



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

Research Commons

<http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/>

## Research Commons at the University of Waikato

### Copyright Statement:

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

The thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of the thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from the thesis.

**A Structural Realist Assessment of the Strategic Competition  
between the US and Iran in Iraq from 2003-2016**

**Avish Anutosh Ram**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Social Science at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.**

**May 2022**

## **Abstract**

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 sparked a competition between two major Middle Eastern powers, the US and Iran, for influence in the former Ba'athist dictatorship. For the US, influencing Iraq would reinforce its position, strengthen Washington's security in the international system by turning a former enemy into an ally, and provide the US with the ability to engage Iran, its chief rival more effectively by positioning itself right on Tehran's border. It would also help secure its border by ensuring that Baghdad would never rise to threaten Tehran's national security in the future and decrease American power in the wider region while enhancing its own capabilities in the Middle East. To interrogate this competition, this thesis investigates the strategic competition between the US and Iran from 2003-2016 through the lens of structural realism (and its offensive and defensive sub-variants) examines the tactics, actors and policies adopted by each side in their quest to gain an advantage over the other. It finds, ultimately, that Iran proved to be more successful than the US in acquiring a position of relative strength in Iraq.

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Reuben Steff for his insightful and outstanding guidance in helping me to complete this thesis. His time and efforts were instrumental in the completion of this research

I would also like to thank my parents for giving me the drive, encouragement, and support to accomplish bold new tasks every day.

.

## Abbreviations

AAH	Asaib Ahl-Haq
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CTEF	Counter ISIS Train and Equip Fund
CTS	Counterterrorism Service
ISF	Iraq Security Forces
IR	International Relations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IRGC	Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KH	Kata'ib Hezbollah
MOIS	Iran's Ministry of Intelligence
NSS	National Security Statement
PM	Prime Minister
PMF	Popular Mobilisation Forces
QF	Quds Force
SCIRI	Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SOFA	Status of Force Agreement
SFA	Strategic Framework Agreement
SOJTF-OIR	Special Operations Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve

US United States

UIA United Iraq Alliance

# Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iv
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	v
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter One: Theoretical Approach to US–Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq</b>	
Introduction.....	4
Liberalism.....	4
Liberal Interpretations of US-Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq .....	6
Constructivism.....	7
Constructivist Interpretations of US-Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq.....	8
Structural Realism.....	9
Usefulness of Structural Realism US-Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq.....	11
The Bush Doctrine and Realism in Iraq.....	13
The Obama Doctrine and Realism in Iraq.....	16
Iranian Policy in Iraq and Realism.....	19
Countering US Presence in Iraq.....	20
Conclusion.....	21
<b>Chapter Two: US-Iranian Strategic Objectives in Iraq (2003-2016)</b>	
Introduction.....	23
A Brief History of US-Iranian Relations.....	23
US Objectives in Iraq.....	24
Reducing Iran’s Influence. ....	24
Combating Islamic Terrorism by Supporting the Iraqi Army.....	26
Interpreting US Strategic Interests through Structural Realism.....	27
Iranian Strategic Objectives in Iraq.....	28

Eliminating the US Influence in Iraq.....	28
Influencing Iraq through Politics and Militias.....	30
Interpreting Iranian Strategic Interests through Structural Realism.....	32
Conclusion.....	33

**Chapter Three: US-Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq in the Political and Military Arena (2003-2016)**

Introduction.....	35
US Political Influence in Iraq.....	35
US Military Influence in Iraq.....	40
US Influence Through Structural Realism.....	43
Iranian Political and Security Influence in Iraq.....	44
Iran’s Political Influence.....	44
Iran’s Security Influence in Iraq.....	46
Qassem Soleimani and the Quds Force.....	49
Analysis of Iranian Influence Through Structural Realism.....	52
Conclusion.....	52

**Chapter Four: ISIS and the US–Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq (2003-2016)**

Introduction.....	54
The Rise of ISIS.....	54
The US Response to ISIS’s Rise in Iraq.....	56
Iran’s Response to ISIS’S Rise in Iraq .....	58
ISIS’s Impact on US-Iranian Competition from 2014-2016.....	61
Conclusion .....	63

**Conclusion.....** 64

**References.....** 67

## **Introduction**

On March 20th, 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and ushered in a new era of foreign interference in the former Ba'athist republic. With the removal of Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, the US demonstrated its military might in front of a worldwide audience and hoped to enhance the US's credibility and influence throughout the broader Middle East region. While the US articulated many reasons for the invasion, including the need to destroy Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that the invasion would usher in a pro-Western democracy that could create a positive domino-like effect throughout the region, the aftermath of the invasion proved to be a golden opportunity for the Islamic Republic of Iran, America's principal regional enemy in the Middle East. The chaos following the American invasion provided Iran with the opportunity to dominate its once potent enemy and significantly weaken Iraq to a degree where it could not threaten the Iran's national security. Since 2003, Iraq has become a battleground for power and influence between two competing powers: the US and Iran. Both have used a range of military, political, diplomatic, and economic strategies to influence Iraq's evolution while simultaneously attempting to gain a competitive advantage over each other.

Iraq is a geopolitically important state that has the potential to provide both the US and Iran with political advantages in the region. Successfully turning Iraq into an ally further isolates the other competitor and further diminishes the opponent's power in a region where both powers are competing for supremacy in the Middle East. Iraq's ownership of large, proven oil reserves (approximately 145 billion barrels) provides both America and Iran with an economic advantage derived from cementing good relations with the Shiite majority nation. Iraq's incorporation into the political system of whatever country dominates it also has the potential to have a domino effect throughout the broader region (Iraq, 2021).

This thesis investigates the strategic competition between the US and Iran in Iraq from 2003 to 2016. It employs the international relations theory of structural realism as the guiding framework through which to analyse the strategic competition between the US and Iran in Iraq. Structural realism, as an international relations (IR) theory, has two primary branches: offensive and defensive realism. (Taliaferro, 2000) The strategic competition between Iraq and the US are analysed via these realist variants.

## *Scope of the Thesis*

Structural realism, offensive realism, and defensive realism are used in this thesis to answer two key questions:

1. To what degree has Iran been successful in implementing its foreign policy objectives in Iraq?
2. What are the differences in the strategies used to counter Iran between the Bush and Obama administrations?

Chapter one provides a brief history of the hostility that existed between the US, Iraq, and Iran; outlines structural realism; discusses the definitions and parameters of the two branches of structural realism, offensive and defensive realism; and considers how each theory contributes to the explanation of the regional security environment and the foreign policies of the US and Iran in Iraq. It also provides an explanation as to why the theoretical framework of structural realism can most competently explain the hostility between the US and Iran in Iraq. Furthermore, this chapter analyses both the specific foreign policy doctrines and worldviews of President Bush and President Obama and Iran's foreign policy during the years 2003-2016.

Chapter two examines the overall objectives of the US and Iran in Iraq and in so doing helps with the interpretation of US and Iranian actions in subsequent chapters. The chapter dissects the strategic objectives of the two, peer competitors using offensive and defensive realism in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the specific foreign policy actions taken by the two peer competitors—as examined in the next chapter—and provides useful insights into the criteria required for both sides to be successful.

Chapter three examines and investigates the strategies utilised, tactics employed, and actions taken by the US and Iran in Iraq during the timeframe covered in this research. The strategies undertaken by the US and Iran are first assessed under two specific paradigms: military and political; and then according to how the US and Iran have competed in the three paradigms mentioned above. A detailed analytical examination of the relationship between the US/Iranian foreign policy actions in Iraq in terms of the two branches of structural realism then follows.

Chapter four explores the rise of the terrorist group ISIS as a case study and studies its impact on the strategic competition between the US and Iran. This exploration is followed by

an investigation into the rise of Iranian non-state proxies as power brokers and major actors in Iraq's national security, political, and economic fabric.

The final chapter of this thesis presents the study's findings on the level of success achieved by the US in countering Iran in Iraq. The conclusion measures the success or failure of American foreign policy in each of the three areas noted above and compares these with the results for Iran's level of success. The concluding chapter also compares the records of Presidents Bush and Obama on Iran and reaches final conclusions regarding the effectiveness of each President's doctrine.

## **Chapter One**

# **Theoretical Approach to US–Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq**

### **Introduction**

Understanding the behaviour of a regional power towards its peer competitors within the parameters of a system requires a theory of international relations (IR) to comprehensively dissect the inevitable regional competition. This chapter introduces three significant branches of IR and outlines structural realism as the primary theoretical framework in investigating strategic competition between the US and Iran in Iraq from 2003-2016. The discussion on which theoretical approach to undertake is then further expanded upon through the exploration of constructivism and liberalism, along with the reasons why these competing strands of IR are not considered in this thesis.

Chapter one provides a general assessment not only of the two branches of structural realism (offensive and defensive realism) but also what each branch contributes towards explaining the US and Iranian geostrategic competition in Iraq. This chapter discusses in detail the overall foreign policy doctrines of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama and how their respective approaches have contributed to America's overall posture in Iraq. In addition, the chapter also discusses the nature of Iranian foreign policy and its application in Iraq and towards the US. The next chapter will discuss the specific strategies and foreign policy actions utilised by the US and Iran in Iraq in the political and military spheres.

### ***Liberalism***

Liberalism is a theory of international relations whose fundamental premise suggests that the relationship between states and the surrounding and transnational society in which they are embedded critically shape state behaviour by influencing the social purpose underlying state preferences (Moravcsik, 1997). Liberalism as a theory focuses on the interdependence of states on three critical levels: their cultural, economic, and fiscal

relationships. While realism focuses on competition and alliances as a function of competition, liberalism emphasises cooperation to achieve mutually desired outcomes. To liberals, international interactions are not a zero-sum game where relative gains and losses matter; all actors can benefit collectively, and absolute gains are the focus. Liberalism has three fundamental assumptions, the first assumption being the primacy of societal actors. The core assumption in liberal international relations theory is that members of civil society are significant actors in a state understood to promote their independent interests (Moravcsik, p. 517).

The second assumption concerns representation and state preferences. This assumption dictates that government represents aspects of society, whose interests are reflected in state policy. Liberalism places institutions at the centre of the government and society and sees it as the primary mechanism for the representation of social interests (Moravcsik, p. 9). The third core assumption deals with interdependence and the international system. The behaviour of states, and hence the level of international conflict and cooperation, reflects the nature of state preferences. Liberal analysis of international relations theorises the presence of patterns of conflicting or converging state preferences which reflect the social context of the state. Liberalism identifies one major negative issue in international politics: war. To solve the issue of war, liberals promote democracy as a bedrock for peace and stability in the international arena (Gomichon, 2013). An important thread in liberalism centres on the idea of the 'Democratic Peace Theory'. Based upon a good deal of evidence, this theory argues that democratic states do not go to war against other democracies (Brown et al., 1996). Democracies are biased against resolving disputes violently and instead attempt to take more peaceful avenues of conflict resolution. In democratic states, credible checks and balances, domestic institutional constraints, separation of powers, and the need for public debate exist and these put significant constraints on going to war. Liberalism focuses on creating conditions for the absence of war and puts its faith in the ability of states to avoid paying a costly price by going to war with one another.

Liberalism also promotes economic interdependence. Commercial liberalism hinges on the idea that the cost of disrupting trade through conflict will have adverse impacts on the wellbeing of all the states involved (Zeng, 2020). The advance in globalisation increases the interdependence of economies in the international context. The increase in economic interdependency in IR is spearheaded through global institutions such as the International

Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank that assist in compelling states to cooperate rather than compete with each other.

### *Liberal Interpretations of US–Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq*

The liberal interpretation of the situation in Iraq encourages cooperation between states to maximise prosperity. Liberalism moreover is also coupled to the international liberal order, which refers to the idea that an organised group of state actors since WWII-led by the US, helped direct the interactions of the international community through the promotion of democracy, greater economic discourse, and rules that every state, whether large or small, must adhere to through their international behaviour (Mearsheimer, 2019). Liberalism, which has been the dominant ideology in modern American foreign policy, was spearheaded sharply by the need to aggressively spread democracy and Western values of economic liberalisation and individual human rights across the world (Mearsheimer, 2017).

While the US has been committed to the spread of liberal ideas in authoritarian countries such as Iraq, liberalism fails to provide a convincing explanation for the geopolitics involving the US, Iran, and Iraq. While liberalism would emphasise taking a collaborative approach with opposing sides and the establishment of regional security architectures to solve critical issues of sectarian violence, corruption, human rights abuses, and economic downturn, there has not been any level of deep or sustained cooperation between the US and Iran, as both sides are actively competing to influence key sectors of Iraq's political, social, and economic life rather than cooperating to achieve better solutions.

At its core, the basic tenets of liberalism include upholding the unalienable rights of individuals and fostering human rights as well as free trade; however, the ultimate goal of liberalism is, according to John Mearsheimer (a realist and critic of post-Cold War US foreign policy), to spread democracy around the world (Mearsheimer, 2019). For liberals and neoliberals, democracy promotion is paramount, and, as the leader of the liberal international order, the ultimate goal of the US is to create a world exclusively populated by democracies that are bound together by a set of shared rules (Mello, 2014).

The US, especially during the George W. Bush administration, adopted and sought to apply the democratic peace theory in Iraq; Bush said the US had a vested interest in spreading democracy in the country to create a more democratic Iraq and to spread peace across the

Middle East. In reality, American interests in Iraq are not defined solely, or perhaps even as a first-order objective, through the spread of democracy and human rights in the region. The overarching goal of the United States in the Middle East was to continuing American hegemony in the region and that the Middle East is not dominated by a foreign power hostile to the United States (NSS, 2002). Therefore, the US sought to limit Iran's power in the region. By contrast, Iran wanted to ensure that the US presence in the region is eliminated; thus, creating a hostile environment for the Americans had been Iran's primary goal in Iraq.

Moreover, liberalism fails to address the absence of regional or international institutions in Iraq, as Iraqi politics was dominated more by US and Iranian governments that unite the major external stakeholders and competitors. As such, the ethno-sectarian power structure of Iraq's national politics has seen the presence of Iranian-backed militia groups such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), who exercise authority over large segments of the grassroots population, thus weakening national governance (Alaaldin, 2017). The political ascendancy of Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups also denied international organisations the ability to assist Iraqi society in promoting democracy and liberalisation.

### *Constructivism*

Why are 500 British nuclear weapons less threatening to the US than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons? Quite simply, the answer is that the social relationship between the US and UK is different from that of the US and North Korea: the UK has a history of cooperation and friendship with the US; North Korea does not. Therefore, whereas the weapons themselves do not have any significant meaning or pose any manifest threat, if put in a social context, they come to be perceived as threats.

Alexander Wendt's example of the differences between the US' view of the UK's and North Korea's nuclear weapons noted above contains the fundamental premise as to key tenets of constructivism as an IR theory, because constructivism is an IR theory that sees the world and reality as socially constructed (Theys, 2018). The fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them. Constructivism is first and foremost characterised by an emphasis on intersubjectivity, which is defined as a sharing of experiences between several actors and agents (Dormer, 2017).

Intersubjectivity leads to social facts: the idea that facts exist only by human agreement. As Alexander Wendt put it, the “anarchic character of the international system (and cycle of competition we ascribe to it) exists because we all agree that this is the case” (Pfefferle, 2014). Constructivism not only asserts that socially constructed state identities are the main determinants of state behaviour, but also rejects the assumption that the international system exists in a permanent state of anarchy as reasonable motivation of the state or international actors. Rather, it suggests that it is necessary to consider the identity and concerns of international actors as a central focus of analysis (Thomas, 2019). Constructivism does not predict whether states will be friend or foe. Furthermore, it contradicts the fundamental premise of realism and liberalism in denying that the international structure is grounded in rationality.

### ***Constructivist Interpretations of US–Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq***

Constructivism is not a suitable IR theory to conclusively explain US and Iranian strategic competition in Iraq. The fundamental premise of a constructivist is the idea that the shared identities are responsible for states’ behaviour towards each other, with Wendt’s nuclear weapons scenario serving as a prime example. However, constructivism fails to explain the division between certain segments of Iraq’s population, despite their shared identities. While Iraq and Iran both have Shia majority populations, opposition to Iranian presence in Iraq contradicts a constructivist claim that social identities can accurately define the international relationship between two state actors. The primary reason for US and Iranian competition is grounded in the nature of the regional system and its implications for the security of the US and Iran, as will be explained below.

Furthermore, constructivism is unable to successfully determine the overarching goals of a state like the US or Iran in influencing Iraq in the manner that other theories such as realism do. While constructivism emphasises the importance of placing a relationship between the states in the social context, US actions in Iraq are not predominantly driven through social factors but by security factors (Ikenberry & Deudney, 2017). Culture and ideology did not play as persuasive a role in US and Iranian intervention in Iraq as realism (Hurd, 2008).

## *Structural Realism*

The IR theory that best defines the tenets of US–Iranian hostility in Iraq is structural realism, also known as neorealism. Structural realism is a materialist theory that deals with actors at the international level (Waltz, 1988). Neorealists believe that the external structure of the international system best explains how states behave and they oppose the belief that domestic politics or composition of individual states drives state behaviour in the international system. Structural realism as an IR theory begins with a set of assumptions. First, states are the principal actors in the international system; secondly, the highest goal of states in an international system is survival; and thirdly, states are rational actors capable of making rational decisions (Mearsheimer, p. 9). Establishing these presuppositions, neorealism makes several hypotheses regarding the nature of state behaviour in IR and develops a framework through which future relationships between states can be viewed. It also begins with the assumption that states have the power to use force at any time; therefore, other states must be willing and prepared to defend themselves (Waltz, 1979). The essential quality of the international system in anarchy is the absence of a recognised central authority with the power to govern or regulate state actors (Waltz, 1997, p. 618). This absence of a supreme overlord in the international system compels states in this anarchic system to provide for their own security and deter future adversarial action. Therefore, regional powers have an innate desire to acquire more power for defence to account for the competition in the regional system (Waltz, 1979, p. 620). In an anarchic system, there exists a constant state and fear of war, as the more power a state accumulates, the greater the likelihood of an attack from a peer competitor. This scenario is often termed the security dilemma (Golovics, 2017). The security dilemma is a situation in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security leads to a decrease rather than an increase in the original state's security (Jervis, 1978). There is a wide body of literature on structural realism as a theory and structural realists are not uniform in their beliefs. While the foundations of the theory emphasise competition, neorealism is divided into two main schools of thought (both of which posit that the system is anarchic): offensive realism and defensive realism (Snyder, 2002).

The theory of offensive realism proposed by Professor John Mearsheimer of Chicago University begins with five bedrock assumptions (Mearsheimer, 2001). First, the

international system is anarchic and lacks a higher central authority. Second, great powers possess some military capabilities which give them the ability to cause harm to the others' national security. States such as the United States and Iran, while significantly different in the strength of their armed forces, both possess sufficient military strength to cause significant harm to each other. The third assumption relates to state intentions and contends that, in any given regional or international system, it is impossible to derive the intentions of any given state in the future and impossible to predict whether certain states might attack each other due to unforeseen future events. Furthermore, states' intentions can change rapidly, a factor which only compounds the danger posed by an uncertain future. The fourth assumption is that the primary goal of every great power is survival. Specifically, states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order. Survival is the number one motive of states because, once its security is compromised, it is unlikely that a state will be able to pursue other objectives. The fifth and final assumption is that great powers are rational actors who are aware of the external environment and think strategically about surviving it. In particular, great powers consider the actions of their adversaries and how their actions affect their own survival.

Finally, offensive realists believe that the quest for power is limitless and regional powers pursue as much power as they can in order to gain a tactical advantage over their rivals; ideally, they seek regional hegemony (Snyder, 2002). In contrast, defensive realists assert that the power structure provides states with few incentives to seek additional units of power, thus making the argument that regional powers seek to maintain the existing balance of power by preserving their place in a given system. Therefore, compromise and cooperation are possible between even seemingly hostile states. If states take action to show that they can recognise one another's defensive intentions, the security dilemma can be overcome. Offensive realists oppose this argument, believing that status quo states are hardly found in international relations and states are incentivised to obtain additional increments of power and seek hegemony in a system despite the consequences (Snyder, 2002, p. 152). To offensive realists then there is no security dilemma; the only option is to maximise power.

The core tenets of realist theory regarding the state of regional competition between peer competitors place structural realism in an ideal position to decipher the actions as well as the hostile relationship between the US and Iran. The theory accurately describes the behaviour of the Islamic Republic of Iran by correctly concluding that, through the expansion of its influence in the region through support for Shiite armed groups throughout the region

such as Hezbollah and Hamas and the acceleration of its nuclear programme, the theocracy is dedicated to ensuring its survival in a region characterised by turmoil (Trevino, 2013).

### ***The Usefulness of Realism in US–Iranian Competition in Iraq***

The theory that best defines US–Iranian strategic competition in Iraq is structural realism. The strengths of this theory lie first and foremost in the basic tenets of its principles and its ability to comprehensively describe the actions and the geopolitical context surrounding US and Iranian competition in Iraq.

Offensive realism posits that states in the international system operate in anarchy and that the highest priority of any state in the international system is survival. As there is no higher power in the international system who can regulate interstate relations, a state is responsible for its own protection. While all state actors have some military capabilities, some states have a lot of offensive capabilities. The goal of every state is to ensure that it is surrounded by weak countries which do not have malign intentions towards each other. The final feature of offensive realism includes intentions. As it is impossible to define the future intentions of states in any regional system, states in a regional system intend to dominate their region of the world more effectively than any other states can in order to prevent being threatened themselves.

These characteristics are evidently observed within US–Iranian strategic competition in Iraq. Iranian and Iraqi relations fulfil all of the fundamental characteristics of offensive realism. The two Shia majority countries share a border and have traditionally had hostile relations towards one another. In the absence of a higher regional power in the Middle East, the Iranian regime has sought to accumulate as much power as possible to ensure its survival. After the fall of Iraq, Iran's accumulation of power in Iraq through political, economic, and military means evidences the Islamic Republic's weariness of Iraq's historic hostile intentions towards it. Iran also possesses strong military capabilities and is attempting to dominate its neighbour and former enemy, while also ensuring that Iraq is never able to challenge Iran.

The United States is the most powerful country in the world and has historically had combative intentions towards Iran. The US has historically shown that it does not tolerate peer competitors in any major region of the world. In the 20th century, the US had four strategic competitors: Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and The Soviet

Union (Mearsheimer, p. 27). Defeating all rivals to its position as the regional hegemon, allowed it, for a period of time after 1991, to arguably become the global hegemon. America also opposes the rise of Iran in the Middle East. The key strategic objective of the US is to ensure that Iran is never in a position to challenge American objectives in the region by geographically isolating it.

Offensive realism complements defensive realism—the other major branch of neorealism—in its explanation of US–Iranian geopolitical competition in Iraq. Both divisions of structural realism share the common belief that the primary goal of any state in the international system is survival (Waltz, 2000). However, defensive realism has major shortcomings when describing US, Iranian, and Iraqi relations. For defensive realists, the expansion of state power can only be possible under certain conditions, and powerful states ought to pursue moderate strategies such as military, political, and economic policies that communicate restraint (Taliaferro, 2001). However, defensive realism falls short of comprehensively describing the geopolitical situation in Iraq. Throughout 2003-2016, Iran did not show restraint in its policies towards eliminating the US’s influence in Iraq (Falk, 2021). Tehran did not preserve the status quo and did not have a limit to the amount of power it wanted to gain. Therefore, the actions of Iran are more succinctly aligned with the branch of offensive realism which accurately theorises the pursuit of hegemony in the international and regional system (Mearsheimer, p. 2).

While offensive realism is the theoretical framework used to define Iran’s actions in Iraq, the analysis of US foreign policy could also be described through the lens of defensive realism. Since the beginning of the Obama administration, the US had adopted a hand off approach from Iraq. Obama had also stated that Saudi Arabia needed to share the Middle East with Iran (Goldberg, 2016). Obama’s view on sharing the region offers an insight into how the president viewed the regions geopolitics as a whole and can be translated as to how he viewed Iraq. Obama’s also envisioned a change in behaviour from Iran through hard diplomacy (Gordon & Zeleny, 2007). Obama’s recognition of Iranian power in Iraq through his plan to stabilize Iraq by negotiating with Iran demonstrated the presence of defensive realism.

From direct engagement with Shiite militias and enemy combatants, to the Iranian regime’s economic funding of Shia militias, the strategies utilised by each side in its pursuit of a competitive advantage over the other will be discussed in chapters three and four.

## *Realism and the Bush Doctrine*

From a realist perspective George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq was a product of liberal ideology. Prominent realists such as John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, Stephen Walt, Christopher Layne, and Michael Desch opposed the war and placed the blame for the war squarely on America's goal in advancing increasingly ambitious goals of democracy promotion and regime change (Ikenberry & Deudney, 2017). Furthermore, just prior to the war, a number of realists paid for an ad in the New York Times that

According to John Mearsheimer, the invasion was a result of the neoconservative ideology imbedded in the Bush Doctrine. Neoconservatism, as defined by Mearsheimer (2005), was "Wilsonianism with teeth", which is to suggest that the Bush Doctrine was akin to Wilsonianism, a form of liberal internationalism derived from the policies of Woodrow Wilson. Wilsonianism and neoconservatism correctly believed that the US has a remarkably powerful military which could be used to reshape the nation's interests. The Bush Doctrine fundamentally believed that the US military was the primary vehicle through which to assert the nation's dominance and to challenge other regional powers in the Middle East such as Iran. The 2003-2011 Iraq War was a hegemonic-realist war (Ikenberry & Deudney, p. 16). According to Mearsheimer (2005), this is why unilateralism is favoured above multilateralism in the Bush Doctrine.

The Iraq War of 2003 is a manifestation of the Bush Doctrine, the collective and interrelated foreign policy principles of the President Bush. Applying a theoretical framework to US-Iranian strategic competition in Iraq requires an understanding of the Bush Doctrine and its potential relationship to structural realism. The Bush Doctrine has four elements: a strong belief in the importance of a state's domestic regime in determining its foreign policy; the notion of commencing a war for the goal of defeating a dangerous adversary who poses an imminent and unavoidable threat to the US; a willingness to act unilaterally as opposed to multilaterally; and an overriding sense that peace and stability required the US to assert its primacy over world politics (Jervis, 2003). However, the tenets of the Bush Doctrine are not entirely consistent in terms of matching with any one particular theory of international

relations; rather, the doctrine relates to multiple branches of the international relations theories.

The first tenet of the Bush Doctrine fits into the liberal branch of international relations. Liberalism postulates the presence of human rights, democracy, free trade, and international cooperation as the guiding principles of the international system. For the Bush administration, encouraging democracy would not only produce democracy in Iraq, but spread to neighbouring countries, creating a domino effect in the Middle East (Jervis, p. 367). The domino-like effect would have severe repercussions for countries such as Iran. Emboldening the 'freedom fighters' in the Middle East would also put on notice US enemies such as Iran and galvanise the anti-Iranian sentiment within the country's borders. The first tenet of the Bush Doctrine does not correspond with the theory of structural realism.

The second tenet of the Bush Doctrine deals with defeating an enemy through preventive war. The right to launch a pre-emptive strike against an urgent and imminent threat to the nation has been the national security strategy for most American presidents; however, the Bush Doctrine went further than the traditional understanding of the concept of a preventative war (Steinberg et al., 2002). George Bush's pre-emptive strike policy broadened his version of the preventative war theory by stating that force may be applied towards countries that might not imminently threaten American security, but which possessed the potential to 'gather' or grow in threat over time (Steinberg et al., 2002). The principle of preventative war had national security implications for Iraq as well as for the Islamic Republic. The Bush administration's perception that Iraq's supposed nuclear capabilities might threaten US sovereignty in the future reinforced its decision to deal with this threat with an American invasion. The rationale of preventative war was a clear threat to Iran because the Islamic Republic met all the required criteria for a possible US invasion of Iran. As with Iraq, Washington identified Tehran as a global sponsor of terrorism by including it in its axis of evil list. Furthermore, the Bush administration had also made the procurement of nuclear weapons a central cause of its interventionist policy. In 2003 and throughout the Iraq War, Tehran was actively attempting to develop nuclear weapons technology. The preventative war principle of the Bush Doctrine was therefore a direct threat to Iran's national security and the invasion of Iraq set a dangerous precedent that Iran could be invaded next.

Bush's iteration of preventative war is a concept that can be explained through John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism. In offensive realism, each state aims to possess at

least some military capabilities, and more powerful states aim to possess a lot of military capability. Offensive realism also assumes that the primary driver of a state's objectives is security from external threats. Bush's preventative war adheres to offensive realist principles because the notion of applying force against other countries that do not pose an imminent threat is an example of a state seeking security in an anarchic global system. Offensive realists also believe that, for regional hegemons, the hunger for power is insatiable and major powers often seek to add additional increments of power in order to gain a competitive advantage over their rivals. Despite the opposition from many realists to the Bush invasion, preventative war is an example of a regional hegemon such as the US attempting to increase its power over its geostrategic rivals in the Middle East: Iran and Iraq. The Bush version of preventative war included credible military action against combatant states such as Iran and Iraq, and likely military action against both nations serve as the perfect example of states whose search for power is insatiable.

The third tenet of the Bush Doctrine posited the advancement of American foreign policy through unilateralism, the practice of taking independent action without regard for support from the nation's allies. Unilateralism possesses characteristics of realism and prominently of offensive realism. Bush's unilateralist approach to American action in the international arena stemmed from a strong belief that the US possessed enough soft and hard power to dominate the international order by enforcing its own set of rules on others while maintaining a different set for itself as the custodians of a rules-based system (Tallbot, 2007). The inherent need to dominate any regional or international system is a core tenet of offensive realism which posits that dominating fellow, peer competitors is vital to a nation's safety and security. Realism posits that states are rational actors who make rational decisions for the advancement of their own national interest. In offensive realism, the pursuit of the national interest includes competing for increments of power against rival competitors in order to gain an advantage. Unilateralism is by definition the relentless pursuit of one's national interests and objectives without regard for the foreign policy priorities of one's allies. Realism also dictates that there are few opportunities to cooperate in the international system and therefore that a state must enforce its power on other states in order to survive in an anarchic system.

The final tenet of the Bush Doctrine is the establishment and continued operation of an American hegemony. The establishment of an American hegemony was discussed clearly in the 2002 National Security Statement (NSS) which stated, "America

intends to keep military strength beyond challenge – thereby limiting peer competition to trade and the pursuit of peace” (Jervis, p. 376). The architects of the Iraq War: Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, and Vice-President Dick Cheney were associated with efforts a post-Cold War American grand strategy centred on the maintenance of American primacy and preventing the emergence of a rival power (Tyler, 1992). A 1992 document by then Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney articulated the country’s position to dissuade peer competitors from aspiring to pursuing a greater military posture as peer competitors (Tyler, 1992).

The Bush Doctrine’s links to American hegemony are grounded in the exercise of unilateralism. Under George W. Bush’s reign, unilateral action in the pursuit of US foreign policy goals became the new American stance. The foundation of American unilateralism was the September 11 attacks on the twin towers that precipitated lone action and the absolute pursuit of hegemony (Jervis, p. 379). According to Jervis, the American hegemony aspect of the Bush Doctrine is part of the realist outlook on power (Jervis, p. 380). In a realist’s outlook, power is checked most effectively by a counterbalancing power. America’s dominance as a superpower gives the US the ability to dictate the terms, such as spreading democracy and liberalism to the world. Absolute power also enables the US to act in ways that would frighten or distress others. The realists’ outlook on the Bush Doctrine’s final phase also stresses that even states that find the status quo acceptable have to worry about the future. The more satisfied an actor is with the status quo, the more it will expect it to get worse. Therefore, a state such as the US is prone to pursuing a hegemony that is motivated by the psychological need to insulate itself from its peer competitors. In Iraq, the country’s authoritarian regime would prove too menacing for American values in the international system; consequently, a strong American intervention was necessary to eliminate such grave threats to the US’s vision of a peaceful international system. The final tenet of the Bush Doctrine has direct implications not just for Iraq, but also for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The invasion of Iraq moved the US closer to achieving its goal.

### ***Realism and the Obama Doctrine in Iraq***

President Obama’s Doctrine regarding the Iraq war could be placed in the camp of defensive realism. An ardent critic of the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq, Obama wanted an end to ‘dumb’ wars in favour of nation-building efforts at home (Fitzgerald

& Ryan, 2014). However, President Obama's thinking on the Iraq War is understood through his overarching foreign policy doctrine. While Obama's Iraqi withdrawal demonstrated the forty-fourth president's lack of desire to engage with Iraq in countering Iran directly on the ground, his overall foreign policy thinking does suggest his foreign policy to fall in the defensive realist's camp.

The Obama Doctrine was based on the premise that there existed a 'foreign policy establishment', or "The Blob", that held a consensus view on the American approach to dealing with conflicts. Central to Obama's Doctrine was his powerful desire not to use the US military as the country's primary foreign policy tool. According to Obama, US foreign policy was rooted in self-destructive military adventurism that was repeated in an endless cycle that caused the ills of American foreign policy (Goldberg, 2016). President Obama scorned the use of the military as the primary vehicle of foreign policy and strongly believed that the army was not a useful tool of foreign policy that could be relied upon to solve all of America's problems. This reluctance to use military force to achieve American foreign policy goals is a defensive realist principle. Defensive realism states that there are limits to the amount of power that can be held by a state. Since Obama's worldview states that US power was finite and so was the US's ability to control events around the world, the 44<sup>th</sup> President's view on Iraq was akin to defensive realism (Obama, 2006). Obama also demonstrated his defensive realist ideology by outlining his intention to rely more on diplomacy and less on military force by saying: "Our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint" (Delman, 2016).

Although Obama's views on Iraq were enigmatic, they did reflect his overall foreign policy doctrine throughout his term as President of the US. In Obama's view, US foreign policy was trapped in a mainstream foreign policy establishment that operated in a groupthink that pursued an aggressive foreign policy in the post 9/11 world (Drezner, 2020). This foreign policy establishment had stagnated America's options abroad in a way that it became impossible to break free from. To Obama, the war in Iraq was seen as an example of the Blob approved wars.

President Obama viewed the Bush Doctrine as an extension of the Cold War foreign policies of Ronald Reagan. He criticised his predecessor's policies in his book, the *Audacity of Hope* in which he describes the Bush Doctrine as "the assortment of outdated policies from

eras gone by, dusted off, slapped together and with new labels affixed. Reagan's 'Evil Empire' was now the 'Axis of Evil'" (Obama, p. 292). Obama postulated that the security environment America faced after the 9/11 terror attacks was fundamentally different from the one that existed prior to the downfall of the Soviet Union (Obama, 2006). The Cold War security environment was characterised by a conventional enemy that could field large armies, deploy powerful arsenals, and invade key territories, thus restricting American access to valuable resources. The post 9/11 world in Obama's view was substantially different as nation states surrendered their monopoly on mass violence because as nation states they were significantly less likely to launch a direct attack on the US as opposed striking at transnational terror groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is with this thought that President Obama opposed the military invasion of Iraq, seeing the incursion as part of a Cold War policy. For Obama, the flexing of traditional American military seeks only to marginalise the US's image in the eyes of the international community particularly in the Middle East (Obama, p. 383). The US military's invasion of Iraq hindered America's broader goals by increasing anti-American sentiment in the Middle East, and the presence of the armed forces only aids terrorist organisations in the recruitment and expansion of its terror networks. The US presence in Iraq not only put the lives of American troops in danger, but also gave the impression of unbound American imperialism at work. Furthermore, President Obama saw the US invasion of Iraq as an example of American policy being stuck in a perpetual cycle of war against Muslim majority countries (Miller, 2017).

Obama's Iraq policy was also impacted by the Obama Administration's "Pivot to Asia" policy (Davidson, 2014). This policy was Obama's signature foreign policy doctrine which emphasised the need to shift American foreign policy attention towards the Indo-Pacific region while strategically shifting away from the Middle East, as the administration viewed the Indo-Pacific as the new centre of economic and political gravity for the 21st century. It was essential to the US's future prosperity to elevate Washington's engagement there and this policy also acted as an opportunity to confront the rising threat posed by China (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). In an article by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the pivot to Asia was described as the place where the future of global politics would be decided, with initiatives such as sustainability, security, economic cooperation, and climate change being several topics of cooperation between the US and other Indo-Pacific nations such as China, India, and Indonesia (Clinton, 2011).

The rebalance sought to shift the primary theatre of American foreign policy from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region. For the Obama administration, Iraq, and by extension the Middle East, was never a top priority, as the US government recognised that the nation had overextended its hand in the region (Gerges, 2012). American focus on Asia rededicated resources away from the Middle East. Even if the pivot to Asia was criticised by many as failing to shift sufficient resources, it was a statement of intent by the Obama administration that US focus was shifting – and resources would eventually follow – away from the Middle East.

### ***Iranian Policy in Iraq and Realism***

Iran's foreign policy doctrine towards its neighbour Iraq has been influenced heavily by a troubled history of war, competition, disproportionate Sunni dominance over a majority Shia population, and geostrategic position (Barzegar, 2008). Iran's security has also faced considerable challenge from the ethno-political divisions that characterise Iraq's polity. Therefore, when the US invasion happened, the Iranians took the opportunity to try to dominate their neighbour in the aftermath.

The exportation of the Shiite revolution to Iraq has been an overarching priority for Iran, given it is a nation devoted to preventing its neighbour from reemerging as an ideological, political, and military threat (Takeyh, 2008). The current Iranian State is a product of the 1979 revolution and is defined by the Shiism, a branch of Islam, that forms the foundation of the nation's governing model. Iraq, in contrast, was ruled by the minority Sunnis, a competing sect of Islam. Iraq's view that its minority Sunni rule in a Shiite majority country was under a grave threat from its neighbours led to the invasion of Iran in 1980 with the tacit approval of the US which even engaged directly in the conflict by sinking Iranian ships in the midst of the Iran-Iraq War (Trevino, 2013). The Iran-Iraq War and the hostility that followed it set the tone for future relations between Iran and Iraq. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 therefore provided Iran with the perfect opportunity to dominate its former foe.

Iran's objectives towards Iraq can be categorised through the lens of offensive realism. In Iran's context, the Shiite majority has used its great power and influence to exploit the political situation in Iraq for its own gain. For Iran, Iraq has not only been an enemy, but also an historic regional rival (Norton, 1990). During the Cold War, Iraq historically had designs to become the regional hegemony. During his reign, Saddam Hussein subscribed to an ideology called Pan-Arabism (Kifner, 1990). Pan-Arabism, a socialist and Arab nationalist

political ideology advocating for the union of all Arab nations while espousing opposition to Western influences, was an ideology that was opposed to the role of fundamentalist religion in the national politics of an Arab nation.

Arab nationalism was Saddam Hussein's guiding principle during his reign and the dream to unite the Arab world under his leadership was his ambition (Norton, 1990). Hussein's subscription to Nasser's Pan-Arab ideology automatically brought Iraq into conflict with Iran. As a movement, Pan-Arabism was diametrically opposed to the involvement of religious fundamentalism in the national body politic and therefore was not only in direct contrast to Iran's stance, but also constituted a threat to Iran's presence in the Middle East order. Two diverging governance models for the Middle East meant that geopolitical competition between Iran and Iraq was a real possibility during the Cold War. While the Arab nationalist movement is no longer the dominant political ideology in the Middle East, realism dictates that the future of international relations is impossible to predict. Therefore, Tehran's intention to dominate Baghdad eliminates the possibility of a future hegemonic rival.

When compared to other regional hegemonies, Iran does not fit the model perfectly, as it has not expanded its influence through direct conquest but through its proxies and influence. Historic examples of regional hegemonies expanding through conquest include the US constantly expanding West and into the Pacific; Imperial Japan expanding by conquering parts of Asia since 1895; Nazi Germany conquering Austria and Czechoslovakia; and Saddam Hussein attempting to conquer Kuwait.

### ***Countering the US Presence in Iraq***

Iran's overall strategy in Iraq was not only focused on Iraq; it was also orientated towards countering plans for American dominance in the Middle East. The US invasion and the heightened military presence of the US close to Iran's border constituted a clear national security threat for the Shiite regime in Tehran. The US invasion of Iraq, while primarily aimed at removing Saddam Hussein and seizing his 'weapons of mass destruction', also intended to achieve another broader objective: i.e., to assert American leadership and hegemony in the Middle East (Jervis, p. 376). US primacy in the Middle East would have credibly amounted to the possibility of future conflict with Iran and since that outcome did

not suit Tehran, it is prudent to conclude that US presence in Iraq was an existential threat to Iran's national interests in the region.

Concluding that the US invasion of Iraq was a severe threat to Iran's regional ambitions as well as its immediate security is a claim that is supported primarily by three things: the notion of preventative war in the US National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2002; George W. Bush's Axis of Evil speech; and the historic hostility between the US and Iran since 1979. The introduction of the Bush variant of preventative war expanded a critical area of the American foreign policy doctrine by including the utilisation of force towards countries that might not imminently threaten American security but which possessed the potential to 'gather' or grow in threat over time. George W. Bush also labelled Iran a state sponsor of terrorism and a "rogue state arming to threaten peace in the world" (Wagner, n.d.). The Axis of Evil designation from President Bush was made in 2002 and the invasion of Iraq came just a year later in 2003. Such combative rhetoric towards Iran forced the regional power to intervene in Iraq.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter introduces and highlights core tenets of the three major disciplines of international relations and discusses their usefulness in describing each IR theory in the context of US–Iranian strategic competition in the Middle East. This chapter discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each theory in relation to the US–Iranian strategic competition in Iraq and finds that structural realism provides the most conclusive picture for analysing strategic competition in Iraq. Structural realism is broken down into two major categories: offensive and defensive realism.

US–Iranian state behaviour in competing for influence in Iraq manifested tenets of offensive realism. Offensive realism theorises that a state's primary goal is survival and the guarantee of security; therefore, powerful states have a lot of military capabilities. Since the nature of any international system is anarchic, a state is driven to accumulate as much power as it can to protect itself from its adversaries. Furthermore, the ideal geographic goal for any major power is to be surrounded by other states that are both weak as well as friendly. Since the invasion of Iraq changed the geographic paradigm for Iran, the Shiite nation adopted a combative foreign policy towards the occupying US force and began to engage in a

geostrategic competition for domination of its neighbour. The US on the other hand aimed to assert its dominance in the Middle East by maximising its power to achieve security through dominance and hegemony.

While offensive realism paints a comprehensive picture of US–Iranian state behaviour in Iraq, the geostrategic competition between the two nations also exhibits traits of defensive realism. The US, as well as Iran, has acted in a way that has attempted to prevent one side from gaining enough power to dominate the other in the region. This chapter finds that the balance of power theory can also be applied in tandem with tenets of offensive realism and that it helps to paint a more accurate picture of the conflict between the US and Iran in Iraq.

This chapter further discusses the respective foreign policy doctrines of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. In analysing the Bush Doctrine, this chapter finds that the principles of ‘preventative war’ as well as ‘unilateralism’ have offensive realist theories enshrined within them. In contrast, the findings of this chapter also show the opposition from the Obama administration in regard to his predecessor’s approach towards Iraq and the approach taken by the forty-third president in dealing with the deteriorating situation in Iraq. This chapter further analyses the respective Bush and Obama theories for countering Iran in Iraq. This chapter also discusses Iran’s national security doctrine relating to Iran and applies structural realism to its foreign policy moves against the US and Iraq.

The next chapter will discuss the foreign policy objectives of the US and Iran in their strategic competition against each other in Iraq. The next chapter will focus on analysing US–Iranian objectives through structural realism and dissect which branch of structural realism best describes Washington’s and Tehran’s objectives in Iraq.

## **Chapter Two**

### **US-Iranian Strategic Objectives in Iraq (2003-2016)**

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter seeks to outline and conduct a brief analysis of the key strategic interests of the US and Iran in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003. Comprehending the US–Iran conflict through their respective foreign policy goals towards the country enables a greater understanding of the true intentions of both these regional powers. This chapter will apply structural realist theory by dissecting how the principles of structural realism are related to the objectives of the US and Iran in Iraq.

This chapter also lays the foundation for future discussion in later chapters on how American and Iranian actions in Iraq translate to maintaining both nations’ respective foreign policy interests in the Middle East as a whole. Finally, this chapter provides a very brief glimpse into US–Iranian relations and the origins of conflict between the two regional powers of the Middle East.

#### ***A Brief History of US–Iranian Relations***

The rupture of US–Iranian relations can be attributed to the 1953 overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran Mohamed Mossadegh with the purpose of restoring a pro-Western Shah sympathetic to American objectives of combating Soviet expansionism and enhancing US commercial interests in the nation’s highly profitable oil industry (Zahrani, 2002). Prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the US enjoyed the unconditional support of the Shah, Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, in moulding Iran into a Western-backed monolith against communism (Wise, 2011). Prime Minister Mossadegh’s election in 1951 had significant economic repercussions for the British and the Americans, as Mossadegh’s campaign to nationalise Iran’s oil industry would cause the British Empire to

lose its access to Iran's vast oil reserves. Following the election of Prime Minister Mossadegh, the Chamberlain Government in the UK through extensive lobbying persuaded the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh (Zahrani, 2002). The Iranian Revolution was fuelled by resentment towards the new social, political, and economic changes Mossadegh brought to Iranian society and the suppression of free political thinking (Moghadam, 1989). The Iranian Revolution of 1979 brought a profound shift in Iran's official policies and attitudes towards the US, giving it the attitude that it has today (Leverett & Leverett, 2013). The US has since that time sought to oppose, contain, and at times confront the new theocratic regime in Iran and the latter's attempts to extend its influence throughout the Middle East. The US–Iranian struggle for regional power continues to play out as the backdrop to a tenuous and complex state of affairs that has complicated the balance of power.

### ***US Objectives in Iraq***

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq War the US maintained an enormous presence in the country, as 170,300 troops occupied the country at the height of sectarian violence in 2007, with the aim of achieving its foreign policy objectives in the country (Berger, 2020). President George W. Bush's signing of the Status of Forces Agreement in 2008 set an official timeline for US troop withdrawal by the year 2011 saw the withdrawal of the majority of US combat troops from Iraq (Status of Forces Agreement, 2008). Troop drawdowns began in 2009 when US troop numbers fell from 157,800 in 2008 to 135,600 in 2009 and then to 88,300 in 2010 followed by a decrease to 42,800 in 2011 (Belasco, p. 9). However, in 2014, 275 Special Forces troops returned to help the Iraqi army to fight ISIS (Berger, 2020).

The US is primarily focused on two foreign policy areas: reducing Iran's influence and combating Iranian terrorism by supporting the Iraqi army.

### ***Reducing Iran's Influence***

Reducing Iran's influence was one of the most important foreign policy interests of the US in Iraq during 2003-2016 (Al-Saleh, 2017). Although reducing Iran's influence, Since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran rapidly enhanced its influence through a range of strategic actions and sought to tighten its grip on its once former geo-strategic rival. Iranian

activity in Iraq poses the most serious threat to US interests in Iraq, while threatening to decrease American power in the Middle East. Stopping Iraq from becoming a pro-Western-style democracy was perhaps the most important American foreign policy objective being opposed by Iranian meddling in the years following Saddam Hussein's downfall.

Iran's influence over Iraq was wielded through a variety of strategies including support for pro-Iranian militias, an Iraqi economic reliance on Iranian goods, supporting and financing Iran friendly politicians, and Iraq-based but Iranian-led anti-American media coverage (Arango, 2017). US expectations for a quick democratisation of Iraq underestimated the strength of Iranian resolve in opposing an American movement to turn Iraq into a strategic partner in the region (Dobbins, 2003).

Iran is the US's most significant adversary in the Middle East. The US in recent history has demonstrated its desire to challenge Iran's ascent in the Middle East through a range of measures. The underlying component in all of America's efforts was strategic balancing, an IR theory that encompasses the actions that a particular state or group of states take in order to equalise the odds against more powerful states; that is to make it more difficult and hence less likely for powerful states to exert their military advantage over the weaker ones (Pape, 2005). Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the US has adopted various strategies involving vigorous balancing against Iran. It has done so through intelligence support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and by adopting a "dual containment" strategy under the 1993-2001 Clinton administration that sought to balance Iran and Iraq against one another (Walt, 2013). American animosity towards Iran had seen the US use strategic balancing as a regional strategy to keep Iran at bay, while ensuring that the Shiite majority power does not threaten US interests by dominating the Middle East (Walt, 2013).

The Middle East had been at the centre of a geopolitical power struggle between the US and her allies and the Islamic Republic of Iran that had succeeded the Cold War and shaped American policy in the region. The conflict in Yemen, the Arab Spring, and the civil war in Syria have been events that have served as battlegrounds for the US-Iranian proxy wars, with the US retaining considerable interest in the outcome of each of these conflicts (Mirza et al., 2021). The US's goal in combating Iran's presence in Iraq was undertaken with the goal of creating a strong and independent Iraq, free from Iran's periphery and influence. An increase in Iran's power increases the Shiite power's ability to compete against the US and its regional allies like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Jordan. Reducing Iranian influence in

Iraq also contributed to the wider geopolitical battle by providing the US with an additional increment of power against Iran (Connable, 2020).

### ***Combating Islamic Terrorism by Supporting the Iraqi Army***

After the events of September 11, 2001, global terrorism became America's primary threat. Dubbed the War on Terror, US foreign policy has been shaped by the pursuit of eliminating radical Islamic terrorists seeking to destroy the US (Fleck & Kilby, 2008). Since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq had become a breeding ground and a target for terrorism from groups such as ISIS and Al -Qaeda (Nance, 2014).

Combating fundamentalist Islamic terrorism by providing military and economic support to the Armed Forces of Iraq remains a top priority for the US. The presence of US military hardware and operational expertise have been essential in ensuring the endurance of ISIS's defeat.

The campaign against terrorism began with the strongly held belief from the George W. Bush administration (based upon faulty intelligence) that Saddam Hussein was actively financing and supporting terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda (Council for Foreign Relations, 2005). President George W. Bush's rhetoric leading up to the invasion consistently linked the 9/11 terror attacks and Saddam Hussein's regime, garnering support as well as legitimacy for the invasion from the American public (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005). The invasion, while successful in defeating the Iraqi army and capturing Saddam Hussein, created a chaotic security situation with intense sectarian, religious, and political violence breaking out across Iraq's religious and ethnic communities (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). The distribution of power in the country shifted dramatically from Iraq's governing Sunni minority to the majority Shia. This power shift saw the outbreak of sectarian tensions between the Shia and the Sunni which was symbolised by the bombing in 2006 of the Askari shrine, a Shia holy site (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). The ensuing chaos from the invasion, coupled with mismanagement of the war including the disbanding of the Iraqi army, provided a hospitable environment for terror groups to grow in size and strength (Thrall & Glaser, 2017).

These conditions led to the rise of a largely unknown terror organisation: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Since 2014, the US has provided tactical, weapons, and informational assistance as well as air support to the Iraqi army and US-backed militias. ISIS lost its Iraqi territory in December 2017; however, the terror group remains a threat to US interests in Iraq

(Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, 2021). The caliphate maintained a continued presence in areas with weak political leadership such as Diyala province in Iraq, a region of the nation that has a chaotic security situation with little engagement from coalition forces, the PMF or the Iraqi army (Operation Inherent Resolve, 2020). Although the once powerful terror group has lost all of its captured territory in Iraq and Syria, the group has mounted a strong and sustained resurgence as an insurgent force inside Iraq. ISIS cells are organised into small cells, usually of 6-25 fighters (Knights & Almeida, 2020, p. 23).

However, American efforts to combat ISIS directly have taken another major hit as a result of the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq (Falk, 2020). The US-led coalition served in a purely advisory role to the Iraqi security forces after the ending of combat missions in Iraq. US withdrawal from Iraq presented an opportunity for terrorist organisations such as the AQI which would later become ISIS to revamp their presence in America's absence (Glenn et al., 2019).

### ***Interpreting US Strategic Interests through Structural Realism***

US strategic interests in Iraq was defined through the principles of both offensive and defensive realism. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a hegemonic-realist war (as concluded in the previous chapter), the Bush administrations policies were consequentially offensive realist in nature. By transforming Iraq into a pro-Western style democracy, the US had hoped to create a positive domino effect throughout the region and isolate Iran. Since the US and Iran were engaged in geostrategic competition between each other, American foreign policy sought to dominate Iran within the wider region during the early stages of the post war period. Transforming Iraq into a pro-Western democracy was a policy decision that matched offensive realist theory because it demonstrated the idea that there was no limit to the extent the US was willing to exercise its power in Iraq.

However, during the latter stages of the Bush administration and the early years of the Obama administration, American strategy shifted from offensive to defensive realism. Since Iran's influence had become interwoven too deeply into Iraq's political and security fabric, the US halted its plan to dominate Iraq and attempted to balance Iranian power in Iraq. Choosing Prime Ministerial candidates who balanced in their opinions of the US and Iran, training and equipping Iraq's armed forces, pressuring Iraq to limit PMF involvement by

absorbing it into the Iraqi armed forces, were examples of defensive realist policies that demonstrated American willingness to accept a reasonable amount of power which was a feature of defensive realism as opposed to completely dominating Iraq, which was a feature of offensive realism.

### ***Iranian Strategic Interests in Iraq***

Iran's interests in Iraq were arguably far greater than those of the US and are directly linked to its national security— an Iraq aligned with the US poses an existential threat to the Iranian regime. Commencing with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Iran's top foreign policy priority has been to eliminate any threats to Iran's national security from Iraq through strategies designed to bring Iraq into its own sphere of influence (Arango, 2017). In the post-Saddam Hussein era of Iraq, Iran is actively influencing Iraq's political, social, and economic structures through a range of actions that will maintain Iraqi subservience to Iran and thus ensure Iraqi weakness in any conflicts or clashes. Iran's primary goal is followed by an additional goal of eliminating American presence from the country in its totality. In recognising the value of a pro-Iranian Iraq, Iran is taking a calculated risk to enforce its presence in the newly chaotic nation.

Since 2003, Iran has skilfully penetrated Iraq's Shiite population, taking advantage of the shared cultural, economic, and religious ties (International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2019). Iranian influence is exercised through a cluster of powerful political and militant organisations, the largest of which is the Badr Organization (Nada & Rowan, 2018).

### ***Eliminating the US Presence in Iraq***

Since former President George W. Bush brought war to Iran's doorstep in 2003, Iran has attempted and hoped to expel the American troop presence from Iraq. By housing hundreds of thousands of American troops at the height of its power, the US presence in Iraq constituted a credible and direct threat to Iran's national security. The year 2007 saw the greatest number of American combat troops stationed in Iraq (170,300); however, that number has significantly diminished across the years, with only 2,500 troops remaining in 2021 (Arraf & Schmitt, 2021). This drawdown has significantly reduced America's influence

in Iraq and allowed Iran more breathing space; nevertheless, Iran's quest to completely dominate Iraq can be realised only with the complete withdrawal of US troops.

US troops in neighbouring Iraq heightened fears that the next destination for American soldiers would be Iran (Scahill & Hussein, 2019). Iranian fears over an American invasion were realised by President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address, which linked the regime to America's global "War on Terror" by including the Islamic Republic of Iran in a list of countries dubbed the "Axis of Evil" (Glass, 2019). Indeed, General Wesley Clark stated that Iraq was envisaged by some in the Pentagon as the beginning of a five-year campaign targeting seven countries. He said:

As I went back through the Pentagon in November 2001, one of the senior military staff officers had time for chat. Yes, we were still on track for going against Iraq, he said. But there was more. This was being discussed as part of a five-year campaign plan, he said, and there were a total of seven countries, beginning with Iraq, then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iran, Somalia and Sudan. So, I thought, this is what they mean when they talk of "draining the swamp".<sup>1</sup>(Clark, 2003)

Such threatening language from former President George W. Bush also encompassed Iranian efforts to gain nuclear weapons, with the Bush administration's vowing that no members of the triple axis would be allowed to obtain and develop nuclear weapons. Since the official pretence for the Iraqi invasion was the capture of Iraqi WMDs, Iran's own nuclear enrichment programme was seen as a threat to US foreign policy objectives, this pretext raised fear of an American invasion of Iran during the early days of the Iraq Wars. US rejection of Iran's "Grand Bargain" in 2003, a document which indicated Iranian willingness to improve relations with the US, led to increasing fears of possible US military action against the Islamic Republic (Dudgeon, 2020). Iran henceforth adopted a series of strategic measures designed to increase the cost of US occupation in Iraq.

While Iran has contended with US presence in Iraq for much of the 21st century, the Shiite power in 2011 temporarily had its goal fulfilled with most of the US troops withdrawing and only 700 soldiers staying behind to provide tactical assistance to the Iraqi army (Berger, 2020). The troop withdrawal also fulfilled a key campaign promise of President Obama (Mannina, 2018). The withdrawal was viewed in a positive light from the Iranian perspective with the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khomeini saying that the US withdrawal "would constitute the golden pages in Iraq's history" (Mostaghim & Patrick,

2011). However, the rise of ISIS meant the return of US-led coalition forces to Iraq in 2014, with a new mission to fight the powerful terrorist organisation. The rise of ISIS deeply enhanced American diplomatic, political, and military engagement with the Iraqi government, once again hindering Iran's progress in its effort to bring its once powerful enemy completely into its own sphere. US–Iraqi mutual cooperation in the defence sphere provided Iraq with an alternative to Iranian influence and allows the US to remain entrenched in the highest levels of Iraq's armed forces.

The official effort to undermine the US-led Iraq war came from the upper echelons of the Iranian government. Chief amongst them was the Quds Force, a special division of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which trained, equipped, and funded local militias such as the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization that attack US forces in an effort to inflict deadly casualties (U.S.: Broad agreement with Iran about Iraq, 2007). Replicating the Hezbollah model in Iraq, Quds spearheaded Iran's effort to attack American troops by providing enemy combatants such as anti-American Iraqi Shiite militias and terrorist Sunni groups with vast quantities of weapons and military hardware, including highly lethal explosive form penetrators, mortars, rockets, improvised explosive devices, and sniper rifles (Kagan, 2006-2007, p. 3).

### ***Influencing Iraq through Politics and Militias***

Building a more pro-Iranian neighbour is the most important strategic objective that that Iran hoped to achieve in Iraq. Iranian strategic planning involves a multi-faceted approach to expanding its foothold and deploying a range of tactics designed to target three key areas critical to achieving supremacy: government and security.

#### *Politics*

Iran spearheads its influence-building campaign through the provision of financial and political support for pro-Iranian politicians in Iraq (Karam & Abdul Zahra, 2021). The Fateh Alliance is the political offshoot of the Badr Organization, a powerful militia group loyal to the Ayatollah. Operating from inside Iran since the 1980s, Badr swiftly moved to dominate Iraqi politics following Saddam Hussein's ousting, gaining 22 seats in the 2014 election, while building a strong base of Shia supporters in northern Iraq (Smyth, 2018).

Support for pro-Iranian Shia groups such as the Fateh Alliance in the Iraqi legislature was cemented through the perception of its fighting prowess against ISIS in 2014. In contrast to the Iraqi government's weak and decapitating response to the rise of ISIS, pro-Iranian political groups with links to Iranian-backed militias eclipsed a weak Iraqi army to lead the fight against the Islamic State, translating gains made on the battlefield towards the political arena.

The gains made by Iran friendly militias have benefitted the Islamic Republic tremendously in the political arena, enhancing Iran's ability to pass policies favourable to Iran's interests. Significant influence in the Iraqi legislature also provides Iran with the necessary political power to circumvent policies targeted towards its power from its primary rival in the country, the US. Evidence of Iran's influence over Iraq's legislature has already been made evident through the Iraqi government's extraordinary decision to expel US troops from the country after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani (Arraf, 2020). In 2020, the United States, in 2020, assassinated Qassem Soleimani via a drone strike, with the State Department accusing the Quds Force general of plotting attacks through various Shiite militias against American diplomats stationed in Iraq (Zraick, 2020). The drone strike escalated hostilities between the US and Iran and was condemned by the then Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi as an act of aggression (Staff, 2020). The resolution to expel US troops was driven solely by Iran's allies, with none of the other factions in the Iraqi legislature taking part in the vote due to intimidation and the threat of violence from militias aligned to pro-Iranian factions in the Iraqi parliament (Al-Rahim, 2020).

### *Militias*

Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq have been a powerful conduit for Iranian influence in the country. Since 2003, Iran has deepened its ties with Iraq's institutions while also playing a major role in the socio-political aspects of Iraqi society. Iran has benefitted from its longstanding ties to Iraqi armed groups and waded deeper into Iraq's political fabric. The pivotal event that propagated the rise of pro-Iranian Shiite militias was the US invasion and regime change in 2003 (Haddad, 2016). The invasion plunged Iraq into crisis and exacerbated sectarian violence amongst the two major sects in Iraq's society: the majority Shiite and the minority Sunni. The post-Saddam Hussein order has since been marred by tensions rising from a clash of sectarian identities, with both the Sunni and the Shia rejecting the opposing party's vision. The rejection of further Sunni authority as well as the presence of US troops in

Iraq prompted the rise of several dozen Shiite militias who opposed the occupation as well as the existing Sunni political order. The Iraqi insurgency resulted in the formation of powerful Shiite militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl-Haq, and Sayyid Al-Shuhada who were some of the first militias to establish a foothold for Shiite power (Alaaldin, 2017).

After the American invasion, Iraq became home to dozens of Shiite militias loyal to the Ayatollah Khamenei. The largest, most powerful of these militias are organised under an umbrella organisation called the Popular Mobilization Forces which was established in 2014 by the former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki (Mansour, 2018). Although a conglomerate of competing interests, the PMF has played a decisive role in that pro-Iranian militias have become a major part of Iraq's creating of a foothold for Iranian influence in Iraqi territory. Iran's support for such armed groups began in the 1980s, with several top Iraqi militia leaders and politicians leading these armed groups from exile in Tehran (Nada & Rowan, 2021).

Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq played a leading role in advancing Iraq's Shiite sectarian identity, with the formation of a Shiite-centric and Shiite-dominated Iraqi state being the central goal for Iraq's various Iranian-backed militant groups (Haddad, 2016). Pro-Iranian militia groups' role in providing security by fighting terror groups such as ISIS has helped enhance their reputations and provided them with the political clout required to form a sustainable base of operations in Iraq. These militias helped enhance Iran's image within Iraq and help craft public opinion towards the Ayatollah (Kata'ib Hezbollah, n.d.).

### ***Interpreting Iranian Strategic Interests through Structural Realism***

Eliminating US presence and influencing Iraq through its powerful militias and pro-Iranian politicians is interpreted through the IR theory of offensive realism. Iran's primary objective in Iraq was to dominate its neighbour and secure its long-term security. Having fought a war with Iraq in the 1980's Iran's efforts to impose its influence on Iraq is grounded in offensive realism thought since Tehran's domination of Baghdad is grounded in the offensive realist notion that the future is impossible to predict, and a state's future security relies on its military power and offensive capabilities. Since Iran and Iraq had fought a war during the 1980s, it is in Tehran's best interests to implement a foreign policy where that outcome is not repeated. However, if Iran were to engage in a military conflict with Iraq in

the future, the Shiite regional power had attempted to increase its power and influence by supporting friendly militias in Baghdad.

Iran's primary objectives are interpreted through offensive realism because it accurately explains the great power competition between the US and Iran in the greater Middle East. Offensive realist theory suggests that a regional system with two dominating powers is bound to come into conflict with each other as neither side could ensure its long-term security without first defeating the other. The Middle East had two regional powers from 2003-2016: the US and Iran who were engaged in a wider proxy war for influence in the region. By dominating Iraq, Iran hoped to gain an additional increment of power and improve its overall security in the region. For Tehran, the regional system, and the situation in Iraq incentivised Iran to pursue limitless power without the need to limit its involvement. The principle of accumulating as much power as states can puts Iran's theoretical approach firmly in the offensive realism category as opposed to defensive realism. Defensive realism states that the pursuit of power is not limitless and states in any regional system seek to find a balance of power. But Iran's strategic objectives contradict this notion and demonstrate Tehran's will to fully dominate Iraq.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter outlines the strategic objectives of the US and Iran in Iraq and gives the reader a framework and a backdrop through which to interpret US–Iranian actions and policies in Iraq. The American-led invasion fundamentally reshaped Iraq's national security, placing it in a state of perpetual chaos driven by a tumultuous cycle of sectarian violence, increased terrorist activity, an economic collapse, political uncertainty, and foreign interference. The United States and Iran both sought to benefit from this inherent instability through a range of strategic and tactical actions. On the one hand, the US seeks to reduce Iraq's influence and battle terrorism in a nation that still serves as the base of operations for ISIS and other terrorist groups. On the other, Iran seeks to bring Iraq into its own periphery by maintaining a trade imbalance, forcing US troops out of Iraq, and influencing Shiite-led politicians in the hopes of controlling the Iraqi legislature. Although the situation in Iraq was incredibly complex, as the country was headed for an uncertain future, the country can be certain of one thing: that the US and Iran will play a major role in its internal politics for a long time to come.

The next chapter discusses the specific strategies, policies, and actions taken by the US and Iran to compete with each other for influence during 2003-2016. It will highlight the strategic competition between the two regional powers in three domains of influence in Iraq: the political and military domains. The next chapter will analyse the strategic competition through an historic lens and determine the success and failure of the actions of both sides in gaining a competitive advantage over the other.

## **Chapter Three**

### **US-Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq in the Political and Military Arena**

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter investigates the foreign policy actions taken by the US and Iran in Iraq to strategically compete against each other in the political and military spheres from 2003–2016. The chapter provides a detailed discussion of the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) and the US government's influence under the Bush administration, the US military efforts to combat terror organisations and the insurgency from pro-Iranian groups, the troop surge of 2007, and American efforts to train and equip Iraqi forces. This chapter also discusses Barack Obama's withdrawal from Iraq and how the decisions made during the Obama administration led to the decline in American power against Iran up until the rise of ISIS.

In the analysis of Iran's strategy to compete with the US, the role of Qassem Soleimani and his overall impact on US–Iranian competitive efforts are examined. In the political sphere, this chapter examines Iran's role in the 2005, 2009, and 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections and Iran's efforts to manipulate Iraq's political establishment to achieve desirable outcomes in its contest against the US. In the military sphere, this chapter takes a closer look at Iran's attempts to fight a proxy war with the US by influencing friendly Shiite militias like the Mahdi Army, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl-Haq, and the Badr Organization. Finally, this chapter also analyses US and Iran's strategy through the lens of offensive and defensive realism and examines which theory more accurately describes the respective strategies of both regional powers.

#### ***US Political Influence in Iraq***

The exercise of US influence in Iraq requires an analysis of Washington's historic power in Iraqi politics. Since the 2003 invasion, the US had been an indispensable broker in

the political processes in Baghdad, exercising its power, influence, and power to enable the formation of US friendly governments during the early post war years.

In the period immediately after the 2003 US invasion, US control of Iraq's political infrastructure was at its highest with the formation of the CPA under the leadership of Paul Bremer. The CPA's authority over the Iraqi government involved rebuilding the Iraqi economy, constructing a capable national security foundation by countering insurgents and eliminating terrorism, and setting Iraq on the path to democratic government by promoting the rule of law (Dobbins et al., 2009). While the Americans took a central role in the governance of Iraq, the US sought to shift political control to Iraqi leaders. However, it was acknowledged that "attitudes toward a foreign military force would depend on the progress made in transferring power" (Dobbins et al., p. 38). In addition, senior US administration officials like the Under Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz believed in the notion that Iraq's Kurds, Shiite, and Sunni would be able to overcome their differences and establish a free and prosperous Iraq (Milne, 2004).

Yet despite its intentions to transfer power to a 'democratically elected' government, the US continued to maintain its power and influence in Iraq's political processes. The US played an active role in pushing the leaders of Iraq's Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish political blocs to form an inclusive government that would also remove the possibility of the Islamic Republic capturing the Iraqi premiership with a friendly candidate (Beehner, 2006). An example of American influence was US opposition to Ibrahim Al-Jafari as prime minister in 2005 (Beehner, 2006). Al-Jafari's inept and incompetent management of local politics coupled with his close ties to Iran spurred the US into using its political influence with Iraqi political officials to pressure Al-Jafari into resigning. Al-Jafari's association with the Islamic Dawa Party, a pro-Iranian Shiite group, was also a point of concern for an American administration that was fully aware of the potential threat posed by Iran to American power in Iraq. The exercise of America's political power also helped elect Iraq's first Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, and American support helped Maliki stay in power. The US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad played a pivotal role in selecting and boosting Maliki's electability, reflecting America's power as a major occupying force (Filkins, 2014).

The depth of American influence under the Bush administration was exhibited by the signing of The Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) and the Security Agreement with Iraq by the Bush Administration in 2008 (Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue,

2021). The SFA's primary purpose was to strengthen the bilateral relations between the two countries by ensuring cooperation on issues such as regional stability, economic cooperation, human rights, and humanitarian aid. The implementation of the SFA demonstrated the importance of Iraq's role in American foreign policy in the wider region as well as a recognition of Iran's power in the Middle East. Pursuing closer relations with an Iranian neighbour during the exodus of US forces from Iraq demonstrated the US' need to ensure continued US presence in the country in forms other than a military occupation.

US political influence also extended to the Kurdish section of the Iraq population. While initially seeking to weaken the Kurdish drive for independence and Kurdish presence in the central Iraqi government, the Americans changed course with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visiting Baghdad and Kurdish President Masoud Barzani's visiting Washington DC where the US promised to accord the Kurds 'special status' in Iraq (Rafaat, 2007). US support for the Kurds also came with a caveat however, as the American foreign officials were aware that Iran was a long-term benefactor of good relations between the Kurds and Tehran. Evidence of good relations between the Kurds and Iran dates back to 1991 when the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) banned incursions into Iran and trade between the two parties reached approximately US\$800 million. Iranian consulates were located in Arbil and Sulaymaniyah, cities in Kurdish majority provinces (Rafaat, p. 83). The US sought to undermine the good relationship between Iran and the Kurds. For instance, the US arrested five Iranian employees in a raid on Iran's consulate in September 2007. Iranian actions followed with the closure of the border between the KRG and Iran.

During the Bush administration, American influence over Maliki included a directed effort by the US to try and reduce Iran's influence over Baghdad's government (Richter, 2007). The US had a vested interest in pressuring PM Maliki to disengage from pursuing closer diplomatic relations with Iran as Bush leveraged his relationship with Maliki to distance Baghdad from Tehran's grasp when Maliki met with Iranian PM Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2007 (Hauser, 2007). Throughout his tenure, Bush's drive to influence Maliki personally was due to his close personal relationship with the Iraqi PM. This close personal relationship was demonstrated by Bush giving his counterpart in Baghdad, lessons twice a week on running his country as well (Rutenberg & Rubin, 2007). Although, Bush attempted to influence Iraq's policy by cementing a close relationship with the Maliki, the Obama administration's policies adopted the opposite approach and reduced US power over Iraq's government.

The US under the Obama administration however had minimal impact on Maliki's election during his second term in office in 2010. While prominent Obama officials like Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brett McGurk and Commander of the US Forces in Iraq Lloyd Austin supported Maliki's re-election, the political manoeuvring required to elect him to power was decided by Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force general (Khedery, 2014). Although the US had closed-door meetings with Prime Minister Al Maliki, Kurdish chief Masoud Barzani, and Iraqi politician Iyad Allawi, the Americans attempted to finalise a deal for the future of Iraq after the 2010 parliamentary elections (Strobel et al., 2014). Under the Obama White House, the US focused on seeking a degree of inclusiveness in the 2010–2014 Iraqi government and awaited the outcome of intra-Shiite bargaining rather than on taking a more hands-on approach in deciding the makeup of the Iraqi government in 2010. Obama's policy in Iraq saw the administration pivot away from the war-torn nation and invested less time and energy into a country the President wanted to pivot away from. Maliki's authoritarian tendencies included his disqualification from the 2010 parliamentary elections of several Sunni candidates such as the former Iraqi Defence Minister Abdul-Kader Jassem al-Obeidi and Saleh al-Mutlaq on trumped up charges of being former Ba'athists (Pollack & O'Hanlon, 2010).

Obama's decision to refocus American attentions towards domestic issues also helped Iran to establish closer ties with Maliki by providing Tehran with the opportunity to form a political alliance with pro-Tehran proxies such as the Badr Organization in 2010 (Sowell, 2015). The Maliki-Iran alliance led to the sponsorship of pro-Iranian militias that the US considered to be terror organizations such as Asaib Ahl-Haq (AAH) (Sowell, 2015). The close relationship between Iran and PM Maliki reduced the US's ability to influence Baghdad's policies more effectively and provided Iran with a stronger footprint in Iraq.

Fomenting sectarianism and fuelling violence amongst the Sunnis and the Shiites was another major example of the loss of American influence in the Shiite majority state. As mentioned above, the promotion of reconciliation as well as a power-sharing agreement based upon decentralisation and federalism that allows Iraq's major sects to govern their own regions became the fundamental goal and official position of the US (Bruno, 2007). Although the creation of an Iraqi democracy based upon federalism was the official position during the Obama administration, Maliki rebuffed the American plan, citing the governance model of Iraq as a purely domestic issue where US involvement would not be welcome (Sly, 2009). Maliki also ordered the arrest of Sunni Vice-President Tariq Al-Hashimi and Finance

Minister Rafe al-Issawi, with false claims of terrorism being levelled at the two politicians from the rival Al-Iraqiya Party (Pollack, 2011). These actions not only exacerbated sectarian tensions but also enabled Iran, the US' regional rival, to ensure Iraq remained divided and weak. Supporting an insurgency and violence to create a failed state on its borders was a core part of Tehran's Iraq strategy and an effective way to defeat the US' plan to create a strong Iraqi state that could become a bulwark against future Iranian aggression (Beehner, 2006).

Washington's interest in quelling sectarian violence to create a strong and democratic Iraqi state that could counter Iran is a foreign policy strategy can be interpreted through the lens of offensive realism. As discussed in chapter 2, a core tenet of offensive realism is to dominate a region by ensuring that the regional power is surrounded by states that are weak and friendly. Offensive realism also dictates that powerful states pursue expansionist policies. Therefore, the US desire to create a democracy in Iraq in the hopes of creating a domino effect in the wider region is an example of an exercise in offensive realist ideology.

While the US took an active part in Baghdad's national body politick and exercised its influence during the early stages of its occupation in Iraq, Washington's decline in power over Iraq was clearly displayed. For example, US lack of power over Iraq was demonstrated by its failure to convince Maliki to rein in Shiite militias loyal to Iran (the most prominent being the Mahdi Army) during the early years of the post war period (Beehner, 2006). Despite corruption in the interior and defense ministries (both departments included Shiite militia officials), Maliki resisted reining in Shiite militias, much to the frustration of US officials. The Mahdi Army and its leader Muqtada Al-Sadr's control of 30 seats in the Iraqi parliament made the leader of the Mahdi Army a key force in Maliki's coalition (Beehner, 2006). While there were several reasons behind Maliki's inability to control Shiite militias like the Mahdi Army, including a power-sharing agreement and the strength of the opposition militias, his reluctance to adhere to US requests cemented the understanding that the US did not have as much power in the political sphere as expected from an occupier. Maliki ultimately undertook a military operation against Shiite militias in Basra that was very nearly a disaster. However, as its success depended on American help, its failure clearly indicated the inability of Baghdad's security forces to fulfil American foreign policy objectives in Iraq.

The US under the Obama administration however had minimal impact on Maliki's election during his second term in office 2010. While prominent Obama officials like deputy assistant secretary of state Brett McGurk and commander of the US forces in Iraq Lloyd

Austin supported Maliki's re-election, the political manoeuvring required to elect him to power was decided by Qassem Soleimani, the Quds force general (Khedery, 2014). Although the US had closed-door meetings with Prime Minister Al Maliki, Kurdish chief Masoud Barzani and Iraqi politician Iyad Allawi the Americans attempted to finalise a deal for the future of Iraq after the 2010 parliamentary elections (Strobel et al., 2014). Under the Obama White House, the US focused on seeking a degree of inclusiveness in the 2010-2014 Iraqi government and awaited the outcome of intra-Shiite bargaining as opposed to taking a more hands on approach in deciding the makeup of the Iraqi government in 2010. Obama's policy in Iraq saw the administration pivot away from the war-torn nation and invest less time and energy into a country the President wanted to forget. Maliki's authoritarian tendencies, including his disqualification of several Sunni candidates like the former Iraqi defense minister Abdul-Kader Jassem al-Obeidi and Saleh al-Mutlaq, on trumped up charges of being former Ba'athists from the 2010 parliamentary elections (Pollack & O'Hanlon, 2010).

Another example of the decline in American influence in Iraq was seen in Al-Maliki's rejection of US troop presence in as well as his desire to withdraw US forces from Iraq (Dagher, 2010). While Obama came into office with the promise of withdrawing troops, his negotiations with President Maliki were conducted as a political ploy, and Maliki's unilateral rejection of the presence of US troops cemented Washington DC's declining power in Baghdad. Obama's desire to withdraw from Iraq and concentrate on domestic issues meant the US was unable to impose its power more effectively in Iraq.

### ***US Security Influence in Iraq***

Understanding Washington's efforts to compete with Tehran in Baghdad requires an understanding of the role of the US armed forces in Iraq. During the 2003–2016 period, the US had maintained varying troop levels tasked with fulfilling several roles including combating terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, training, equipping, and providing security assistance to the Iraqi armed forces, and maintaining order in association with Washington's political needs. US security assistance played a critical role in contributing to America's overall strategic decision making as well as advancing America's national security interests in Iraq. The official role of the US armed forces in the direct aftermath of the invasion included stabilising the country, rebuilding Iraq's military forces, engaging in

combat missions against pro-Iranian militia groups, eliminating terror groups like al-Qaeda, and providing military security in cooperation with Washington's diplomatic efforts (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020).

One of the important influences the US military had during the occupation was its campaign to combat an intense anti-US insurgency that erupted in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion (McWilliams & Schlosser, 2004). Consisting of a variety of groups including al-Qaeda, former Baathist loyalists, and pro-Iranian militias, the insurgents were dedicated to overthrowing and hindering the US-supported Iraq government as well as ending the US occupation of Iraq. While the insurgency included several combatant groups, the faction that primarily wielded Iran's influence in Iraq was Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, an armed militia allied with Iran. A Shiite cleric with an anti-coalition rhetoric and fierce opposition to the US presence in Iraq, Al-Sadr initially believed after visiting Iran in 2004 in remodelling Iraq's political system into an Iranian-style theocracy with an Iraqi religious figurehead (Khrolely, 2014). The Mahdi Army also received training and funding from the Quds Force (QF), the specialised division of the Iran Revolutionary Guard as well as funding to attack US forces in Iraq (Eisenstadt et al., 2011).

The group's first major confrontation with US forces came during the 2004 uprisings after the banning of Sadr's newspaper and his denunciation as a terrorist by Paul Bremer (Profile: The Mahdi Army, 2008). US forces also fought with the group in a new security offensive in 2007 that saw US troops battle for control over several pro-Mahdi Army strongholds such as Diwaniyah and Karbala (Cochrane, 2009). The coalition offensive saw the Mahdi Army driven out of key cities, with Sadr himself fleeing to Iran. Although several rogue elements of the group continued to operate despite a ceasefire agreement, the US had successfully liberated key Sadrist strongholds while temporarily reducing those of Sadr and, by virtue of association, Iran's outsized influence.

US efforts to combat Iran's influence in Iraq were not limited to the Mahdi Army but also extended to other Iranian-backed militants known as 'special groups' (Cochrane, 2009). The battle for Fallujah, fighting in the Al-Anbar province, the Ramadan Offensive, and the Battle of Najaf were major combat missions that took place in the 2003–2006 phase of the Iraqi insurgency (Pirine & O'Connell, 2008). Combating pro-Iranian groups that stoked violence and created a hostile security situation in Iraq helped the intense violence to subside and denied Iran leverage over the US and Iraq.

US security sectors' influence extended to combating terrorism in Iraq. Between 2003 and 2016, the presence of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS greatly exacerbated violence amongst Iraq's population. The primary goals of these terror organisations were to foment insurrection and unrest amongst the Iraqi populous in order to undermine the goals of the US occupation. The bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in 2006, an event that sparked the Iraq Civil War in 2006, was a prominent example of a terror network actively derailing US efforts to curb sectarianism and stabilise the country (Fearon, 2007). During the early post war years of the US occupation, terrorist groups exerted greater influence in major cities such as Ramadi (which al-Qaeda in Iraq designated the future capital of the 'Caliphate') (Smith & Macfarland, 2008). To combat terror groups in Iraq, the US military undertook direct combat missions to deal with the threat of terrorism. During the Bush administration, direct counterterrorism operations like the Battle of Ramadi helped to liberate Anbar province from the pressures exerted by terror organisations and returned power to traditional tribal Sunni leaders (Kagan, 2006-2007).

Nowhere was the importance of US troops to the security of Iraq made more evident than in the troop surge of 2007, which saw the addition of 30,000 combat troops to provide Baghdad with additional security while reducing the plethora of violence in the nation (Beinhart, 2015). The presence of American troops saw a monumental decline in violence from 26,000 civilian deaths in Iraq in 2007 to fewer than 10,000 in 2008, and to around 5000 in 2009 (Beinhart, 2015). The reduction of violence from terror groups was an essential step to bolstering Iraq's national security and strengthening the government's image when it came to providing protection from groups such as al-Qaeda. The 'surge' also had an additional impact and decreased Iran's military footprint and influence, stopping Baghdad's neighbour from weakening Iraq and dominating it during the 2007–2008 period. The presence of Iranian militias had begun to pose a serious security threat to the mission of US forces.

American impact on Iraq's national security extended beyond the limits of direct military action against hostile groups. The US' role in Iraq expanded to Iraqi military training and equipping programmes designed to provide Iraq's military forces with the necessary tools to combat terrorism. During the George W. Bush administration, the creation of a military force called the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) was the first specialised American-led programme designed to help Baghdad counter terrorism independently in the succeeding years. Despite challenges such as increased politicisation and the lack of an official budget, the CTS continued to be an effective force, making 700 terrorist arrests and detaining 9000

terror suspects from 2004–2011 (Witty, 2016, p. 27). The CTS also helped spearhead the counterattack against the rise of ISIS in 2014 (Knights & Mello, 2017). Training and equipping organisations like the CTS helps increase the US' security footprint in Iraq, while creating a competent military unit capable of attacking the nation's problems with terrorism. Having a well-trained, combat-ready force that is capable of meeting the challenges from terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS was important, as it increased public trust in Iraq's government and decreased opportunities for Tehran, Washington's primary rival in Baghdad, from taking advantage of the dire security situation by providing an alternative security source and winning support amongst the Iraqi people.

American efforts to improve Iraqi security also expanded to training and equipping Iraq's traditional military. Throughout 2003–2016, the US equipped the Iraqis through four programmes: the Foreign Military Sales program (which has seen Iraq purchase US\$22 billion worth of US equipment since 2005), Excess Defense Articles, the Presidential Drawdown Authority, and funding from Operation Inherent Resolve (Ollivant & Bull, 2018). Close security cooperation with Iraq ensured Washington's continuing influence in shaping Baghdad's security and stopped Iran from dominating Iraq's security sector completely.

Whereas fighting terror groups and insurgencies in Iraq throughout the Bush and Obama presidencies provided the US with a competitive advantage over its geopolitical rival, the success of terror networks in fomenting insurrection greatly assisted Iran's overarching strategy of creating a weak and failed Iraqi national state.

### ***US Influence Through Structural Realism***

US actions to maintain its influence in Iraq can be seen through their offensive and defensive realism characteristics. America's efforts to maintain its political influence in Iraq can be analysed using the defensive realist principle of strategic balancing. The recognition of Iran as a rival to the US in Iraq is seen as an obvious threat to the US' position in the wider region. President Bush's signing of the SFA and the Security Agreement in Iraq could be viewed as mechanisms deployed to balance Iran's increasing role in Iraq. Simultaneously, providing tools to the Iraqi army to combat terror groups and militant organisations supported by Iran is a foreign policy decision which shows examples of proxy balancing. Proxy balancing refers to the transfer of resources to third parties with the aim of limiting a state's

power by providing a state with capabilities (Nexon, 2009). US training initiatives and funding are examples of proxy balancing that sees the transferring of such capabilities to Iraq as a means to assist in US efforts to balance Iran. Although the Bush administration signed agreements that promised continued US involvement in Iraqi politics, his successor President Obama did not forge closer ties during the early years of his presidency, as his withdrawal from Iraq did not adhere to the principles of proxy balancing.

While defensive realism provides a balance of power explanation for US political support in Iraq, theories of offensive realism analyse US actions through the lens of a hegemon that seeks to impose its influence on its chief opponent, Iran. As concluded in previous chapters, the US invasion of Iraq was a hegemonic war designed to assert American supremacy in the region. US foreign policy actions such as the troop surge of 2007, agreements between the US and Iraq, training, and equipping Iraq's military etc. during the Bush administration are examples of policies that attempted to maximise American power to maintain its hegemony while dominating Iran in the overall region. Iraq's border with Iran ensured that accumulating additional increments of power by the US threatened Tehran's borders. In offensive realist theory, a state's security is dependent upon its neighbours' being weak as well as friendly. Creating a pro-Western Iraq would automatically threaten Iran's immediate security and create national security concerns for Iran in the long term.

### ***Iranian Political and Security Influence in Iraq***

#### ***Iranian Political Influence in Iraq***

From a geopolitical perspective, Iraq remained Iran's biggest foreign policy brief. As Chipman (2019) noted, Tehran's primary concern in the arena is shaping Baghdad's political orientation to ensure that the Iraqi government does not pose a threat to Iran. While Persian-speaking Iran and Arabic-speaking Iraq are distinct in several ways, the two nations are tied together by shared cultural and religious ties. Iran's success in the Iraqi political arena has depended upon the exploitation of close religious ties with its neighbour. Iran's political strategy since 2003 has been to create a weak federal Iraqi state with a pro-Iranian Shiite majority leading the country (Eisenstadt, 2010). Iran's goal has been to unite the Shiite

parties so that they could translate their demographic weight into political influence and thereby consolidate Shiite primacy.

Throughout 2003–2016, Iran had attempted to dominate Iraqi politics by wielding its influence in the 2005, 2009, and 2013 parliamentary elections. The establishment of Iran's political influence in Iraq was greatly assisted by the fact that major Iraqi parties were founded in Iran decades prior to the 2003 invasion. In the years leading up to the 2005 Iraqi constitution and election, Tehran's power was wielded through three major political parties in Iraq: the Sadrist Movement, the Dawa Party, and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution (SCIRI). Consisting of exiles and political dissidents, prominent Shiite politicians took shelter in Iran. The SCIRI was founded in 1982 in Tehran, with support from the Iranian government (SCIRI, 2015). While the Dawa, a political party founded in the 1950s, received political support for its insurgency against Saddam Hussein from Tehran during the 1980s (Placeholder6), the Sadrist Movement, the third primary vessel of Iranian power was founded in the 1990s by Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr and headed by Muqtada Al-Sadr in 2003.

The combination of the Dawa Party, the SCIRI, and the Sadrist Movement led to the formation of the United Iraq Alliance (UIA), a pro-Iranian political coalition that won the January parliamentary elections of 2005 (Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?, 2005). The political parties that composed the UIA were the SCIRI led by Abdul Aziz-Al-Hakim, the Islamic Dawa Party led by the then Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, and the Sadrist Movement led by Muqtada Al-Sadr (Iraq's most powerful coalitions, 2010). Although Maliki was chosen by the US to become the prime minister in 2006, his leadership of the Dawa Party and that party's close ties with Iran proved to be a favourable outcome for Tehran. Maliki shared Tehran's Shiite Islamist worldview: however, he trod a fine line in his attempts to ensure his own political survival by negotiating with both the US and Iran.

Iran's influence in Iraq's political sphere was also evident during the 2010 parliamentary elections when Iran engineered Maliki's re-election by forcing the Sadrists to vote for his candidacy despite Maliki's order to drive back the Mahdi Army, the military wing of the Sadrist movement in spring 2008 (Pollack, 2014). The split between the Sadrists and the Dawa Party in 2010 and the formation of a new political coalition, the state of law coalition, split the Shiite faction's power in the national politics, an undesirable outcome for the Iranians. The Iranians also used their influence to stop a call for a vote of no confidence against Maliki in 2012, anticipating that it would be a vote he would be likely to lose. While

Tehran's influence crucially kept Maliki in power, the withdrawal of that support during the 2014 parliamentary elections effectively tanked Maliki's chances of a third term. Tehran's desire to preserve Iraq's stability by preventing another Shiite-Sunni civil war similar to that of 2006–2008 also became an important foreign policy objective for the regional power because of the connectivity of Iraq's economy to Iran's. The breakout of another civil war might also have invited a stronger US intervention and threatened Iranian borders by virtue of thousands of American troops being stationed next to its neighbour. Iran therefore negotiated Maliki's exit and approved the candidacy of Adil Abdul-Mahdi (Khedery, 2014).

### *Iran's Security Influence in Iraq*

Iranian efforts to remould Iraq into a pro-Iranian weak state were spearheaded by its active support for Shiite militia groups from 2003–2016. Utilising Shiite militias to increase sectarian strife with Sunni political parties and to engage in direct fighting with US coalition forces was critical to Tehran's overall strategy. Funded, trained, and equipped by the IRGC, the pro-Iranian militias integrated themselves into the new political order and provided a proxy force to directly engage in fighting with US troops in Iraq (Nada & Rowan, 2018). Iran's military strategy in Iraq relied on asymmetric warfare i.e., fighting US forces on the ground through proxy groups while avoiding direct involvement and confrontation with the world's superpower on its borders which would drag the Islamic Republic into a direct conflict with a militarily superior force that had far more capabilities.

While Iran has waged a proxy conflict against the US through several militia groups, the major paramilitaries used throughout 2003–2016 apart, from the Mahdi Army, have been Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, and Asa'ib Al-Haq.

#### *Kata'ib Hezbollah*

Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) or the Brigades of the Party of God, is an Iranian sponsored anti American Shiite militia that formed with five small armed groups united to form a singular entity in 2007 (Nada & Rowan, 2021). KH is governed by a Shura (Arabic word for consultation) Council. The Quran encourages that Muslims decide their affairs through consultation), with a secretary general, five deputies and external overseers from the IRGCs. (Knights, Smith, & Malik, Profile: Kataib Hezbollah, 2021) The militia carried out specific

actions in direct consultation and with the advice of the IRGC-QF. The Revolutionary guard corps also partly finances the group and provides intelligence and tactical media and propaganda training in order to enhance the groups reach. The group's overarching goal is to set up an Islamic government based on the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (Nada & Rowan, 2021) a system of governance rooted in Shia Islam whereby the transfer of all political and religious authority to Shiite clergy and makes all the key state decisions subject to approval from a supreme clerical leader or the *vali-e faqih* (guardian Islamic jurist). (Aarabi, 2019) The model of government advocated by Kata'ib Hezbollah takes inspiration from the Iranian model of governance. The Shiite militia also looks on Ayatollah Khamenei as the groups spiritual guide with the leader of Iran prominently featured in the militia's promotional materials (Aarabi, 2019) .

As part of the 45<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> brigade of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), KH fought ISIS, taking part in several major military operations in Iraq. It fought in the US backed offensive to retake Mosul (Dehghanpisheh, 2016), the Iraqi army's effort to retake Ramadi (France 24, 2015), the joint campaign to recapture Fallujah in 2016 (Martin, 2016) alongside many other military operations against ISIS.

The group held a strong anti-American sentiment as the group opposed the return of US forces to advise the Iraqi army in fighting ISIS. (Nada & Rowan, 2021) Designated as a terrorist group by the US State Department in 2009, Kata'ib Hezbollah earned a reputation for attacking US forces in Iraq through the use of rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and improvised rocket assisted mortar (IRAM's). Some attacks on US forces include an RPG-29 attack on a U.S. tank located in Sha'ab, Iraq on May the 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, February 19, 2008 IRAM attack on a U.S. base near Rustamiya, Iraq. (Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq, 2009)

### *Badr Organization*

The Badr Organization is Iran's oldest proxy group in Iraq. Founded in the 1980s, the group was founded as the Badr Corps and was part of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a powerful Shiite political party. (Steinberg, p. 1) Since its inception, the militant group has worked closely with Iran, receiving direct support from the IRGC through funding, equipment, and training. The Badr Organization's deep ties with Iran has allowed the organization to penetrate Iraq's political and military establishment with

members of the group occupying positions inside Iraq's police force and army. (Arosoaie, p. 20)

The Badr Organization also played a major role in recapturing the cities of Ramadi and Tikrit from ISIS fighters at the height of the conflict which the group then used as propaganda for political momentum and support in Iraq. Under the leadership of Hadi Al-Amiri, the Badr organization has also furthered its agenda by instigating sectarian violence against Iraq's Sunni population, with the US State Department cables estimating that Al-Amiri ordered the killings of 2000 Sunnis through death squads. (Morris, 2014) The powerful militia group's grip on power increased with the rise of ISIS. In October 2014, the Badr led Operation Ashura, for the liberation of Jurf Al-Sakhar, a city near Baghdad and in doing so propagated the view that through the liberation of a border city to the capital, it played a role in securing Baghdad itself. (Arosoaie, p. 21)

#### *Asaib Ahl Al Haq*

Asaib Ahl Al Haq (AAH) or the League of the Righteous is an Iranian proxy and one of the largest militias in Iraq. Founded by Qais Al-Khazali in 2006, AAH broke away from the Mahdi Army (JAM), another militia run by the Iraqi cleric, Muqtada Al-Sadr and is a direct rival to Al Sadr's Sadrist movement. (Asaib Ahl al-Haq, 2021) AAH's overarching goals include, maintaining a Shiite controlled Iraqi state, promoting religious and political principles in line with the Iranian Revolution, expelling US troops and diplomatic presence from Iraq and advancing Iran's influence in Iraq. (Wyer, 2012)

AAH is funded, trained and equipped directly by the Quds Force, the external special operations branch of the IRGC. (Wyer, p. 9) In addition to training and financing AAH, Iran served as a base from which senior AAH officials could coordinate activities from in 2010. (Wyer, p. 12) Designated as a terrorist organization by the US State Department, AAH have acted in close cooperation with Iran and used Iranian made materials explosive formed projectiles (EFP) to target US forces in Iraq. (Knights, 2009) AAH members operate in cells made up of four to ten persons grouped under regional commanders with long experiences in Iran's intelligence services. AAH is responsible for over 6000 attacks on US forces since the occupation of Iraq in 2003. (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, 2006) Most notably in 2007, AAH operatives kidnapped and murdered five US soldiers in Karbala Iraq. (Knights, 2009)

AAH is more than just a militant group. On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Al Khazali addressed the country at a press conference in Najaf and announced the intention of the AAH to move to politics. (Wyer, p. 11) In the wake of US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, AAH embarked on a multi-pronged strategy including offering cultural sermons decrying US and Western influence in Iraq, providing social services to the Shia majority, increasing its own political representation by opening political offices in Baghdad and disseminating pro-Iranian propaganda through events and religious sermons as part of a multipronged offensive on America's presence in Iraq (Wyer, pp. 15-16)

With the help of its proxies, Iran increased the cost of the US occupation in Iraq. The use of proxies enabled Iran to avoid a direct confrontation with America while utilising militias as a useful source to combat the US in Iraq. Supporting proxy groups also creates a separate armed element within the Iraqi state that could pose problems for the Iraq's stability in the future. Militias such as the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah were organized under the umbrella of the PMF, an organization that Iran has significant power over. The PMF's size and funding make the group just as powerful as the traditional Iraqi army. Iraq's inability to disband PMF militias as per the request of the US provided Iran with the ability to inflict significant damage on American assets inside the country and create an even more dangerous security environment for the US to navigate in.

### *Qassem Soleimani and the Quds Force*

Iran's effort to dominate Iraq had been coordinated through multiple branches of the Iranian state, including the government, military, and major Iranian businesses, with each sector playing a critical role in aiding Tehran's efforts to combat the American presence and increase its power and influence in Iraq. However, the principal architect of Iranian foreign policy in Iraq was the QF, the elite clandestine wing of the IRGC responsible for Iran's foreign military operations (Soufan, p. 1). The QF's goal as a group has been to create suitable infrastructure for its intelligence officers in Iraq by providing support to loyal militias groups, generating economic activity through construction and commerce, and coordinating activities of various institutions such as the Red Crescent, Al-Shahid Organization, and different religious and tourism companies in order to advance Tehran's power in Baghdad (Iraqi Intelligence Report on Quds Force Activities in Iraq).

Established in 1998 to centralise Iranian military operations in overseas territories, the QF's first engagement in Iraq came at the end of the first Gulf War in 1990–1991 when US forces expelled Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait. The QF provided limited assistance to Shiite and Kurds in their revolt against the Baathist government in Iraq's March 1991 uprising (Golkar & Aasabi, p. 28). The QF's physical presence in Iraq began in the 1990s with the formation of the "Ramadan Headquarters" near the city of Ahvaz in Iran (Felter & Fishman, p. 17). During the 1990s, the QF fostered relations and trained and equipped organisations such as the Badr Organization, ISCI, and militant allies such as Muqtada Al-Sadr's Jaysh Al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army) as Iranian support for Shiite militants in exile laid the foundation for its future intervention in Iraq.

Since its founding, the art of asymmetric warfare has shaped the QF's military doctrine with the QF testing its mettle in the Bosnian War where QF soldiers supplied, indoctrinated, trained, and transported Bosnian Muslims in an effort to export its Islamic revolution to Europe (Golkar & Aasabi, p. 30). The development of the QF's military doctrine and its subsequent success can be attributed to one man: Qassem Soleimani, Iran's primary agent in Iraq. Nicknamed the Shadow Commander, Soleimani was personally responsible for countering the US in Iraq and commanded Iran's foreign policy operations in other countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen (Soufan, pp. 2-4). In the direct aftermath of the invasion of 2003, the Iranian regime realised that success in Iraq meant that Iran could be next on America's radar. Iran therefore dedicated enormous resources to denigrating the US presence in Iraq and ultimately forced it to abandon Iraq (Soufan, p. 3). To damage the US occupation, Soleimani began a long campaign of attacks on US troops by assisting Syrian intelligence in funnelling Sunni jihadist fighters into Iraq. While in Iraq, Syrian jihadists launched attacks against US forces through the use of Iranian-made roadside bombs supplied by QF factories (Soufan, p. 3). Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq were also recipients of Iranian-made roadside bombs used to target US troops in Iraq. Soleimani had also coordinated attacks on US troops in Iraq directly from the beginning of the Iraq War, with a December 27 attack on an Iraqi military base that killed a US civilian contractor in 2019 (Barnes, 2019). Such was the power of the QF major general, that US officials openly discussed Iraq's efforts to reach out to Soleimani in order to stop rocket attacks on the highly secured Green Zone in 2009 (Karimi & Gambrell, 2020).

In the sphere of intelligence, espionage, and spycraft, Soleimani worked aggressively to counter the US by imbedding Iran in Iraq's affairs. QF influence in Iraq provided Iranian

intelligence assets to Iranian assets to carry out successful operations favourable to Tehran. A trove of leaked intelligence reports from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) that were published by the Intercept and the New York Times detail QF tactics in espionage and spyware (Arango et al., 2019). According to the reports, Iran moved quickly to add former CIA informants in Iraq to their payroll after the 2011 withdrawal. The recruitment of former American informants gave Iran an in-depth picture of US espionage tactics as well as valuable insights into American plans for Iraq (Arango et al., 2019). The withdrawal of American troops in 2011 had left hundreds of secret agents jobless and destitute and fearful of possible revenge from Iran for aiding the US in its fight. Short of income, they offered their services to Iran and disclosed sensitive American technology such as an eavesdropping system on mobile phones run out of the Iraqi prime minister's office, software the US had given to the Iraqis, safehouse locations, surveillance techniques, American training videos and espionage field manuals, and details of American-made weaponry. Through bribery and gifts of gold coins, money, and other material goods MOIS secured valuable information on US activities which enabled the QF to counter the US in espionage.

Qassem Soleimani's reach into Iraq extended far beyond the coordination of military operations against the US and its allies. As the primary director of Iranian power, the QF general worked aggressively with Iraq's political establishment to embed Iran into Iraq's national affairs. Senior Iraqi administration officials like former national security minister Mowaffak Al-Rubaie described Soleimani as the "most powerful man in Iraq without question" and stated "nothing gets done without him" (Chulov, 2011). According to the leaked intelligence reports obtained by the New York Times, Soleimani successfully lobbied Iraq's Transportation Minister, Bayan Jabr to permit Iranian airplanes on to Syria, despite pressure from the US to limit Iran's use of Iraqi airspace (Arango et al., 2019).

The QF under Qassem Soleimani has been the primary vehicle through which Tehran has exercised its strategic competitions against the US in Iraq. The QF undertook a multipronged strategy in countering the US that involved funding and equipping Shiite militias, spearheading Iran's political plan, and gathering intelligence to counter the US. Soleimani was the most important figure in Iran's efforts to combat the US in Iraq.

## *Analysis of Iranian Influence Through Structural Realism*

Iran's strategy and actions in Iraq against the US are best understood through the theory of offensive realism. Since 2003, Iran's overarching strategic objective has been to dominate its neighbour in order to prevent the emergence of a future Iraqi nation that could prove to be hostile and a threat to Tehran's future security. The fundamental premise of offensive realism states that any regional power in the international system must ensure that the international security environment is anarchic in nature; therefore, it becomes necessary for regional powers to surround themselves with other countries that are weak and friendly. Iran's attempts to weaken Iraq by empowering allied militias, combined with its attempts to encourage and support pro-Iranian politicians, ensures that both criteria are met. Tehran's recognition that the US could transform Iraq into a pro-Western country further justified its actions and attitudes towards its neighbour. Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq was also influenced by its desire to become a regional hegemon in the Middle East (Trevino, 2013). In this context, a great power such as Iran was not limited in its pursuit of power and exerted its influence on Iraq in order to accumulate additional increments of power in its conflict with the US in the greater Middle East.

In contrast to offensive realism, defensive realism also explains Tehran's behaviour as a form of defensive posturing. The tenet of defensive realism dictates that the expansion of power can only be achieved under certain conditions, as, under an anarchic international system, the increase in one state's security decreases the security of other states. US consolidation of its security in the Middle East by influencing Iraq therefore decreased Iran's security and thus justified Iranian actions as defensive posturing.

Iran's desire to dominate Iraq was also rooted in its troubled history with its neighbour since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Iraq had remained Iran's enemy prior to the US invasion of 2003. Therefore, Iran took advantage of the chaos and attempted to reorganise Iraq's political and national security environment.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter investigates the strategic competition between the US and Iran in Iraq by analysing the foreign policy actions in the political and national security spheres in Iraq from 2003–2016. The chapter concludes that the Bush administration attempted to mould Iraq into a pro-Western democracy by providing Iraqi forces with training and equipment to combat

Iranian militias in the insurgency. Bush's personal relationship with Maliki saw the US influence Iraq by connecting with Maliki on a personal level. Events such as the surge were employed as a direct attempt to quell Iran's ambitions of sowing chaos and negating American influence in the country. While the Bush administration maintained direct involvement in Iraq's future, the incoming Obama administration withdrew its efforts to influence Iraq during the early years of Obama's presidency, thus allowing Iran to increase its footprint inside its neighbour. Obama's pivot towards domestic issues decreased US's power.

Regarding Iranian efforts to influence Iraq through politics and national security, this chapter discusses Iran's direct influence in the parliamentary elections of 2005, 2009, and 2014 through its allied Shiite political parties and its attempts to keep Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki in power. This chapter also analyses the role of Qassem Soleimani and reveals his power in leading Iran's overall strategy against the US in Iraq. This article introduces militias that operate as proxies for Iran's proxy war against the US and provides a brief history of their motives, tactics, and involvement with US forces over the years as well as the influence wielded by these militias.

The next chapter takes the rise of ISIS as a case study and investigate the impact of this event on overall US–Iranian strategic competition as a whole. It discusses the change in President Obama's strategy from withdrawal to engagement, while also examining the Iranian-backed Shiite militias' increase in power.

## **Chapter Four**

### **ISIS and the US–Iranian Strategic Competition in Iraq (2003-2016)**

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter seeks to investigate ISIS's impact on US–Iranian strategic competition in Iraq from 2003 to 2016. The US and Iranian reactions to the threat of ISIS in Iraq were important moment as it had consequences for Iraq's future political outlook. This chapter analyses the role of the US and Iran in combatting ISIS from its rapid rise in 2014 to the beginning of its defeat in 2016. This article examines the influence the US and Iran had on Baghdad during the fight against ISIS by studying US military assistance to Baghdad from 2014 and investigating the role Tehran's primary military and political ally, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which was formed in response to the terror groups rise. Understanding the role of the PMF in Iraq is essential to understanding US–Iranian confrontation because the PMF became the primary vehicle through which Iran extended its influence during the latter years of this study.

The brief history of ISIS is given in order to explain the failure and shortcomings in US foreign policies during its occupation. Furthermore, this chapter also seeks to highlight the role of American military and economic assistance to Baghdad and the impact of this relationship on the overall strategic outlook of US–Iranian competition in Iraq.

#### ***The Rise of ISIS***

In early 2014, a little-known terrorist group called Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTWJ) stunned the world by initiating a sudden but effective military campaign that captured key cities and territories in Iraq (Perper, 2021). This campaign resulted in the terror group's capturing huge swathes of Iraqi territory including major cities of Mosul, (Spencer & Geroux, 2021) Ramadi (Hassan & Chan, 2015), Fallujah (Engel, 2017), and Tikrit (Chapell, 2015).

Founded in 1999 by a Jordanian militant Abu Mudab Al Zarqawi, ISIS began as an independent Islamic extremist organisation that became an offshoot of al -Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Fishman, 2016). As a by-product of the American-led invasion in 2003 and its multiyear-long aftermath, ISIS controlled approximately 45,377km and 2.5 million people in Iraq and Syria by early 2017 (Jones et al., 2017, p. ix).

Three events were pivotal in the rise of ISIS: The De-Baathification of the Iraqi government and the disbanding of the Iraqi army under the Bush administration, and the withdrawal of US troops in 2011 under the Obama administration. Through these events, the US CPA pushed thousands of members of the Baath Party out of the government and increased anti-American sentiment amongst Iraq's Sunni population, a major section of Iraq's demographics that possessed administrative and governance experience (Rubin, 2015). The disbanding of the Iraqi army also alienated a large and powerful sector of Iraqi society (hundreds of thousands of men), leading many Iraqi soldiers who served under Saddam Hussein to join al -Qaeda-affiliated groups that would ultimately become ISIS and helped enhanced the fighting prowess of the terror organisation (Coles & Parker, 2015). Examples of Iraqi generals switching allegiances include Saddam-era officers like Fadel al-Hayali, the top deputy for Iraq who once served Saddam Hussein as a lieutenant colonel and Adnan al-Sweidawi, a former lieutenant colonel who went on to head ISIS's military council (Hubbard & Schmitt, 2014).

De-Baathification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army happened against the backdrop of the sectarian violence between the Shiite and the Sunni which broke out after the invasion. Following the 2003 invasion, the Sunnis rejected the new political order in Iraq that favoured the Shiite majority and the Baathists alongside Sunni Iraqis, feared the power transition would eliminate their grip on Iraq to the Shiites. Despite numbering a quarter of the overall population, the Sunnis had held power during Saddam's reign; however, the US invasion brought Shiite domination of Iraq's politics and raised fears of Shiite reprisals against Sunni communal interests (Moaddel et al., 2008). Al Zarqawi took advantage of the division in Iraq's society and further escalated these divisions amongst the Shia and Sunni into a civil war by bombing the Al-Askari mosque, a significant holy site for Shiite Muslims (Crowley, 2014; US Department of State, 2004).

The bombing of the Al-Askari mosque was part of a broader campaign by radical Sunni insurgents who pursued violence against the Shiite population through ethnic cleansing

and thuggery. The destruction of the shrine in turn mobilised Shiite militias against the minority Sunni population, leading to a wave of sectarian violence that had catastrophic consequences for Iraq's national security (Al-Jabouri & Jensen, 2010, p. 9).

The first US response to ISIS (then called al-Qaeda in Iraq) began in 2006. The US incurred heavy casualties during the height of the sectarian violence ushered in by AQI and other Sunni terrorist groups, with 944 American soldiers dying in Iraq in 2005, 921 dying in 2006, and 1,021 dying in 2007 (Faces of the Fallen, n.d.). As AQI operated in Sunni areas like Anbar, Ninevah, and Salah Al-Din, the local Sunni population became disillusioned by the violence and intimidation from AQI and its allies (Al-Jabouri & Jensen, 2010).

The events mentioned above led to a revolt, with the Sunnis partnering with the US to fight a common enemy. With US funding, Sunni tribes helped to displace AQI from its strongholds in Anbar, Ninevah, and Salah Al-Din. The death of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi via a US drone strike in 2006 further weakened AQI's hold on Iraq (Weaver, 2006). "The Anbar Awakening" forced AQI to go underground and act as an underground terrorist group rather than a full-scale insurgency (Kagan, 2007). Although the US had successfully worked with its Sunni allies to weaken ISIS' hold on Iraq's Sunni population the group successfully recovered its losses and rose at breakneck speed in 2014.

The revival of the terror group in 2014 had its links to the US withdrawal of 2011 under the Obama administration (Mannina, 2018). The withdrawal of 45,000 troops in 2011, created a security vacuum that helped ISIS to reorganize and re-establish itself as a major threat Iraq's national security. The decision to withdraw troops from Iraq halted the tenuous progress made under during the Anbar Awakening and the troop surge of 2007.

### ***The US Response to ISIS's Rise in Iraq***

The rise of ISIS during 2014, came in the wake of PM Maliki's sectarian divisions in Iraq through a range of policies that marginalised and disenfranchised Sunnis. These included mass arrests and violence against Sunni protesters, purging Sunni officers from the Iraqi army, and firing Sunni politicians who objected to Maliki's politics (Bhognani, 2014). Maliki also enhanced his hold on the Iraqi judiciary by putting pressure on the Iraqi Supreme Court to issue favourable rulings towards the Maliki government. One example of these rulings is

the constitutional ruling in January 2011, when the Supreme Court placed independent institutions such as the Central Bank and the Integrity commission under the supervision of the Iraqi cabinet after an appeal from the Maliki government to clarify articles 102 and 103 of the Constitution (Sullivan, 2003). The Iraqi judiciary lacked the independence that helps the courts to stay independent from national politics, and judges in Iraq have not been immune to political pressure or death threats from militias and power brokers (Sullivan, 2003). The move to remove the independence of independent bodies showed Prime Minister Maliki's ability to exercise power to achieve dictatorial control over Iraq's civilian institutions and the nation's financial sector. The widening sectarian divide caused by the Maliki government had detrimentally negative implications for the US' goals of providing stability for the nation. Prime Minister Maliki's mismanagement of Iraqi politics and its impact in increasing recruitment for ISIS and other terrorist organisations was viewed as a fundamental issue for America's own national security, with a group of six influential bipartisan senators in 2013 voicing strong concerns about the health of the Iraqi democracy (The New York Times, 2013).

Following the spectacular rise of ISIS in early 2014, the US launched a multinational coalition called the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR). The SOJTF-OIR was created to formalise ongoing military actions to defeat ISIS. The SJTF-OIR provided military, tactical, and operational support to the Iraqi military in the wake of its rise. The US mission to combat ISIS began with the authorisation of airstrikes by President Obama in 2014 to avert the fall of Erbil (Cooper et al., 2014). American involvement gradually increased with the formation of the US-led coalition to fight ISIS and provide military assistance to the Iraqi army in defeating the caliphate. Since the beginning of US combat operations in Iraq, the US-led coalition of 85 member countries conducted 14,886 airstrikes in Iraq in support of the Iraqi offensive on the ground (US led Coalition in Iraq and Syria, 2021). American airstrikes were critical to Iraqi success in major military campaigns such as the recapture of Tikrit in 2014, Ramadi in 2015 and Mosul in 2016 (Glenn, 2016).

American assistance to Iraq in the wake of ISIS' rise increased with the establishment of the Counter ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF). At the direction of the Department of Defense, CTEF provided Baghdad with crucial monetary support in combating ISIS, with \$6.5 billion in funding from the financial year 2015 (Sharp et al., 2020). The CTEF helped build Iraq's security forces' capabilities by providing military equipment integral in military offensives for example mortars, high powered machine guns, Humvees, cleaning kits,

ambulances, Abrams tanks, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) (Office of the Department of Defense, 2020, pp. 9-17). The US military industrial complex has been a major source of weapons and operational planning for Baghdad, as Iraq's security forces (ISF) relied on and continue to rely heavily on American expertise in combating ISIS despite the terror groups' defeat, according to a report by the lead Inspector-General of the US in 2021 (O'Donnell, 2021).

Although American help throughout the campaign against ISIS has included providing operational support to the ISF as well as training in long-term strategic thinking and intelligence-led planning, the ISF has lacked the capability to independently plan and execute tactical and strategic-level operations against the ISIS insurgency and continues to rely on American-led tactical planning to fulfil its strategic objectives (O'Donnell, 2021). This reliance on US personnel ensures continuing American presence within Iraq, which in turn translates into sustained American influence inside Iraqi's security institutions. Maintaining a presence in Iraq's army fulfils an important purpose because the ISF is the first line of defence against ISIS combatants who predominantly operate out of Iraqi provinces such as Salah ad Din, Ninevah, Anbar, Kirkuk and Diyala (O'Donnell, 2021). Supporting the ISF ensured a working relationship with the federal government in Baghdad and helps balance the state's other major security organisation, the Iranian backed PMF.

### ***Iran's Response to ISIS's Rise in Iraq***

Iran's relationship with ISIS lies in the direct aftermath of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. Iran opposed the US invasion of Iraq and, fearing the inclusion of Sunnis in the Iraqi government, Iran saw the inevitable post-conflict reconstruction as an opportunity to increase its involvement in the country (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015). For the first time in half a century, Iran had in Iraq a friend and not a foe. The chaos unleashed by the American-led invasion helped to create a base for terrorist groups such as AQL, and with the advent of ISIS Tehran found itself with the prospect of facing an adversary with an innate hatred of Shiites creating a Sunni caliphate on Iran's borders (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015, p. 4).

Anti-Shiism forms the bedrock of ISIS' core ideology and is the principal reason for the Iranian-ISIS adversarial relationship. ISIS views Shiite Islam as a false form of Islam and

militants commonly refer to Shiite Muslims as *Rāfiḍah* or rejectors of the true version of Islam, according to the group (Jihadist News, 2014). Abu Musab-Al Zarqawi the leader of AQI, the precursor to ISIS, in 2006 espoused his personal views on Shiism, denouncing the top Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Iraq as an atheist, while comparing the Shiite to snakes and levelling accusations of collusion between the Shiites and foreign invaders in past military campaigns (CBS, 2006). AQI's deep hatred of the Shiite led the terror group to launch attacks against Iraq's Shiite population with the bombing of the Imam Ali Mosque, a Shiite holy site in Najaf in 2003 (Wedeman, 2003). The bombing of the Al-Askari shrine in 2006 further inflamed tensions between Iran and AQI, leading to a civil war in 2006-2008.

The rise of ISIS in 2014 and the capture of Iraqi territories endangered Iran's political ambitions to establish a pro-Shiite, pro-Iranian government and galvanised the Islamic Republic into acting against the Sunni insurgent group. For Tehran, facing the prospect of an adversary like ISIS constituted an eminent threat to its national security, as the terror group had designated Iran as one of its chief enemies and placed it amongst its top targets (Tabatabai et al., 2021, p. 106). Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran had invested significant resources in cultivating its influence in Iraq; however, the rise of ISIS threatened to demolish the influence Tehran had developed with its neighbour, as the terror group's significant gains could have dissolved Iraq as a state and unleashed chaos on Iran's borders. Therefore, Tehran rapidly moved to quell the threat of ISIS through direct and swift intervention.

The deployment of 2,000 troops in Iraq to train, equip, advise, and arm Shiite and Kurdish allies in mid-2014 laid the groundwork for a calculated and full intervention to arrive in the coming years (Chulov, 2014). Iran's Quds Force, which had been the primary vehicle in cultivating and maintaining Iran's power in Iraq, took charge of the coordination of Iranian military activities against ISIS in Iraq, with Qassem Soleimani as its head. Iranian troop deployments in Iraq had arrived at a time when Tehran was already directly engaged in the Syrian Civil War. While Iran had deployed thousands of troops in Syria, Iranian involvement in Iraq was significantly smaller, in part because Iran could rely on the US-led international coalition fighting ISIS, while conserving its ground forces (Tabatabai et al., 2021, p. 108). Iranian intervention in Iraq was conducted in line with the country's usual patterns of intervention, that is, through the use of several Iranian friendly militias and armed groups, with Tehran offering advice, financial, and military support.

The primary organisation through which Iran fought ISIS was an umbrella organisation called the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) or the Hashed: a loose confederation of 50-70 militias groups that formed the biggest entity not under the direct control of the Iraqi government (Mansour & Jabar, 2017). The organisation owes its allegiance to three distinct leaders, three distinct figures: the leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei, Grand Ayatollah Ali-Sistani, and Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr (Mansour, 2018). Iran had the support of several pro-Iranian militia groups in Iraq, with the most powerful backed and sponsored militias in the PMF being Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al Haq (Alaadin, 2017). Formed in response to a call to arms in 2014 by the Grand Cleric of the Shiite Ayatollah Ali Sistani to ordinary Iraqis to help fight ISIS in Iraq. Ali-Sistani's call to arms came from the collapse of Iraq's state security's ability to protect Iraq amid ISIS' rise by the then Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki in direct breach of Article 9, Paragraph B of the Iraqi Constitution which prohibited the formation of a militia outside of the framework of the armed forces (Mansour & Jabar, 2017).

As a state-sponsored umbrella organisation, the PMF fought alongside the Iraqi army in several military campaigns to defeat ISIS. The PMF became an effective fighting force and helped liberate Iraqis at a time when the Iraqi state had collapsed in 2014. The PMF's success on the battlefield enhanced its popularity and support amongst the Shiite provinces in Iraq, and as a result, recruitment for PMF fighters amongst the Shiite base swelled, with well-placed sources suggesting that 75% of men aged 18-30 in Shiite provinces signed up to join various PMF groups (Mansour, 2016). The popularity of the Iran-allied faction of the PMF converted into support for the Iranian state. The success of the PMF allowed the organisation to go beyond being just a traditional military institution, and Iranian-backed PMF militias have allied with political parties to translate their gains from the security to the political arena.

Although the PMF was a nonunified entity that was officially under the command of the Prime Minister, the largest militias mentioned above worked in tandem to with Iranian officials like Qassem Soleimani to enhance Tehran's power and image in key cities like Fallujah (Bodetti, 2017). The Badr organization's control over Diyala, a Sunni majority province, was one example of PMF and Iran's power in Iraq. The Badr organization worked to transfer control of Diyala province the Shiites by Sunnis from returning to Diyala province, thereby changing the provinces demographics and electing Muthana-Al-Tamimi, a Badrist to the post of governor in 2015 (Sowell, 2015). The disenfranchisement of Sunnis in

Diyala increased Iran's hold over Iraq by enabling its proxy to control a key province, ensuring that the Shiite regional power is able to exercise greater control over a portion of Iraqi territory. Kata'ib Hezbollah, another power PMF associated militia helped capture Tikrit, and was heavily involved in the seizure of Fallujah in 2015 and became a permanent part of its security (Nasrawi, 2016).

### ***ISIS's Impact on US-Iranian Competition from 2014-2016***

While both the US and Iran took part in the campaign to defeat ISIS, the analysis indicates that Iran proved to be more successful in cementing its influence over Iraq than the US from 2014-2016. The efforts of the PMF in defeating ISIS gave the umbrella organization official status, making the group an authorized part of the Iraqi army in 2016 (Salim & Ryan, 2016). The allegiance of the PMF to Ayatollah Khamenei, weakened the Iraqi state by giving Iran's activities in the country, greater legitimacy and direct control of the nation's security as PMF militias were given authority to hold ground and maintain security in Iraq. Authority to maintain direct control over Iraqi territory by the PMF helped create deterrence by weakening state power and increased Tehran's hold over the country. The US's attempt to pressure Iraq's new PM Haider Al-Abadi to incorporate the PMF into Iraq's traditional security force and reduce its power failed.

Stigmatising, disenfranchising and terrorizing Iraq's Sunni population, was the second benefit Tehran gained from the PMF's newly gained power. neutralising any threats that may arise from a potential Sunni national government in Iraq in the future. The disenfranchisement of the Sunnis was opposite to the outcome wanted by President's George Bush and Obama, who supported an Iraqi federal government with major Sunni representation as a way to stabilize Iraq.

The establishment of the PMF as a central authority in Iraq's security sector also increased the likelihood of competition between the state and its paramilitaries. As discussed in the previous chapter, independent militias like Iranian backed militias like the Mahdi Army and Kata'ib Hezbollah have engaged in direct confrontation with Iraqi and US forces. The centralization of Iranian backed militias increased the likelihood of future confrontation

between the Iraqi state and the PMF and ensured that Iraq was beholden to Iran in the security arena (Mansour, 2015).

Iran net gains during 2014-2016 automatically reduced the US's power and ability to compete with Iraq in the political and military arena. American airstrikes on ISIS targets provided crucial support to Iraqi ground forces, but PMF's heavy presence on the ground negated the impact of US airstrikes (Cooper H. , 2015). The Obama strategy also left Iranian backed militias to carry out the ground offensive in certain battles against ISIS (Cooper H. , 2015). The Battle of Tikrit was an example of Iranian backed militias committing the majority of its forces (30,000 fighters), led by QF general Qassem Soleimani, to fight ISIS. Direct engagement from Iran and its patrons, the QF, limited the US's options in conducting military operations with Iraq's federal government.

Iran's efforts to increase its military footprint through proxy militias in Baghdad is interpreted through the theory of offensive realist. The presence of the PMF role in spearheading the fight against ISIS intended to deliver additional increments of power to Iran and provide Tehran with the opportunity to dominate Iraq's political and military sphere. Another aspect of offensive realism is the ability for states to possess significant military capabilities in its arsenal in order to prevent strategic competitors from challenging its power. Iran's support for the PMF increases Tehran's military power and limits American options when it comes to challenging Iran's authority in Iraq.

On the other hand, US foreign policy from 2014-2016 can be described through the lens of defensive realism. President Obama's foreign policy did not attempt to expand American power in Iraq, instead attempted to balance Iranian power by utilising diplomacy to achieve outcomes such as incorporating the PMF into Iraqi state security. The US's actions under Obama did not seek to maximise relative power which could have been attempted by fighting back against the Iran-backed PMF – however, such a move could have plunged the country back into chaos and US gains would have been minimal as a result. Obama recognised his limited options and the constraints he faced and rather than gamble, he chose a more moderate path to ensure the maintenance of a stable Iraq that, in turn, would increase the chances the US could hold on to its influence with the Iraqi government even if this influence was balanced by increased Iranian influence via the PMF.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter discusses the rise of ISIS in early 2014, an event that shocked the world and forced the international community to act against this brutal and barbaric foe. The presence of ISIS threatened to destabilise the Middle East and the terror group became a threat to American and Iranian interests alike in Iraq. Recognising the danger ISIS posed, America and Iran rushed to assist Iraq in its fight against ISIS. However, ISIS' rise had ramifications for US–Iranian strategic competition in Iraq.

While the US and Iran took part in the campaign against ISIS, it was Iran that took greater advantage of the political and security situation in Iraq. Iranian mobilisation of the PMF, a coalition of various militia groups, increased the popularity of Iranian-backed groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl-Haq and the Badr Organization. The presence of PMF in Iraq's parliament allowed direct Iranian influence into Iraq's policy making and legislative decision making. The PMF still managed to establish themselves in the political arena and to continue to represent Iran's power and influence in the country.

In contrast, American power in the country waned in comparison to Iran throughout 2014 to 2016. The presence of the PMF decreased America's ability to exercise greater control over Iraq's parliament. However, the United States continues to maintain strong relations with the ISF. While the US did not commit its own troops to fight ISIS, US programmes like CTEF enabled Washington to continue to fund, train, and equip Iraqi forces as well as maintain a presence amongst one of the most powerful institutions in the Shiite majority nation.

The ISIS era changed Iraq's power dynamics and ushered in a new era of influence in Iraqi politics. The political system post 2014 introduced new actors in Iraq and changed the roles of both America's and Iran's role in the country. The next chapter will conclude this thesis by summarising the findings of the research and answer the thesis questions.

## **Conclusion**

From 2003 to 2016, Iraq became the key focus for strategic competition between the US and Iran. On one hand the US attempted to use its power as an occupying force to bring Iraq under its influence by transitioning the anti-American regime to a pro-Western democracy that would become the model for future democratisation in the Middle East and a bulwark to US's enemies, like Iran. Iran for its part, used its key Shiite militias, proxies and patronage networks to ensure that Iran could never become a national security threat to Tehran in the future. The US's inability to achieve the desired political outcome in Iraq or hinder Iranian plans led the US to eventually shift focus from active domination of Iraq to strategic balancing where the US strategically competed with Iran to reduce its presence in the country.

Tehran's approach towards the US in Iraq was shaped due to the structure of the regional system in the Middle East that saw Iran's territorial integrity threatened by a geostrategic competitor. The research concludes that the US invasion of 2003 was a hegemonic realist war designed to assert US supremacy in the Middle East. The invasion saw the world's superpower position itself in the region in a manner that could enhance its influence throughout the region and isolate Iran, creating a hostile future for the US's primary opponent in the Middle East.

Due to the battle for US-Iranian competition from 2003 to 2016, this thesis concludes that the US experienced a relative loss in influence to Iran in Iraq and Washington's campaign to compete with Tehran has not been effective or successful. US influence declined from the Bush administration through to the Obama administration in both the political and military dimensions. This thesis concludes that George W. Bush successfully exercised his power by influencing Iraq's political decision making during his tenure and was able to limit Tehran's influence in the country. In the security arena, George Bush's strategy was more comprehensive and aggressive than Obama as it involved influence over Iraq more comprehensively and where his policies the troop surge and efforts to train and equip Iraqi forces to combat terror networks. This directly helped maintain the US's presence in Iraq's national security sector.

In contrast to the Bush administration, Obama's policies contributed to the decline in the US's ability to maintain the level of influence it possessed during the Bush administration. In the political arena, Obama's reluctance to devote American resources into a conflict he fundamentally opposed led to then PM Nouri Al-Maliki consolidating his power in 2009 and exacerbating the sectarian tensions that plagued the Obama administration through its tenure. Maliki's rejection of the Obama White House's efforts to assist in Iraq's democratic processes made clear that US influence in Baghdad was waning. In the security dimension, Obama's withdrawal of 2011, and lack of desire to comprehensively engage in Iraq was directly linked to the rise of ISIS in 2014.

This research also concludes that Iran's influence steadily increased in both the military and the political dimensions from 2003 to 2016 and the Islamic Republic had more success in combatting the American influence in Iraq. Through the use of its militias, Tehran raised the cost of the US occupation, fuelled sectarian violence and conducted clandestine operations in advancing its foreign policy objectives in Iraq. In the political realm, Tehran's geography and substantial military assets coupled with its shared religion and identity with Baghdad, enhanced its negotiating power with Iraq's new political establishment, ensuring that Iran could act as a bulwark against Washington's influence in the Iraqi political sphere.

The rise of ISIS in 2014, saw major shifts in the power dynamics in Iraq between Washington and Tehran and saw Iran gain an advantage over its geostrategic rival. The active presence of the Quds Force (QF) and its leader Major General Qassem Soleimani enhanced Iranian reputation amongst Iraq's politicians and its people. Tehran's use of militias once again served as the central vehicle through which the QF engaged in direct combat with ISIS militants, enabling groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr organization and Asaib Ahl-Haq to capture territories and exercise direct political and security controls over those areas. The capture of Iraqi territory by militias meant that Iran had the ability to exercise its power in a more direct manner and could reduce Washington's dwindling influence at the local and regional level.

While tilting the competition of power in favour of Iran, ISIS's rise in 2014 did provide an opportunity for the reluctant Obama administration to reassert the US presence in Iraq through a range of measure that included airstrikes, training and equipping elements of the US trained Iraqi forces like the Counter Terrorism Service and coordinating with Iraq's political establishment to secure the country from the threat of ISIS. Yet despite American

aid, this thesis found that Iran exercised its power in the country more proactively and facilitated deeper engagement with its Iraqi counterpart to navigate a more successful path for its influence towards its neighbour.

Ultimately, this thesis concludes that the greater portion of the distribution of foreign influence in Iraq 2003 to 2016 tilted towards Iran. While the US had the large amount of influence during the post war years succeeding the invasion, Iran worked hard to imbed itself into the political and the military fabric of Iraq and steadily imposed itself on its weaker neighbour. The change in the American administration in 2009 was also a factor that hindered Washington's ability to compete with Iran as the Bush and Obama administrations approached the Iraq question with substantial differences in strategies, which in turn was related to grand strategic priorities; for Bush, Iraq was the key geopolitical priority but for Obama it was a need to begin shifting attention and resources to Asia and the Pacific. In contrast, Tehran's foreign policy was consistent in its goals and objectives. Ultimately, making Iran the more successful of the two powers in competing for influence in Iraq.

## *References*

- Aarabi, K. (2019, March 20). *What is the velayat-e faqih?* Tony Blair Institute for Global Chances: <https://institute.global/policy/what-velayat-e-faqih>
- Alaaldin, R. (2017). *Containing Shiite militias: The battle for stability in Iraq*. Brookings Institute.
- Alaaldin, R. (2017, November 1). The origins and ascendancy of Iraq's Shiite militias. <https://www.hudson.org/research/13993-the-origins-and-ascendancy-of-iraq-s-shiite-militias>
- Alaadin, R. (2018, May 15). What Iraq's election means for its Shiite militias. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/15/what-iraqs-election-means-for-its-shiite-militias/>
- Al-Jabouri, A. N., & Jensen, S. (2010). The Iraqi and AQI roles in the Sunni awakening. *PRISM*, 2(1), 3-18.
- Al Jazeera. (2010, March 4). *Iraq's most powerful coalitions*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/3/4/iraqs-most-powerful-coalitions>
- Al-Rahim, R. (2020, January 16). Consequences of Iraq's vote to end coalition troop presence. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/consequences-of-iraqs-vote-to-end-coalition-troop-presence/>
- Al-Saleh, O. (2017, March 17). Iran and ISIL 'top priority' for Iraq-US relations. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/3/21/iran-and-isil-top-priority-for-iraq-us-relations>
- Associated Press. (2019, January 12). *A timeline of the US involvement in Syria's conflict*. <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-syria-islamic-state-group-middle-east-international-news-96701a254c5a448cb253f14ab697419b>
- Arango, T. (2017, July 15). Iran dominates in Iraq after U.S. 'handed the country over'. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-iranian-power.html>
- Arango, T., Risen, J., Fassihi, F., Bergman, R., & Hussain, M. (2019, November 19). The Iran cables: Secret documents show how Tehran wields power in Iraq. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/18/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-spy-cables.html>
- Arosoaie, A. (2015). Hadi Al-Amiri's grip on Iraq. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 7(10), 19-24.
- Arraf, J. (2020, January 6). Iraqi parliament votes to expel U.S. troops, Trump threatens sanctions. <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/06/793895401/iraqi-parliament-votes-to-expel-u-s-troops-trump-threatens-sanctions>
- Arraf, J., & Schmitt, E. (2021, July 24). U.S. to announce troop drawdown from Iraq, but little is expected to change. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/24/world/middleeast/iraq-biden-us-forces.html>
- Barnes, J. (2019, December 27). American contractor killed in rocket attack in Iraq. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/us/politics/american-rocket-attack-iraq.html>

- Beehner, L. (2006, March 30). U.S. intervention in Iraqi politics. Council of Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-intervention-iraqi-politics>
- Beinhart, P. (2015, September). The surge fallacy. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-surge-fallacy/399344/>
- Belasco, A. (2019). *Troop levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and other potential issues*. Congressional Research Service.
- Berger, M. (2020, January 11). Invaders, allies, occupiers, guests: A brief history of U.S. military involvement in Iraq. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/01/11/invaders-allies-occupiers-guests-brief-history-us-military-involvement-iraq/>
- Bhognani, P. (2014, October 28). *In their own words: Sunnis on their treatment in Maliki's Iraq*. [Video file]. FRONTLINE. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq/>
- Blachford, K. (2021). The balance of power and the power struggles of the polis. *Journal of International Political Theory*, 17(3), 429-447.
- Bodetti, A. (2017, April 13). *Fallujah: The Iraq victory that could lose the war*. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/fallujah-the-iraq-victory-that-could-lose-the-war>
- Bolan, C. J. (2017, August 4). The US balance-of-power strategy in the Gulf is collapsing: But it never had a chance anyway. <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2017/08/us-balance-power-strategy-gulf-collapsing-it-never-had-chance-anyway/140005/>
- Brannon, S. (1994). Pillars, petroleum and power: The United States in the Gulf. *The Arab Studies Journal*, 2(1), 4-10.
- Brookes, P. (2021, May 4). *Iran's growing missile threat*. The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/irans-growing-missile-threat>
- Brown, M., Lynn-Jones, S., & Miller, S. (1996). *Debating the democratic peace*. MIT Press.
- Bruno, G. (2007, October 17). *Plans for Iraq's future: Federalism, separatism, and partition*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/plans-iraqs-future-federalism-separatism-and-partition>
- Bush, G. W. (2002). *The national security strategy*. The White House.
- Byman, D. (2003). Should Hezbollah be next? *Foreign Affairs*, 82(6) 54-66.
- CBS. (2006, June 6). *Zarqawi calls for civil war In Iraq*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/zarqawi-calls-for-civil-war-in-iraq/>
- Center for International Security and Cooperation. (n.d.). *Kata'ib Hezbollah*. [https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/kataib-hezbollah#text\\_block\\_24071](https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/kataib-hezbollah#text_block_24071)
- Center for International Security and Cooperation. (2006). *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*. [https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/asaib-ahl-al-haq#\\_ftn9](https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/asaib-ahl-al-haq#_ftn9)
- Chapell, B. (2015, March 12). *Iraqi force makes more gains toward taking Tikrit from ISIS*. [Radio broadcast]. National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/03/12/392485510/iraqi-force-makes-more-gains-toward-taking-tikrit-from-isis>

- Chipman, J. (2019, November 2019). Iran's networks of influence. Chapter four: Iraq. The Institute for International Strategic Studies. International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- Chughtai, A., Ibrahim, A., & Billard-Arbelaez, S. (2021, October 10). Infographic: All you need to know about Iraq's election. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/10/infographic-all-you-need-to-know-about-iraqs-elections>
- Chulov, M. (2011, July 28). Qassem Suleimani: The Iranian general 'secretly running' Iraq. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence>
- Chulov, M. (2014, June 14). Iran sends troops into Iraq to aid fight against Isis militants. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/14/iran-iraq-isis-fight-militants-nouri-maliki>
- Clark, W. (2003). *Winning modern wars: Iraq, terrorism, and the American empire*. Public Affairs.
- Clinton, H. (2011, October 11). *America's Pacific century*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>
- Cochrane, M. (2009). Jaysh al-Madhi. Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/jaysh-al-mahdi>
- Combating Terrorism Center. (n.d.). *Iraqi Intelligence report about the Quds Force activities in Iraq*.
- Congressional Research Service. (2020). *U.S. Foreign aid to Israel*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>
- Connable, B. (2020). *An enduring American commitment in Iraq*. Rand Corporation.
- Coles, I., & Parker, N. (2015, December 11). How Saddam's men help Islamic State rule. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/>
- Cooper, H., Landler, M., & Rubin, A. (2014, August 7). Obama allows limited airstrikes on ISIS. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/world/middleeast/obama-weighs-military-strikes-to-aid-trapped-iraqis-officials-say.html>
- Council on Foreign Relations. (2005, February 3). *IRAQ: Iraqi ties to terrorism*. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-iraqi-ties-terrorism>
- Counter Extremism Project. (2021). *Asaib Ahl al-Haq*. <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/asaib-ahl-al-haq>
- Corbett, M. (n.d.). *Oil shock of 1973–74*. <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/oil-shock-of-1973-74>
- Crawford, N. (2019). *United States budgetary costs and obligations of post-9/11 wars through FY2020: \$6.4 trillion*. Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs.
- Crowley, M. (2014, June 26). How the fate of one holy site could plunge Iraq back into civil war. *Time*. <https://time.com/2920692/iraq-isis-samarra-al-askari-mosque/>
- Daoud, D. (2020, April 30). Hezbollah considers the United States, not Israel, its greatest enemy. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/hezbollah-considers-the-united-states-not-israel-its-greatest-enemy/>

- Dagher, S. (2008, December 28). Ex-Hussein officials and others go on trial. *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/29/world/middleeast/29iraq.html>
- Davidson, J. (2014). The U.S. "Pivot to Asia". *American Association of Chinese Studies*, 21(Special Issue, June 2014), 77-82.
- Defense Intelligence Agency. (2019). *Iran military power*.
- Dehghanpisheh, B. (2016, October 31). Iran-trained militias join U.S-backed campaign on Mosul, flying Shi'ite flags. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-iran-idUSKBN12U0UI>
- Delman, E. (2016, March 31). *Obama promised to end America's wars: Has he? The Atlantic*.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-wars-numbers/474531/>
- Department of Defense Office of Inspector General. (2021). *Operation Inherent*.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/domino-theory>
- Dobbins, J. (2003). *America's role in nation building*. Rand Corporation.
- Dobbins, J., Jones, S. G., Runkle, B., & Mohandas, S. (2009). *Occupying Iraq: A history of the Coalition Provisional Authority*. Rand Corporation.
- Dormer, R. (2017). The impact of constructivism on international relations theory: A history. *Kwansei Gakuin University, Social Science Review*, 22, 51-64.
- Drezner, D. (2020, May 7). *The Blob abides*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/05/07/blob-abides/>
- Dudgeon, I. (2020, December 2). What are the chances of a new 'grand bargain' between the US and Iran? <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/what-are-the-chances-of-a-new-grand-bargain-between-the-us-and-iran/>
- Edge, D. (Director) (2021). *Truth, war and consequences*. [Film]. FRONTLINE.
- Einhorn, R., & Van Diepen, V. (2019). *Constraining Iran's missile capabilities*. Brookings Institute.
- Eisenstadt, M. (2010, October 5). Iran and Iraq. United States Institute of Peace:  
<https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-iraq>
- Eisenstadt, M., Knights, M., & Ali, A. (2011). Iran's influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's whole-of-government approach. Washington Institute of Policy.
- Election Guide Democracy Assistance & Election News. (2018, May 12.) The Republic of Iran: Election for Majlis An-Nuwwab Al'Iraqiyy (Iraqi Council of Representatives).  
<https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3060/>
- Engel, P. (2017, January 1). This is what ISIS' longest-held Iraqi city looked like after years of occupation. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/fallujah-after-isis-2016-12?r=AU&IR=T>
- Encyclopedia Britannica.(n.d.). *Domino theory*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/domino-theory>
- Esfandiary, D., & Tabatabai, A. (2015). *Iran's ISIS policy*. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

- Falk, T. O. (2020, November 22). What the US troop withdrawal means for Iraq.
- Falk, T. O. (2021, July 6). 'Caught in a geopolitical struggle': US-Iran tug of war in Iraq. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/6/caught-in-a-geopolitical-struggle-us-iran-tug-of-war-in-iraq>
- Fellows, J. (2015, August 14). What if Barack and Bibi are both right? *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/08/israel-opposition-iran-deal/401129/>
- Fearon, J. (2007). Iraq's civil war. *Foreign Affairs*, 86(2), 2-15.
- Felter, J., & Fishman, B. (2008). *Iranian strategy in Iraq: Politics or other means*. West Point: Combating Terrorism Center.
- Filkins, D. (2014, April 21). What we left behind. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind>
- Fishman, B. (2016, October). *Revising the history of Al-Qa`ida's original meeting with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi*. *CTCSentinel*, 9(10). <https://ctc.usma.edu/revising-the-history-of-al-qaidas-original-meeting-with-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/>
- Fitzgerald, D., & Ryan, D. (2014). *Obama, US foreign policy and the dilemmas of intervention*. Macmillan.
- Fleck, R. K., & Kilby, C. (2008). Changing aid regimes? US foreign aid from the Cold War to the War on Terror. *Journal of Development Economics*, 91(2), 185-197.
- France 24. (2015, May 19). *Iraqi army, militias prepare to retake Ramadi from IS group*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20150519-iraq-army-militias-ramadi-is-group>
- Geneva Centre For Democratic Control of Armed Forces (2008). *Status of forces agreement between the Republic of Iran and the United States of America*.
- Gerges, F. (2012). *Obama and the Middle East: The end of America's moment?* St. Martin's Press.
- Gershkoff, A., & Kushner, S. (2005). Shaping public opinion: The 9/11-Iraq connection in the Bush administration's rhetoric. *Perspectives in Politics*, 3(3), 523-537.
- Glass, A. (2019, January 29). *President Bush cites 'axis of evil,' Jan. 29, 2002*. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/29/bush-axis-of-evil-2002-1127725>
- Glenn, C. (2016, April 27). Timeline: US policy on ISIS. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-us-policy-isis>
- Glenn, C., Rowan, M., Caves, J., & Nada, G. (2019, October 28). Timeline: The rise, spread, and fall of the Islamic State. [wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state)
- Goldberg, J. (2010). *The point of no return*. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/09/the-point-of-no-return/308186/>
- Goldberg, J. (2016, April). The Obama doctrine. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

- Golkar, S., & Asabi, K. (2021). *The view from Tehran: Iran's military doctrine*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.
- Golovics, J. (2017). Contemporary realism in theory and practice: The case of the Ukrainian crisis. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 362-365.
- Gomichon, M. (2013). Joseph Nye on soft power. *E-International Relations*, 1-5.
- Gross, S. (2019, March 5). What Iran's 1979 revolution meant for US and global oil markets. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/05/what-irans-1979-revolution-meant-for-us-and-global-oil-markets/>
- Haddad, F. (2016, January 7). *Shia-centric state building and Sunni rejection in post-2003 Iraq*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408>
- Hahn, P. (2006). Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower doctrine of 1957. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36(1), 38-47.
- Hamasaeed, S., & Nada, G. (2020, May 29). *Iraq timeline: Since the 2003 war*. <https://www.usip.org/iraq-timeline-2003-war>
- Hanna, A. (2021, March 8). *U.S. military deployments around Iran*. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/jan/05/us-military-deployments-around-iran>
- Hartley, O. T. (2019). *Oil, gas and geopolitical dimensions of the Syrian Civil War: A neoclassical realist assessment*. [Master's dissertation University of Waikato].
- Hauser, C. (2007, Aug 09th ). *Bush Says Iraqi Leader Shares His View on Iran*. The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/09/world/middleeast/09cnd-prexy.html>
- Hassan, F., & Chan, S. (2015, October 28). Iraqi victory over ISIS in Ramadi could prove pivotal. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/world/middleeast/iraq-ramadi-isis.html>
- Hassan, H. (2019, April 16). *From radical to rentier Islamism: The case of Iraq's Dawa Party*. Malcolm H. Kerr: Carnegie Middle East Institute. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/04/16/from-radical-to-rentier-islamism-case-of-iraq-s-dawa-party-pub-78887>
- Hassan, H. (2020, October 4). Husham al-Hashimi helped the Iraqi government understand and hunt down ISIS terrorists. But his last work was on Shiite militias, and they assassinated him for it. *New Lines Magazine*. <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/the-man-who-knew-too-much-why-shiite-militias-killed-iraqs-finest-isis-scholar/>
- Hersh, S. M. (1992, January 26). *U.S. secretly gave aid to Iraq early in its war against Iran*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/26/world/us-secretly-gave-aid-to-iraq-early-in-its-war-against-iran.html>
- Higel, L. (2021, November 16). *Iraq's surprise election results*. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraqs-surprise-election-results>
- Holbrik, K., & Drachman, E. (1971). Egypt as recipient of soviet aid, 1955-1970. *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, 127(1), 137-165.

- Hubbard, B., & Schmitt, E. (2014, August 27). Military skill and terrorist technique fuel success of ISIS. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/army-know-how-seen-as-factor-in-isis-successes.html>
- Hubbard, B., & Almosawa, S. (2021, February 5). Biden ends military aid for Saudi war in Yemen: Ending the war is harder. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-biden.html>
- Hurd, I. (2008). Constructivism. In C. Reus-Smit & D. Snidal (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of international relations* (pp. 298-316). Oxford University Press.
- Ikenberry, J., & Deudney, D. (2017). Realism, liberalism and the Iraq. *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 4, 7-26.
- International Crisis Group. (2005, March 21). *Iran in Iraq: How much influence?* <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/iran-iraq-how-much-influence>
- International Institute of Strategic Studies. (2019). *Iran's networks of influence in the Middle East*.
- Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation under the security dilemma. *World Politics*, 30(2), 167-214.
- Jervis, R. (2003). Understanding the Bush doctrine. *Political Science Quarterly*, 118(14), 365-388.
- Jihadist News. (2014, July 1). *Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi encourages emigration, worldwide action*. <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>
- Jones, S., Dobbins, J., Byman, D., et al. (2017). *Rolling back the Islamic State*. Rand Corporation.
- Kagan, K. (2006-2007). *Iran proxy war against the United States and the Iraqi government*. Institute for the Study of War.
- Karam, Z., & Abdul Zahra, Q. (2021, October 13). Analysis: Iraq vote underscores divisions over Iran's role. <https://apnews.com/article/fatah-muqtada-al-sadr-baghdad-united-states-saudi-arabia-2d3c5aabecb9d9996303e5d0c466ebca>
- Karimi, N., & Gambrell, J. (2020, January 4). Iran's popular Gen. Soleimani became an icon by targeting US. *Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/article/syria-ap-top-news-tehran-international-news-iraq-3bb7af59e8b1bfd3e15222a98395ee85>
- Katzman, K. (2010). *Iran-Iraq relations*. Congressional Research Service.
- Kaye, D. D., Nader, A., & Roshan, P. (2011). *Israel and Iran: A dangerous rivalry*. Rand Corporation.
- Keane, C. (2016). *US nation-building in Afghanistan*. Routledge.
- Khedery, A. (2014, July 3). Why we stuck with Maliki — and lost Iraq. *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-we-stuck-with-maliki--and-lost-iraq/2014/07/03/Odd6a8a4-f7ec-11e3-a606-946fd632f9f1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-we-stuck-with-maliki--and-lost-iraq/2014/07/03/Odd6a8a4-f7ec-11e3-a606-946fd632f9f1_story.html)
- Khroley, N. (2014, August 7). Moqtada al-Sadr's difficult relationship with Iran. <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/moqtada-al-sadrs-difficult-relationship-with-iran/>

- Kifner, J. (1990, August 9). *Confrontation in the Gulf; Champion of Arab poor? Hussein grasps for Nasser's revolutionary mantle*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/09/world/confrontation-gulf-champion-arab-poor-hussein-grasps-for-nasser-s-revolutionary.html>
- Knights, M. (2009, March 16). Iran's ongoing proxy war in Iraq. The Washington Institute of Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-ongoing-proxy-war-iraq>
- Knights, M., & Almeida, A. (2020). *Remaining and expanding: The recovery of Islamic State operations in Iraq in 2019-2020*. *CTC Sentinel*, 13(5), 1-16.
- Knights, M., & Mello, A. (2017, July 19). The best thing America built in Iraq: Iraq's counter-terrorism service and the long war against militancy. War on the Rocks. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/>
- Knights, M., Smith, C., & Malik, H. (2021, April 1 ). Profile: Kata'ib Hezbollah. The Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah>
- Latif, A. (2008, August 19). The Da'wa Party's eventful past and tentative future in Iraq. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/20930>
- Leverett, M., & Leverett, L. (2013). Symposium: The U.S.-Iranian relationship and the future of international order. *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs*, 2(2), 237-446.
- Loidolt, B. (2021, February 17). *Reconsidering al-Qaeda-Iranian cooperation*. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/reconsidering-al-qaeda-iranian-cooperation/>
- Loris, N. (2020, January). Does the United States still need Middle East oil? <https://www.heritage.org/coal-oil-natural-gas/commentary/does-the-united-states-still-need-middle-east-oil>
- Lund, A. (2018, March 29). *How Washington learned to love Haider al-Abadi*. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/report/washington-learned-love-haider-al-abadi/?agreed=1&session=1>
- MacCalman, M. (2016). A.Q. Khan nuclear smuggling network. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 9(1), 104-118.
- Majidiyar, A. (2018, May 3 ). *Iran-backed Fateh Alliance seeks to win or play kingmaker in upcoming Iraqi elections*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-backed-fateh-alliance-seeks-win-or-play-kingmaker-upcoming-iraqi-elections>
- Malka, H. (2011). *Crossroads: The future of the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Mannina, R. (2018, December 23). *How the 2011 US troop withdrawal from Iraq led to the rise of ISIS*. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-2011-us-troop-withdrawal-iraq-led-rise-isis>
- Mansour, R. (2016, February 1 ). *The popularity of the Hashd in Iraq*. Malcolm H. Kerr: Carnegie Middle East Institute. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62638>

- Mansour, R. (2018, April 3). More than militias: Iraq's popular mobilization forces are here to stay. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>
- Mansour, R. (2021). *Networks of power*. Chatham House.
- Mansour, R., & Jabar, F. A. (2017, April 28). *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's future*. Malcolm H. Kerr: Carnegie Middle East Center. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>
- Marcus, J. (2014, June 13). *Factors behind the precipitate collapse of Iraq's army*. *The BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838435>
- Martin, P. (2016, May 27). The campaign for Fallujah: May 26, 2016. Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/campaign-fallujah-may-26-2016>
- McWilliams, T., & Schlosser, N. J. (2004). *The battle for Fallujah*. Marine Corps University.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W.W. Norton Company.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2005, May 18). *Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq war: Realism versus neo-conservatism*. [https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/morgenthau\\_2522jsp/](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/morgenthau_2522jsp/)
- Mearsheimer, J. (2017, November 3). *The roots of liberal hegemony*. [Video file]. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSj\\_Vol1pOU&t=62s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSj_Vol1pOU&t=62s)
- Mearsheimer, J. (2019). Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order. *International Security*, 43(4), 7-50.
- Mearsheimer, J., & Malt, S. (2006). The Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy. *Middle East Policy*, 3, 29-87.
- Mello, P. J. (2014). Democratic peace theory. In P. I. Joseph (Ed.) *The SAGE encyclopedia of war: Social science perspectives* (pp. 472-476). SAGE.
- Miller, P. (2017, March 6). *Reassessing Obama's legacy of restraint*. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/03/reassessing-obamas-legacy-of-restraint/>
- Milne, D. (2004). Intellectualism in US diplomacy: Paul Wolfowitz and his predecessors. *International Journal*, 62(3), 667-680.
- Mirza, M. N., Abbas, H., & Qaisrani, I. H. (2021). Structural sources of Saudi-Iran rivalry and competition for the sphere of influence. *Sage Open*, 2-7.
- Moaddel, M., Tessler, M., & Inglehart, R. (2008). Saddam Hussein and the Sunni insurgency: Findings from values surveys. *Political Science Quarterly* 123(4), 623-644.
- Moghadam, V. (1989). The revolution and the regime: Populism, Islam and the state in Iran. *Social Compass*, 36(4), 415-450.
- Moravcsik, A. (1997). Taking preferences seriously: A liberal theory of international politics. *International Organization*, 51(4), 513-553.
- Morris, L. (2014, October 18). Appointment of Iraq's new interior minister opens door to militia and Iranian influence. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/appointment-of-iraqs-new-interior-minister->

opens-door-to-militia-and-iranian-influence/2014/10/18/f6f2a347-d38c-4743-902a-254a169ca274\_story.html

- Mostaghim, R., & Patrick, M. (2011, October 30). Iran praises Iraq as U.S. withdrawal nears. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-xpm-2011-oct-30-la-fg-iran-iraq-us-20111031-story.html>
- Mraz, J. L., & McCallen, J. P. (1996). Dual containment in the Persian Gulf: Strategic considerations and policy options. Naval Postgraduate School.
- Nada, G., & Rowan, M. (2018, April 27). Pro-Iran militias in Iraq. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq#:~:text=Badr%20Organization%20\(formerly%20known%20as,and%20led%20by%20the%20IRGC.](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq#:~:text=Badr%20Organization%20(formerly%20known%20as,and%20led%20by%20the%20IRGC.)
- Nada, G., & Rowan, M. (2021, November 10). *Profiles: Pro-Iran militias in Iraq*. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/nov/10/profiles-pro-iran-militias-iraq>
- Nance, M. (2014). *The terrorists of Iraq: Inside the strategy and tactics of the Iraq insurgency 2003-2014* (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Nasrawi, S. (2016, June 30). *Iraq: Fallujah is liberated, now what?* Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/6/30/iraq-fallujah-is-liberated-now-what>
- National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses for Terrorism. (2015). *Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)*. <https://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/supreme-council-islamic-revolution-iraq-sciri>
- Nexon, D. (2009). The balance of power in the balance. *World Politics*, 61(2), 330-359.
- Ng, A. (2021, March 22). These 6 charts show how sanctions are crushing Iran's economy. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/23/these-6-charts-show-how-sanctions-are-crushing-irans-economy.html>
- Norton, A. R. (1990, September 16). *Grand delusions: Arabism: Saddam Hussein is but the latest Middle East leader who would unite the long-divided Arab World--and time is on his side*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-16-op-890-story.html>
- Obama, B. (2006). *Audacity of hope*: Crown Publishers.
- O'Donnell, S. W. (2021). *Operation Inherent Resolve*. Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General.
- Office of the Department of Defense. (2020). *Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): Train and equip fund (CTEF)*.
- Office of the Director of National Intelligence. (2021). *Annual threat assessment of the US intelligence community*.
- Office of the Press Secretary. (2015, November 16). *Fact sheet: Advancing the rebalance to Asia and the Pacific*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>
- Ollivant, D., & Bull, B. (2018, April 24). *Iraq after ISIS: What to do now*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/iraq-after-isis-what-do-now/>

- Painter, D. S. (2009). The Marshall Plan and oil. *Cold War History*, 9(2),159-175.
- Painter, D. S. (2012). Oil and the American century. *The Journal of American History*, 99(1), 24-39.
- Pardo, T., & Vilnai, M. (2021, April 19). *Israel should support Biden's efforts to revive the Iran Nuclear Deal*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/19/israel-iran-nuclear-deal-biden-efforts/>
- Perper, R. (2021). Viral jihad: A genealogy of al-Qaeda and ISIS' propaganda. *CMC Senior Theses*. 2694.
- Pfefferle, T. (2014). The international system as social construct. *E-International Relations*, 1-6.
- Pirine, B., & O'Connell, E. (2008). *Counter-insurgency in Iraq 2003-2006*. Rand Corporation.
- Pollack, K. (2011, December 23). *Iraq back on the brink: Maliki's sectarian crisis of his own making*. Brookings Institute. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/iraq-back-on-the-brink-malikis-sectarian-crisis-of-his-own-making/>
- Pollack, K. (2014, April 4). *Iraqi elections, Iranian interests*. Brookings Institute. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/04/04/iraqi-elections-iranian-interests/>
- Pollack, K., & O'Hanlon, M. (2010, January 17). Iraq's ban on democracy. *The New York Times*. [https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/18/opinion/18pollack.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/18/opinion/18pollack.html?_r=0)
- Reidel, B. (2019, October 19). *Beirut 1958: America's origin story in the Middle East*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/10/29/beirut-1958-americas-origin-story-in-the-middle-east/>
- Radio Farda. (2020, July 5). *Iran spending hundreds of millions on religious shrines In Iraq and Syria*. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-spending-hundreds-of-millions-on-religious-shrines-in-iraq-and-syria/30707198.html>
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2017, October 21). *Iranian general reportedly played key role in swift takeover of Iraq's Kirkuk*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/iranian-general-irgc-commander-soleimani-reportedly-played-key-role-swift-takeover-iraqs-kirkuk-kurdish-parties-puk-kdp/28807424.html>
- Rafaat, A. (2007). US-Kurdish relations in post invasion Iraq. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 11(4),79-89.
- Reuters. (2020, July 3). *Coronavirus and sanctions hit Iran's support of proxies in Iraq*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-proxies-insight-idUSKBN2432EY>
- Roth, D. (2020, March 26). The headquarters for the restoration of holy shrines: Another IRGC front. United Against Nuclear Iran. <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/blog/headquarters-for-restoration-of-holy-shrines-another-irgc-front>
- Rubin, A. (2015, November 3). Ahmad Chalabi and the legacy of De-Baathification in Iraq. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/04/world/middleeast/ahmad-chalabi-and-the-legacy-of-de-baathification-in-iraq.html>
- Rutenberg, J., & Rubin, A. J. (2007, Jul 25th). *Bush and Iraqi: Frequent Talks, Limited Results*. The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/25/washington/25maliki.html>

- Sabir, H. (n.d.). *Karbala, the chain of events*. <https://www.al-islam.org/articles/karbala-chain-events>
- Sayegh, F. (1959). Arab nationalism and Soviet-American relations. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 324, 103-110.
- Scahill, J., & Hussein, M. (2019, November 19). *The changing of the overlords*. <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/18/us-iraq-invasion-iran/>
- Schoon, S. (2011, July 26). *Cold War containment: The role of the military*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/26/cold-war-containment-the-role-of-the-military/>
- Sen, A. K. (2018, May 8). *A brief history of sanctions in Iran*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-brief-history-of-sanctions-on-iran/>
- Sharp, J., Humud, C., & Collins, S. (2020). *U.S. foreign assistance to the Middle East: Historical backgrounds, recent trends, and the FY2021 request*. Congressional Research Service.
- Sly, L. (2009, July 4). Iraq's Maliki rejects U.S. offer on national reconciliation. *The Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-jul-04-fg-iraq-biden4-story.html>
- Smith, N., & Macfarland, S. (2008). *Anbar awakens: The tipping point*. Defense Technology Information Center.
- Sowell, K. (2015, Apr 23rd). *The Rise of Iraq's Militia State*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/59888>
- Smyth, P. (2018, June 11). *Iranian militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political outcomes and U.S. response*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-militias-iraqs-parliament-political-outcomes-and-us-response>
- Smyth, P. (2019, April 26). Making sense of Iraq's PMF arrests. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-sense-iraqs-pmf-arrests>
- Snyder, G. (2002). Mearsheimer's world: Offensive realism and the struggle for security: A review essay. *International Security*, 27(1), 149-173.
- Soufan, A. (2018). *Qassem Soleimani and Iran's unique regional strategy*. CTC Sentinel, 11(10). <https://ctc.usma.edu/qassem-soleimani-irans-unique-regional-strategy/>
- Sowell, K. (2015, August 13). Badr at the forefront of Iraq's Shia militias. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/61016>
- Spencer, J., and Geroux, J. (2021, October, 15). *Urban warfare project case study series: Case study #2: Mosul*. Modern Institute of War. <https://mwi.usma.edu/urban-warfare-project-case-study-2-battle-of-mosul/>
- Staff, R. (2020, January 3). *Factbox: Reactions to the killing of Iranian general in a U.S. air strike*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-blast-reaction-factbox-idUSKBN1Z2070>
- Steinberg, G. (2017). *The Badr Organization: Iran's most important instrument in Iraq*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

- Steinberg, M. J., O'Hanlan, M. E., & Rice, S. E. (2002, December 21). *The new national security strategy and preemption*. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-national-security-strategy-and-preemption/>
- Strobel, W., Ryan, M., Rohde, D., & Parker, N. (2014, July 1). Special report: How Iraq's Maliki defined limits of U.S. power. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-maliki-specialreport-idUSKBN0F51HK20140630>
- Sullivan, M. (2003, April). *Middle East Security Report 10: Maliki's authoritarian regime*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Malikis-Authoritarian-Regime-Web.pdf>
- Sun, M. (2014). Balance of power theory in today's international system. *E-International Relations*, 1-5.
- National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses for Terrorism (2015). Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). <https://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/supreme-council-islamic-revolution-iraq-sciri>
- Tabatabai, A., Chandler, N., Frederick, B., & Kavanagh, J. (2021). *Iran's military interventions*. Rand Corporation.
- Takeyh, R. (2008). Iran's new Iraq. *Middle East Journal*, 62(1), 13-30.
- Taliaferro, J. W. (2001). Security seeking under anarchy: Defensive realism revisited. *International Security*, 25(3), 128-161.
- Tallbot, S. (2007, February 21). *Unilateralism: Anatomy of a foreign policy disaster*. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/unilateralism-anatomy-of-a-foreign-policy-disaster/>
- The New York Times. (2013, October 29). Senators' letter to President Obama on Iraq. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/10/30/world/middleeast/senators-letter-to-obama-on-iraq-violence.html>
- The Washington Post (n.d.). *Faces of the fallen*. <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/national/fallen/>
- Theys, S. (2018). Introducing constructivism in international relations theory. *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/>
- Thrall, T., & Glaser, J. (2017, June 6). *Was the rise of ISIS inevitable?* [cato.org/blog/was-rise-isis-inevitable](http://cato.org/blog/was-rise-isis-inevitable)
- Toprani, A. (2019, May 15). *Oil and the future of U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf*. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/oil-and-the-future-of-u-s-strategy-in-the-persian-gulf/>
- Trevino, R. (2013). Is Iran an offensive realist or a defensive realist? A theoretical reflection on Iranian motives for creating instability. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 382-392.
- Tyler, P. (1992, March 8). *U.S. strategy plan calls for insuring no rivals develop*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/us-strategy-plan-calls-for-insuring-no-rivals-develop.html>
- US Department of State. (n.d.). *Foreign terrorist organizations*. <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>

- US Department of State. (2004, February). Zarqawi letter. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.html>
- US State Department. (2021, July 26). *Joint statement on the U.S.-Iraq strategic dialogue*. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue-2/>
- US Department of the Treasury. (2009, July 2). *Treasury designates individual, entity posing threat to stability in Iraq*. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>
- Van Evera, S. (2006). Assessing US strategy in the War on Terror. *The Annals of the American Academy*, 607, 10-26.
- Vardy, J. (2015, May 19). *Iraqi army, militias prepare to retake Ramadi from IS group*. [Video]. France 24. <https://www.france24.com/en/20150519-iraq-army-militias-ramadi-is-group>
- Voronkov, V. (2020). *Eleventh "Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of member states in countering the threat"*. Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism.
- Wagner, A. (n.d.). *Bush labels North Korea, Iran, Iraq an 'Axis of Evil'*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-03/press-releases/bush-labels-north-korea-iran-iraq-axis-evil>
- Walt, S. (2013, November 27). *U.S. Middle East strategy: Back to balancing*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/21/u-s-middle-east-strategy-back-to-balancing/>
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Waltz, K. N. (1988). The origins and prevention of major wars. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18(4), 615-628.
- Waltz, K. N. (2000). Structural realism after the Cold War. *International Security*, 25(1), 5-41.
- Weaver, A. M. (2006). The short, violent life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>
- Weede, E. (2007). Nation-building in the Middle East: The new imperialism. *Liberales Institut*, 1-27.
- Wedeman, B. (2003, August 30). *Najaf bombing kills Shiite leader, followers say*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/08/29/sprj.irq.najaf/>
- Wilson Center. (2012, May, 21). *Obama and the Middle East: The end of America's moment*. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/obama-and-the-middle-east-the-end-americas-moment>
- Wintour, P. (2021, November 11). *UK tells Iran that sanctions prevent payment of £400m debt*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/nov/11/uk-tells-iran-that-sanctions-prevent-payment-of-400m-debt>
- Wise, K. (2011). Islamic revolution of 1979: The downfall of American-Iranian relations. *Legacy*, 2(1), 1-17.
- Witty, D. (2016). *The Iraqi counter terrorism service*. Brookings Institute.

- Wyer, S. (2012). *The resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq*. Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ResurgenceofAAH.pdf>
- Yuan, S. (2021, October 27). *Iraq election body soon to announce final results after recount*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/27/independent-body-to-give-verdict-on-iraq-election>
- Zahrani, M. T. (2002). The coup that changed the Middle East: Mossadeq v. The CIA in retrospect. *World Policy Journal*, 19(2), 93-99.
- Zeng, Y. (2020). *Economic interdependence, power, and peace: A rationalist study of commercial liberalism*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina].
- Zraick, K. (2020, January 3). What to know about the death of Iranian General Suleimani. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/world/middleeast/suleimani-dead.html>