-owned companies are being made in the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, the locations of some of the most significant Shi'a sites. A free trade zone has been established between the two countries all around Basra. In 2010, business between the two nations was \$88 billion. Additionally, Tehran has spent about \$300 million on the reconstruction of Iraq, and numerous other contracts have been made in the areas of safety, education, manufacturing, transportation, and tradition [3]. Iranian currency is also widely accepted in the southern cities of Iraq.

On the other side, Iraq's growth as a global oil giant would boost Iraqi lawmakers' independence and lessen Iran's influence there. According to Maggiolini [22], oil wealth may change Iran-Iraq relations. Baghdad's increasingly forceful position inside OPEC and the region will have a profound impact on the regional power dynamics between these two countries. Iraq would also be an OPEC competitor to Iran should the international sanctions against it be lifted. In light of this, the IRIS panelists emphasized their anticipation of a larger Iranian influence in the oil and political sectors of Iraq and the KRG [27]. The possibility of competition for dominance in the region's oil exports, which Iran depends on to support its ailing economy, is one further reason for Iranian concern over a stable Iraq. Iran's economic stability is contingent upon the advantageous nature of high oil prices. However, the nation's structural economy is vulnerable due to inefficiencies, corruption, and a dearth of foreign investment. Despite possessing the second-largest oil reserves globally, a significant number of the country's aging oil fields necessitate fresh expenditures to sustain output. It is predicted that the oil sector will require a substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) of up to \$17 billion [2].

Iran's authorities appear to have decided that they can survive the diplomatic pressure being put on them by the US, Europe, and many IAEA members and that Iran will have the will and resources to withstand sanctions even if they are implemented [2]. As a result, Iran and a strong Iraq will likely have some competition in the oil sector. While the fact that both nations are significant energy producers does make them economically competitive, they also share a common goal of regional stability, which will give them both the greatest possible access to global markets for their exports [2].

Iran uses its relationships with the post-2003 Iraqi government to its economic benefit because Iraq has emerged as Iran's most significant non-oil export market. The two nations decided to double the amount of electricity exported to Iraq from 400 to 1000 megawatts [3]. By providing Iraq with the natural gas it needs to run its power plants, Iran also uses soft power in that country [28].

## **5. USING IRAQ AS A BASE TO INTERVENE IN REGIONAL ISSUES**

The alignment of its position in Iraq was intricately linked to Iran's strategic objectives of assuming a more prominent role in the Gulf region that is commensurate with its political, economic, and military capacities, as well as its geopolitical significance [26]. Iraq serves as a crucial conduit for Iran, establishing a terrestrial link to its supporters in Syria and Lebanon, thus demarcating Syria's eastern and western boundaries. The establishment of a land connection has facilitated the movement of armed groups, backed by Iran, across three countries. This movement is in response to perceived threats against the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" in the region. These concerns emerged following the onset of the Syrian War in 2011 and the rise of Daesh in 2014 [29].



Iran's approach to Iraq has taken on a new twist as a result of Syria's situation. Iran's latest goal in the region is to stop Syrian Sunnis from overthrowing the Assad government, which is regarded as its sole Arab ally. Iran's direct foray into Syria was made simpler by the close relations between Iran and Iraq and Iran's clear influence over Iraqi leaders. This entailed sending military equipment and personnel into Syria to support the Syrian Baath administration. Iran, on the other hand, stopped providing weapons and ammunition to the Syrian opposition groups as it tightened its control over the Iraqi-Syrian border. Furthermore, Tehran made every effort to influence and even compel the Iraqi government to back the Assad regime militarily and covertly [30]. Some Iraqi decision-makers are becoming more uncomfortable as a result of the Syrian upheaval. Due to the potential for conflict to spill over into its borders and destabilize its government, Iraq has different interests from Iran's position of backing the Assad administration. Baghdad's conflicting response to the Syrian crisis is also harming Iraq's relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, mirroring the internal divisions within the Iraqi government regarding the existence of the state [22].

Regional rivals of Iran in Iraq are the main barrier. Rival nations like Saudi Arabia and Turkey are stepping up their efforts in Iraq. Additionally, the regional axis that opposes Iran is working to reduce Iran's influence in the region. In order to compete with rivals in the region like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the Iranians must effectively influence Iraq and make it their closest friend [29], [31].

Obama's policy of American and Iranian convergence confined Iran's influence in the Arab world to activities that served its national interests and did not pose a danger to those of the United States, particularly after Iran had assurances that the United States would stand by it. The expansion of Iranian influence in the Arab region has been seen in light of the ongoing geopolitical tensions between the United States and Iran during the tenure of President Trump. Iran has notably escalated its involvement in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, both politically and militarily. The utilization of Iran as a means to apply pressure by the United States during the presidency of Trump has led to an escalation in the threat posed to American interests [6].

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study applied realism and neorealism approaches to assess and explain Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq post-2003. Where, such article has explored the nature of the fundamental variables that have significantly influenced Iranian foreign policy, focusing on its stance toward Iraq in the post-2003 era. This article identified some significant findings which are:

- A. Since the toppling of Saddam Hussein, there has been a significant improvement in the relations between Iran and Iraq. The ease with which Iraqi dissidents, who had established long-standing connections with the Iranian regime, were able to assume power in Baghdad can be attributed to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The coalition forces ensured that political formations characterized by robust Shi'ite and Kurdish affiliations would assume authority over the newly established government through the complete overthrow of the Ba'athist state, the conduct of elections, and the deliberate promotion of sectarianism, as exemplified in the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC).
- B. Although information about Iran's policy in Iraq comes from a variety of sources, most of them agree on the two basic goals. Preventing Iraq from endangering Iran's position in the region on a national, political, military, economic, and religious level was the first and most important priority. Iran's main objective was to prevent the US from attacking Tehran; its other objectives included limiting US influence in Iraq and distracting the US.

- C. Iranian engagement in Iraq dates back a long time. If Iran's strategic interests are threatened, it may opt to become a more significant and aggressive (and murderous) actor. Iran has decided to intervene thus far mostly through soft power and religious alliances. Iran is highly motivated to influence events in Iraq and possesses both powerful hard power and soft power capabilities. Despite its relatively modest official military capabilities relative to its size, Iran possesses the capacity to deploy a substantial quantity of troops and equipment into Iraq, should it determine that such action would serve its strategic goals. The enduring historical and cultural ties between Iran and Iraq have endowed Iran with a notable capacity to exert influence over both the political establishment and the broader populace in Iraq.
- D. Iran was attempting to take control of the region by interfering in local conflicts in places like Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran also tries to compete with other regional countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey through its robust presence in Iraq.
- E. Due to the democratic process implemented by the United States in Iraq, which resulted in the establishment of a Shiite government, it seems unlikely that Iraq will be capable of posing a significant danger to Iran in the foreseeable future, perhaps spanning several decades, after the American invasion in 2003. The exclusion of political and demographic factors played a significant role in influencing the political landscape in Iraq, as it fostered a more favorable relationship with Tehran in comparison to Washington.
- F. Iran uses backing for armed groups as a tool for its foreign policy. Iran has assisted in establishing various groups in Iraq and has given them money and weapons to grow into strong-armed organizations and political forces. These organizations have earned seats in national legislative elections, positions in government cabinets, and a sizable amount of political legitimacy.
- G. Iran has made efforts to influence Iraq and try to lessen American influence there. By transforming pro-Iranian military wings into substantial political forces and sources of armed force, Iran aims to influence the decisions made by the Iraqi government and strengthen its position of influence.
- H. The situation in the global arena now demonstrates the necessity of addressing both soft and hard power concurrently rather than separately. Both hard and soft power frequently interact and support one another. Both have a connection to one another in the end since they both show the capacity to influence others' behavior in order to accomplish the desired objective. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq facilitated Iran's consolidation of power within the country, enabling it to leverage Iraq as a conduit for expanding its influence throughout the broader Arab region. Iraq served as a formidable barrier and safeguard, shielding Iran's interests and providing a protective barrier.

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