



The Influence of the Vilayat-e-Faqih on Iran's Foreign Policy: A Case Study of Iraq

¹ **Dr. Mahdi Mostafa Faqi**

¹ **Politics and International Relations Department, Faculty of Law,
Political Science and Management, Soran University, Soran, Kurdistan
Region, Iraq**

Abstract:

This study investigates the impact of the Vilayat-e-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) concept on Iran's foreign policy, particularly toward Iraq. The conceptual basis of Iran's political system and its domestic and international conduct is rooted in Vilayat-e-Faqih, which empowers Islamic jurists to oversee the nation's political affairs. This article employs constructivist theory, focusing on the influence of identity, ideas, and historical narratives on state behavior, to examine the intersection of Iran's ideological commitments with regional strategic goals. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has enhanced its political, economic, and military influence in Iraq by exploiting shared Shia religious identity and historical connections to shape its influence among both state and non-state actors in Iraq. The research contends that Iran's involvement in Iraq cannot be exclusively attributed to geopolitical or security reasons. Vilayat-e-Faqih, on the other hand, is an intellectual framework and a legitimizing tool that helps Iran make decisions about its foreign policy and makes it easier for it to build alliances. These findings indicate that Iran's policies promote cooperation and incite friction in Iraq, furthering its regional objectives while fostering rivalry among diverse national and international actors.

1: Email:

mahdi.ahmad@soran.edu.iq

2: Email:

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.37651/aujlp.2025.167729.1699>

Submitted: 15/11/2025

Accepted: 7/12/2025

Published: 1/09/2026

Keywords:

Vilayat-e-Faqih
Foreign policy
Policies
Identity.

©Authors, 2026, College of Law
University of Anbar. This is an open-
access article under the CC BY 4.0
license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



تأثير ولاية الفقيه على السياسة الخارجية لإيران: دراسة حالة العراق د. مهدي مصطفى فقي أحمد^١

^١ قسم السياسة والعلاقات الدولية، كلية القانون، العلوم السياسية والإدارة، جامعة سوران، سوران، إقليم كردستان، العراق.

الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة تأثير مفهوم ولاية الفقيه على السياسة الخارجية لإيران، لا سيما تجاه العراق. يُعد الأساس المفاهيمي للنظام السياسي الإيراني وسلوكه الداخلي والدولي متجذراً في ولاية الفقيه، التي تمنح الفقهاء الإسلاميين سلطة الإشراف على الشؤون السياسية للدولة. تستخدم هذه المقالة النظرية البنائية، مع التركيز على تأثير الهوية والأفكار والسرديات التاريخية على سلوك الدولة، لفحص تقاطع الالتزامات الأيديولوجية لإيران مع الأهداف الاستراتيجية الإقليمية. منذ سقوط صدام حسين في ٢٠٠٣، عززت إيران نفوذها السياسي والاقتصادي والعسكري في العراق من خلال استغلال الهوية الدينية الشيعية المشتركة والروابط التاريخية لتشكيل تأثيرها بين الجهات الفاعلة سواء كانت حكومية أو غير حكومية في العراق. وتؤكد الدراسة أن تدخل إيران في العراق لا يمكن عزوه بشكل حصري إلى الأسباب الجيوسياسية أو الأمنية. ولاية الفقيه، من ناحية أخرى، هي إطار فكري وأداة شرعية تساعد إيران على اتخاذ القرارات بشأن سياستها الخارجية وتسهل عليها بناء التحالفات. تشير هذه النتائج إلى أن سياسات إيران تعزز التعاون وتثير الاحتكاك في العراق، مما يحقق أهدافها الإقليمية ويعزز التنافس بين الفاعلين الوطنيين والدوليين المختلفين.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

ولاية الفقيه، السياسة الخارجية، السياسات، الهوية.

المقدمة Introduction

The doctrine of Vilayat-e-Faqih, the ideological basis of Iran's government, has a significant impact on the country's foreign policy. This concept holds that the highest-ranking Islamic scholar should have political power, combining religion and governance. In this context,

Iran interacts with Iraq, which has a substantial Shi'a population and has a long history, culture, and religion with Iran.

Iran has become much more powerful in Iraq, both politically and militarily, since Saddam Hussein fell and a Shi'a-led administration took over. Individuals have diverse opinions about Iran's role. Some think it is an extension of Iran's religious duty, while others think it is a strategic move to keep its influence and security in the region. The goal of this study is to examine how the Vilayat-e-Faqih affects Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq, especially in light of Iraq's domestic challenges and its ties to other regional powers.

The study will analyze the intellectual foundations of Iranian foreign policy, focusing on the connection between Vilayat-e-Faqih and Iran's overarching regional objectives. It will also use constructivist theory to explain how identity, historical narratives, and ideologies shape Iran's strategic choices in Iraq.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study elucidates the impact of ideological systems on state behavior in the Middle East. It examines the link between religious authority and geopolitical strategy by analyzing Iranian foreign policy through the prism of the Vilayat-e-Faqih ideology, using Iraq as a case study. The research underscores the significance of reciprocal sectarian identification, historical background, and ideological narratives in Iran's policymaking and regional involvement. It also adds to broader discussions of power dynamics, regional security, and the role of

ideology in foreign policy, providing politicians, scholars, and anyone with an interest in the region with helpful information.

2.1 Problem Statement

The involvement of Iran in Iraq has ignited fervent discourse. Certain specialists and political observers perceive Iran's actions in Iraq as primarily motivated by sectarian ideologies and a desire to advocate for Shi'a interests in the area. Some contend that Iran's foreign policy is centered on strategic objectives, including regional security and the preservation of its political and economic clout in the Middle East.

This study contends that Iran's foreign policy with Iraq cannot be comprehensively understood solely through the lenses of sectarianism or geopolitics. It underscores that the theory of Vilayat-e-Faqih is essential in influencing Iran's strategy towards Iraq, offering a cohesive framework that integrates theological convictions with strategic objectives. The manner in which Iran balances these aspects is a crucial inquiry for comprehending its regional operations and its relationship with Iraq.

3.1 Aims of the Study

1. To investigate how Vilayat-e-Faqih influences Iranian foreign policy toward Iraq, both ideologically and strategically.
2. To assess the role of religious identity, historical narratives, and ideological commitments in shaping Iran's interactions with Iraq.

3. To apply constructivist theory to analyze how Iran's policies are framed by identity and how these elements influence Iran's regional strategies.
4. To examine the consequences of Iran's involvement in Iraq for both Iraq and the broader Middle East, particularly in relation to other regional powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia.

4.1 Research Questions

Main Question:

How does Vilayat-e-Faqih influence Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq, both ideologically and strategically?

Sub-Questions:

1. How do constructivist theories explain the role of identity, religious narratives, and historical ties in shaping Iran-Iraq relations?
2. What are the strategic interests driving Iran's foreign policy in Iraq, and how does Vilayat-e-Faqih justify these interests?

5.1 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, employing case study analysis to examine Iran's foreign policy regarding Iraq. It analyzes significant political, economic, and military occurrences since 2003, utilizing primary sources including government statements, policy documents, and expert interviews, alongside secondary materials such as scholarly journal articles, books, and studies.

This study utilizes constructivism as its theoretical framework, emphasizing the influence of identity, norms, and historical narratives on state conduct. This methodology elucidates the influence of Iran's Vilayat-e-Faqih ideology on its policies.

I. Understanding the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Iranian Foreign Policy and Vilayat-e-Faqih

I.A. Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's foreign policy has evolved through an intricate amalgamation of historical, cultural, and ideological influences. Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has upheld a foreign policy frequently seen as unique among Middle Eastern nations. Iran's foreign policy, influenced by the principles of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, is determined by both national interests and its religious convictions, as well as the political tenets of the Islamic Republic (Katzman, 2010). Iran's foreign policy has been shaped by its geopolitical location, relationships with surrounding nations and major powers, and its aspiration to establish itself as a leader in the Islamic world (Moussavian, 2018).

Since the revolution, Iran's foreign policy has been influenced by two primary factors: its aspiration to maintain sovereignty and security, and its commitment to advancing its ideological framework of governance rooted in Vilayat-e-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic

Jurist). This system, which bestows supreme authority onto a religious leader, is a crucial component of the Islamic Republic of Iran's political framework and significantly influences its foreign relations, especially in the context of Middle Eastern politics (Parsa, 2016).

The Vilayat-e-Faqih idea has significantly influenced Iran's regional conduct, particularly its relations with nations with substantial Shi'a populations, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. The concept extends beyond Iran's domestic politics, emphasizing the defense of Shiite populations in other countries, which Iran regards as integral to the broader Islamic ummah under the leadership of the Supreme Leader. This ideological component complicates Iran's foreign policy, as its actions are motivated by pragmatic national interests, religious obligations, and a sense of identity. The existence of significant Shi'a religious centers and powerful religious networks among Iraqis has established robust cultural and ideological connections, prompting Iran to interact with Iraq on political, economic, and military levels (Nasr, 2006).

In addition to religious and ideological factors, security considerations have influenced Iran's foreign policy with Iraq, particularly since the U.S.-led invasion that removed Saddam Hussein in 2003. The elimination of a longstanding opponent provided Iran with an opportunity to augment its influence, while simultaneously presenting new security threats, such as the emergence of extremist factions like ISIS. Iran's backing of ally militias and political entities in

Iraq is perceived as a strategic initiative to establish a buffer zone against hostile forces and as an ideological endeavor consistent with Vilayat-e-Faqih. This twofold strategy seeks to reinforce Iran's influence within Iraqi political institutions and security frameworks. Nonetheless, it also incites conflicts with regional and international actors who view Iran's involvement as disruptive and expansionist (Mansour and Jabar, 2017).

I.B. Vilayat-e-Faqih

Ayatollah Khomeini first presented the philosophy of Vilayat-e-Faqih in the early 1970s, and subsequently established it as a fundamental aspect of the Islamic Republic following the revolution. This concept asserts that the governance of the Islamic state should be entrusted to a qualified religious scholar, the Faqih, who is empowered to rule in line with Islamic law. The Faqih possesses supreme political and religious authority, capable of directing the state and its populace on both domestic and international matters (Sadjadpour, 2014). According to the ideology of Vilayat-e-Faqih, the Supreme Leader of Iran serves as the paramount authority, supervising both the executive and legislative branches while also wielding considerable influence over the nation's foreign policy. The Supreme Leader holds authority over military and security issues, making the leader's role essential to Iran's international conduct (Gause, 2019).

In addition to affecting Iran's internal government, the philosophy of Vilayat-e-Faqih significantly influences its regional role

and initiatives to foster group identification. Iran perceives itself as a guardian of Shi'a communities globally. It employs the Supreme Leader as both a home authority and a spiritual leader for Shi'a groups abroad. This conceptualization of religion and ideology elucidates Iran's involvement in regional matters as both a strategic instrument and a moral imperative. Iran wields influence in regions such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria via clerical networks, philanthropic organizations, and religious entities. These transnational contacts allow Iran to sustain its influence without depending exclusively on direct diplomatic channels, instead grounding its foreign policy in a common community identity and belief systems (Nasr, 2006, pp. 21–25).

The proliferation of Iranian influence internationally is sustained through soft power, primarily through religious instruction and media engagement. The intellectual influence of Iran is disseminated through seminaries in Qom and Mashhad, where clerics from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Gulf get training before returning to their communities to assume leadership roles (Muth, 2022, pp. 54–55). Moreover, media organizations such as Al-Alam and Al-Manar disseminate narratives that correspond with Iranian strategic and religious objectives (Schliebitz, 2007, pp. 12–14). These instruments constitute an intellectual network that bolsters Iran's diplomatic and military initiatives. This stratified methodology enables Iran to strengthen the Supreme Leader's authority among external Shia constituencies and maintain enduring influence, despite evolving political conditions.

Nonetheless, there has been opposition to the foreign representation of Vilayat-e-Faqih. Iran's engagement is perceived as an endeavor to propagate revolution and undermine unfavorable regimes in certain Arab nations. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Jordan explicitly characterize Iranian activities as meddling intended to bolster local Shi'a factions affiliated with Tehran. The theory lacks general endorsement, even within Shiite communities. The Najaf religious authority, particularly Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, favors a quietist political stance and rejects the direct clerical leadership advocated by Khomeini (Abdo, 2013, pp. 52-53). This division indicates that Shiite transnational unity is fragmented, and Iran's ideological goals in Iraq are likely to be subject to negotiation and modification.

This complex situation presented a strategic opportunity for Iran in Iraq post-2003. The downfall of Saddam Hussein facilitated the emergence of a new opponent, leading Iran to cultivate robust alliances with Iraqi troops through the establishment of political and armed organizations. Iran rationalized its backing of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as essential for security and the safeguarding of Shi'ite communities from extremist dangers, including ISIS (Sarı, 2021, p. 431). The combination of ideological dedication and security strategy elucidates why Vilayat-e-Faqih directs Iran's operations and facilitates its regional influence. Both religious identity and pragmatic geopolitical considerations motivate Iran's engagement in Iraq.

I.C. Theoretical Framework

Constructivism, a significant theory in international relations, underscores the influence of ideas, beliefs, and identities on state behavior. In contrast to realism, which emphasizes material force and national interest, and liberalism, which focuses on collaboration and institutions, constructivism asserts that the international system is socially constructed and that state actions are shaped by collective ideas and norms (Wendt, 1999). Constructivist scholars argue that states are motivated not only by power and self-interest, but also by their identities and the ideational frameworks that influence them (Ruggie, 1998). Constructivism posits that the international system is not an objective fact but is influenced by social interactions and shared understandings among actors. Consequently, state behavior is influenced by both external influences and internal beliefs, ideologies, and identities.

Moreover, Constructivism emphasizes that identities are constantly constructed and modified through social and political interactions rather than being static. Foreign policy trajectories are shaped by multiple factors, including collective memory, religion, culture, and historical experience (Wendt, 1999, pp. 224–225). States operate according to their self-perceptions and the perceptions others hold. Consequently, significant alterations in foreign policy behavior might transpire even under equal material conditions, prompted by

transformations in identity, such as regime change or heightened nationalist discourse.

Constructivism also underscores the significance of standards in directing and limiting state behavior. Norms are recognized norms of acceptable conduct that shape how states view their obligations and interests. The global norm against chemical weapons profoundly affects state behavior, notwithstanding potential strategic military advantages from contravening this standard (Ruggie, 1998, pp. 881–882). States frequently behave in accordance with their dedication to collective ideas and identities, illustrating that power in international politics encompasses both material and ideational dimensions.

Furthermore, Constructivism elucidates Iran's foreign policy by emphasizing the influence of its ideological and religious identity on its diplomatic strategy. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign actions are driven not solely by national interests but also by the objective of promoting and disseminating the ideals of the Islamic Republic. This is evident in Iran's diplomatic rhetoric, its support for revolutionary factions, and its endeavors to augment its influence throughout the Middle East (Sadjadpour, 2014).

Religion significantly influences Iranian foreign policy. Iran perceives itself as a preeminent authority within the Islamic realm, particularly for Shi'a Muslims, who represent the majority of the populace. This identity influences Iran's relations with nations like Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Bahrain, where Shi'a populations are significant.

Iran's support for Shi'a political factions and militias in these countries embodies its geopolitical objectives as well as its religious and ideological tenets (Nasr, 2006).

In contrast, both Vilayat-e-Faqih and constructivism emphasize the role of ideational elements in influencing state behavior. Constructivism highlights the significance of identity and collective beliefs, but Vilayat-e-Faqih presents a specific ideological perspective on how Iran's Islamic identity shapes its actions. They mutually enhance one another by emphasizing the significance of ideas in shaping Iran's foreign policy (Gause, 2019). The intersection of Vilayat-e-Faqih and constructivism is seen in Iran's endeavors to amplify its religious and ideological impact globally. In Iraq, Iran's foreign policy is motivated not only by security considerations but also by a dedication to promoting and safeguarding Shi'a Islam, a fundamental element of the Islamic Republic's ideology. Thus, Iran endorses Shi'a militias and political factions in Iraq and engages in the regional contest for dominance.

II. Iranian Foreign Policy towards Iraq

II.A. Historical Overview of Iran-Iraq Relations

The relationship between Iran and Iraq is notably significant and tumultuous within the context of the Middle East. Historically, they have maintained a lengthy border accompanied by important cultural, religious, and historical ties. However, these relationships have

frequently been affected by conflict, especially in recent years. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) represents a significant phase in their relationship, marked by intense animosity and conflict. The conflict, initiated by Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, resulted in hundreds of thousands of fatalities on both sides and engendered profound animosity between the two nations (Wehrey, 2014).

The conflict centered on territorial disputes, particularly over the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and on Iraq's attempts to limit the growing influence of the Iranian revolution that had ousted the Western-supported Pahlavi regime. The war ended in a stalemate, resulting in no significant territorial alterations, yet it inflicted enduring consequences on both nations. The aggression of Iraq and the resulting international isolation of Iran created a perception of vulnerability in Tehran, thereby intensifying its quest for strategic depth in the region (Dehghan, 2017).

The 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein markedly altered Iran-Iraq relations, enhancing Iran's ideological and political influence. Iran aimed to forge relationships with emerging Shi'a political parties and militias in Iraq, many of which had previously benefited from support or refuge provided by Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War. Organizations such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) significantly influenced the political landscape of Iraq following 2003 (Mansour, 2018, pp. 9–11). Iran utilized these networks to integrate itself into Iraq's developing state institutions and to fortify its western border.

This transition signified a change from overt conflict to strategic engagement, as Iran progressively wielded influence through security collaboration and political support instead of direct military action.

Despite persistent opposition from local and regional actors, Iran's growing influence in Iraq continues to be a subject of controversy. Multiple Iraqi factions, encompassing Sunni communities, secular groups, and certain Shi'a, express concern that Tehran's engagement threatens Iraqi sovereignty and exacerbates sectarian divisions. The 2019 protests, characterized by significant participation from young Shi'a Iraqis, demonstrated widespread frustration regarding perceived excessive political and economic interference by Iran (Ahouie and Tefagh, 2024). Countries such as the United States and Saudi Arabia perceive Iran's influence as a component of a wider strategy that utilizes ideological networks and non-state actors to enhance their dominance in the Middle East. Tehran's strategic depth in Iraq has expanded since 2003; however, its influence is still linked to political instability and competing national identities.

II.B. The Role of Vilayat-e-Faqih in Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Iraq

The principle of Vilayat-e-Faqih has significantly influenced Iran's foreign policy regarding Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Islamic Republic of Iran, under the leadership of the Supreme Leader, has utilized its religious and ideological authority to guide its actions in Iraq, emphasizing its role as the protector of Shi'a

Muslims in the region. The religious leadership is a fundamental aspect of Iran's strategy in Iraq, where a significant portion of the population consists of Shi'a Muslims (Sadjadpour, 2014).

Since 2003, Iran has significantly invested in establishing networks of political parties, religious institutions, and militia groups that conform to the Vilayat-e-Faqih ideological framework. This strategy enabled Iran to translate its religious influence into tangible political power in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion. Tehran has financially supported parties like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and has cultivated strong relationships with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), portraying these entities as guardians of Shiite interests and defenders of Iraq's sovereignty. These alliances enabled Iran to sustain its influence in Iraq's political and security domains, thereby solidifying the role of the Supreme Leader as both a spiritual and strategic authority (Povey, 2015, pp. 72-79). The integration of political strategy and ideological strength has ensured Iran's sustained influence in Baghdad.

Moreover, the leadership of Vilayat-e-Faqih in Iraq is not wholly ambiguous and illustrates intra-Shiite ideological discussions. Iran advocates for a model of clerical guardianship under the Supreme Leader; however, significant clerical influence in Najaf, particularly from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has cultivated a tradition of quietism that opposes direct clerical governance. The divide became particularly pronounced during the 2019 protest movement, as

numerous Shi'a Iraqis expressed criticism of Iran's political interference and rejected the narrative surrounding Shi'a identity and loyalty to Tehran. The protests indicated that Iran has numerous counterparts; however, these groups frequently serve as negotiation partners and occasionally oppose Iran at the grassroots level (Rojhelati, 2023). This dynamic indicates that Vilayat-e-Faqih is aligned with Iranian policies while simultaneously navigating the intricate landscape of Iraqi politics and religion.

In 2014, Iran's rationale for involvement in Iraq evolved in response to the emergence of ISIS, prompting the Vilayat-e-Faqih framework to support heightened military engagement in the region. Iran's support for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is motivated by both a strategic imperative to avert regional instability and a religious duty to protect Shiite holy sites and communities. This narrative enabled Iran to rationalize its involvement in Iraqi Shi'a communities and to enhance its operations through advisory support and coordination with militia leaders. The integration of the PMF into Iraq's security forces enhanced Iran's influence in governmental institutions, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to ideological principles in the formulation of national security policy (Sarı, 2021, pp. 435-438).

However, Iranian policy has generated tensions within Iraq's political and clerical domains. The Vilayat-e-Faqih model underscores Shiite and transnational alliances focused on the Supreme Leader;

however, numerous Iraqi Shiite actors continue to prioritize national identity above clerical hierarchy. The divide became particularly apparent when Iranian-backed militias were accused of suppressing Iraqi protesters and intervening in domestic politics. The disparity between Iran's assertive ideological agenda and Iraqi nationalistic sentiments underscores the limitations of disseminating the Vilayat-e-Faqih framework. This ideological tension illustrates that Iran's influence is not uniform or absolute; rather, Iraqi Shi'a identity is more significantly shaped by local historical, religious, and political contexts than by Iranian revolutionary ideology (Abdo, 2013, pp. 52–53).

In summary, Iran's promotion of Vilayat-e-Faqih in Iraq illustrates how norms, identities, and ideologies shape state behavior through a constructivist lens. The religious establishment in Iran cultivates a Shi'a-centric identity that shapes its military and political strategies, including the support of militias and organizations like the PMF. Iraqi Shi'a actors negotiate, adapt, or resist ideological influence based on their local historical, religious, and political contexts. Power is a socially constructed phenomenon that depends on societal acceptance rather than on material strength alone, as evidenced by the 2019 protests and intra-Shiite debates.

II.C. Iran's Strategic Interests in Iraq

Iran's strategic interests in Iraq are complex and interconnected, encompassing regional security, influence over the Baghdad government, access to religious and cultural sites, and economic

opportunities, including trade, energy, and informal markets. Subsequent to the 2003 U.S. invasion, Tehran swiftly sought to leverage its historical, cultural, and religious ties with Iraq to exert political influence, aiming to install a friendly or compliant government in Baghdad. This would limit the presence and influence of adversarial states or U.S. power adjacent to Iran's western borders. Security continues to be a central concern in Tehran's policy regarding Iraq (Raouf, 2019).

Iran considers Iraq's security essential to achieving strategic depth and preventing hostile transit routes. Analysts note that Tehran regards Iraq as the final line of defense along its western border. The presence of U.S. forces or hostile governments in Iraq is perceived as a significant threat that may alter Iran's threat perception. This analysis details Iran's substantial role in aiding militias and domestic political factions in Iraq post-2003 (Thaler, 2008).

The West Point Center for Counterterrorism highlights the significance of religious and ideological factors. Iraq is home to two significant Shiite holy cities, Najaf and Karbala, along with an extensive Shiite religious network. Through its influence over this network, Iran bolsters its soft power and credibility among Shiite communities in the region, simultaneously expanding its reach within the global religious community. Pilgrimages, spiritual connections, and educational relationships enable Tehran to exercise normative influence alongside its security initiatives. Numerous political studies emphasize

the enduring significance of religious affiliations in influencing Iran's long-term strategies and policies (Hafez, 2014).

Recently, the Middle East Council on Global Affairs (+1) has noted an increase in both formal and informal economic activities. Iranian companies and traders are increasing cross-border trade, energy transactions, and informal smuggling activities. These activities facilitate client networks in Iraq and assist Iran in mitigating the effects of international sanctions. Investigations indicate that these economic connections enhance Iran's monitoring systems and support militias and political figures associated with Tehran (Shenavar, 2025).

In summary, the constructivist approach posits that both material interests and the interplay of shared identities, memories, and religious discourses determine Iran's influence in Iraq. The post-2003 context in Tehran facilitated the perception of Shiite groups in Iraq as integral to a shared civilizational and ideological framework, wherein notions of resistance, martyrdom, and Islamic unity justify Iran's involvement. Consequently, Iran's security, religious influence, and economic connections in Iraq are founded on socially constructed interpretations rather than strategic rationale.

II.D. Iran's Instruments of Influence in Iraq

Since 2003, Iran has become a significant external actor in Iraq, influencing its political and security dynamics following the invasion. This influence is manifested through a synthesis of religious authority, political connections, and military presence. Iran has established a

significant presence within Iraqi state institutions and society through the utilization of a common Shi'a identity, the formation of alliances with Iraqi political parties, and the support of armed groups such as the Popular Mobilization Forces. These strategies have established Iran's influence in Iraqi politics. Three methods are presented below (Dawood, A.A., 2022).

II.D.1. Religious Instruments

Tehran fosters relationships among clerics, endorses religious institutions, and utilizes pilgrimages to Najaf and Karbala as mechanisms of influence. Iran employs a common religious and ideological identity as a form of soft power to enhance relationships with Shiite nations, such as Iraq. These initiatives extend beyond spiritual objectives; they establish comprehensive networks of loyalty and affiliation. Iran has exerted considerable influence on Iraqi politics through these channels. Furthermore, seminars and charitable organizations funded by Iran provide social services, thereby enhancing reliance on Iran (Rasouli, 2023).

II.D.2. Political Instruments

Iran wields influence in Iraq through political parties, either by directly sponsoring election campaigns or utilizing client networks. It utilizes diplomats and intelligence operatives to sway decision-making at the cabinet level. Exposed telephone conversations and inquiries disclose Iran's attempts to surveil Iraqi political leaders and exert control over essential ministries. Iran is the preeminent regional power

influencing Iraq's political process, both directly and indirectly. Since 2003, Iranian-backed parties have demonstrated a greater propensity to secure electoral victories and consolidate their influence than those without Iranian endorsement. This political infiltration enables Tehran to influence Iraq's domestic and foreign policy to advance its strategic interests (Taher, 2024).

II.D.3. Military and Paramilitary Instruments

The Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has equipped, armed, and counseled several Iraqi militias, many of which subsequently attained political power or integrated into governmental entities such as segments of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). In the wake of ISIS's inception in Iraq and Syria, Iran significantly contributed to the Iraqi military's endeavors to vanquish the organization. Furthermore, during the 2017 KRI Referendum, Iran endorsed Iraqi forces in opposition to the Peshmerga. Iran's military factions provide battlefield assistance, as evidenced in the conflict against ISIS, exert coercive control over Iraqi politics, and aid Iran in fighting operations that jeopardize its interests. The 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani underscored the significance and fragility of Iran's militia strategy; subsequent events indicate that Tehran has adjusted while being strongly reliant on its military networks (Middleton, 2020).

In summary, Iran's influence in Iraq, viewed through a constructivist lens, is predicated not only on tangible power but also on

shared identities, symbols, and social significances. By underscoring a collective Shiite identity, Iran reinterprets political allegiances and legitimizes its involvement as an intrinsic aspect of culture and religion, rather than as an external imposition. Religious networks, political alliances, and militia affiliations constitute social solidarity frameworks through which Iran can exert influence within Iraq's institutions and society, employing norms, narratives, and collective memory rather than coercion.

Conclusion

Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq, particularly post-2003, clearly reflects ideological commitments, identity-based legitimacy, and strategic calculations. The core component of this policy is the idea of Vilayat-e-Faqih, which designates the Supreme Leader as a pivotal authority in both religious and political spheres, with obligations that transcend Iran to encompass the entire Shi'a community. This philosophy underpins Iran's interventionist policy, motivated not by geopolitical necessity but by a moral obligation grounded in common religion and transnational Shi'a solidarity. Constructivism elucidates this dynamic by demonstrating how identities, historical memory, and religious symbols influence the state's choices and decisions. Iran views Iraq not merely as a neighboring nation but as a territory where cultural and religious affiliations can be leveraged to exert influence.

The efficacy of Iranian influence in Iraq is evident through the interdependent mechanisms of religion, politics, and military power.

Religious institutions and clerical networks cultivate loyalty and a collective identity; political coalitions allow Tehran to exert influence over governance and decision-making in Baghdad; and military affiliations, particularly with the IRGC and Popular Mobilization Forces, provide avenues to safeguard and advance strategic interests. This comprehensive strategy has allowed Iran to cultivate a significant presence within Iraq's security and governmental frameworks.

Nonetheless, the projection of Vilayat-e-Faqih and Iranian influence has encountered resistance. The presence of intra-Shiite doctrinal divergences, particularly between Qom and Najaf, indicates that religious identity is not homogeneous. The 2019 protest movement demonstrated that Iraqi Shi'a national identification may supersede transnational ideological affiliations and contest the Iranian narrative, scrutinizing the legality of its activities.

In summary, Iran's influence in Iraq is determined by social dynamics that are perpetually reconstructed, negotiated, and challenged. It depends not just on coercive or material power but also on collective conflicts, religious affinity, and historical consciousness. The influence of local circumstances in Iraq is more conditional, adaptive, and at times contradictory.

Reference List

1. Abdo, G., 2013. *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Saban Center. pp. 52–53.

2. Abdo, G., 2013. *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. pp. 52–53.
3. Ahouie, M. and Tefagh, M., 2024. A Difficult Friendship: Elements of Continuity and Change in Iran-Iraq Relations in Post-Saddam Era. *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, 8(3), pp.615-652.
4. Dawood, A.A., 2022. Political Islam in Iraq and its impact on foreign relations from 2005 to 2020.
5. Dehghan, H. (2017). Iran's Role in the Middle East and Its Influence in Iraq. *The Guardian*.
6. Eisenstadt, M. & Knights, M., 2018. *Iran's Influence in Iraq: Between Balance and Hegemony*. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4184>
7. Gause, F.G. (2019). *The Gulf Cooperation Council: A Study in the Integration of the Gulf*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Hafez, M.M., 2014. The origins of sectarian terrorism in Iraq. In *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama bin Laden's Death* (pp. 436-460). Columbia University Press.
9. Katzman, K. (2010). *Iran: Background and U.S. Policy*. Congressional Research Service.
10. Katzman, K., 2020. *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options*. Congressional Research Service. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL32048>

11. Let me know if this looks good or if you need any further adjustments!
12. Mansour, R. & Jabar, F.A., 2017. *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*. Carnegie Middle East Center. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/04/the-popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraqs-future?lang=en¢er=middle-east>
13. Mansour, R., 2018. *Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State*. Chatham House Research Paper, pp. 9–11.
14. Middleton, D.C., 2020. Lessons to be learned? What the IRGC Quds Force can teach us about mission command.
15. Moussavian, S. (2018). *Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
16. Muth, C., 2022. *Houses of Wisdom: A Comparative Study of the Najaf and Qom Seminaries*. *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 46(2), pp. 53–62.
17. Nasr, V. (2006). *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. W.W. Norton & Company.
18. Nasr, V., 2006. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York: W.W. Norton.
<https://archive.org/details/shiarevivalhowco00nasr>
19. Parsa, M. (2016). *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*. University of California Press.

20. Povey, T., 2015. The Rise of Social Movements in Iran since the 1990s. *In Social Movements in Egypt and Iran* (pp. 72-96). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
21. Raouf, H., 2019. Iranian quest for regional hegemony: motivations, strategies and constrains. *Review of economics and political science*, 4(3), pp.242-256.
22. Rasouli, M., 2023. Evaluation of Capabilities and facilities of Najaf to Karbala Road with Emphasis on Hosseini's Arbaeen. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, 2(4), pp.77-91.
23. Rojhelati, Z. (2023) 'The "Holy" Conflict: The Religious Authority and Intra-Shiite Tensions in Iraq', Rûdaw Research Center. Available at: <https://rudawrc.net/en/pdf/article/theholy-conflict-the-religious-authority-and-intra-shiite-tensions-in-iraq-2023-01-24> (Accessed: 8 November 2025).
24. Ruggie, J.G. (1998). What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge. International Organization.
25. Sadjadpour, K. (2014). Iran: The Islamic Republic's Quest for Regional Dominance. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
26. Sarı, İ., 2021. 'Iran's New Iraq Policy After Saddam: From Sociological Dynamics to Political Realities', *Iranian Studies*, 5(2), pp. 427–454.
27. Sarı, İ., 2021. Iran's New Iraq Policy After Saddam: From Sociological Dynamics to Political Realities. *Iranian Studies*, 5(2), p. 431.

28. Schliebitz, P., 2007. *Shaping Perceptions: The Role of the Media in Iran's Foreign Policy*. Canadian Forces College. pp. 1–20.
29. Shenavar, R., 2025. Transition to Renewable Energy in the Middle East: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Path to Sustainability.
30. Taher, I.H., 2024. IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING ACTORS: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX ROLE OF IRANIAN PROXIES. *Uluslararası İktisadi ve İdari Çalışmalar Dergisi*, 2(1), pp.65-74.
31. Thaler, D.E., 2008. *Future US security relationships with Iraq and Afghanistan: US Air Force roles* (Vol. 681). Rand Corporation.
32. Wehrey, F. (2014). *The Iran-Iraq War and the Shaping of Modern Iranian Politics*. RAND Corporation.
33. Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.