

https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.28.2025.335			
Received:	18 June 2025	Accepted:	05 Sept. 2025
Revised:	08 August 2025	Published:	15 December 2025
Volume:	28 (December)	Pages:	64-76
To cite: Md. Thowhidul Islam, A. K.M. Iftekharul Islam & Anowara Akter 2025. Iranian theological influence on Iraqi politics: A realist interpretation. <i>International Journal of Islamic Thought</i> . Vol. 28 (Dec.): 64-76.			

Iranian Theological Influence on Iraqi Politics: A Realist Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intricate nexus between Iranian religious instrumentalization and Iraqi political dynamics in the post-2003 era. Employing a realist theoretical framework, the analysis investigates how Iran systematically exploits sectarian affiliations and ideological convergences to pursue its geopolitical objectives and project regional hegemony. The research delineates the mechanisms through which Iran exercises religious soft power and examines the consolidation of Shi'a political ascendancy in post-Ba'athist Iraq. Through systematic analysis of Iranian patronage networks and proxy organizations, this investigation evaluates the modalities of Iranian religious influence penetration within Iraqi political structures. While acknowledging the instrumental utility of religious discourse in contemporary statecraft, the study critically assesses the limitations inherent in realist analytical frameworks, particularly their tendency to marginalize grassroots mobilization and cross-cultural dynamics. The findings contribute to scholarly understanding of the multifaceted interplay between religious identity, political authority, and state behavior in the contemporary Middle Eastern context, as conceptualized through the lens of structural realism. This research offers empirical insights into the evolving patterns of transnational religious influence and its implications for regional security architecture.

Keywords: *Iraqi politics, Iranian foreign policy, Middle East security, Shi'a networks, theological influence.*

Iran and Iraq have significantly shaped the security dynamics of the Persian Gulf region, despite ongoing tensions (Ehteshami 2003). In the post-Saddam context, Tehran's regional strategy has been driven by both historical grievances and contemporary security considerations. Iran's support for Iraqi opposition groups during Saddam Hussein's rule including financial,

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organizational, and logistical assistance established enduring ideological and personal dependencies that continue to shape Iraqi politics (Guzansky 2011). Tehran's efforts to empower the Shi'a faction in Iraq are rooted in religious rivalry, particularly as the rise of Shi'a religious centers like Najaf and Karbala more influential than Iran's Qom threatens Iran's theological leadership and may embolden domestic opposition favoring pluralism over theocratic rule (Guzansky 2011). Realist theory in International Relations offers a pertinent framework for analyzing these developments, focusing on power, security, and state behavior within an anarchic system. While theology is not traditionally central to realism, its strategic deployment as a tool for mobilization, legitimacy, and alliance-building illustrates how Iran uses religious affiliation to bolster regional influence. This study using realist lens investigates the interplay between Iranian theological influence and Iraqi politics since 2003, emphasizing Iran's use of Shi'a networks and ideological ties to advance its strategic interests.

Methodology

This research will adopt a qualitative research approach, primarily utilizing document and content analysis. The primary data will consist of original texts and materials, including official statements, government publications, and significant religious scriptures along with their interpretations. Key governmental documents such as constitutional provisions, laws related to religious freedom or political organization, and official reports will also be critically examined. Secondary data will be gathered from a wide range of sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research papers, and reports from think tanks and international organizations. These materials will provide essential contextual background and theoretical grounding. Through a process of critical evaluation and synthesis, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the existing body of scholarship. It will identify gaps within the current literature and seek to address them through a socio-religious lens, applying detailed document and content analysis of both primary and secondary sources.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes the key theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and methodological approaches that inform our understanding of how Iran has leveraged theological and religious instruments to project power and influence within Iraq's political landscape. The application of realist theory to Iranian-Iraqi relations has been extensively developed in the international relations literature. Murray (1996) and Padelford (1949) provide foundational examinations of Morgenthau's classical realist principles, emphasizing how states pursue power and security through strategic calculations. Waltz (2008) advances the neorealist perspective, focusing on structural constraints within the international system that shape state behavior. These works establish the theoretical groundwork for understanding Iran's engagement in Iraq as fundamentally driven by security imperatives and power maximization rather than purely ideological considerations. Paipais (2018) makes a significant contribution by bridging realist theory with theological dimensions, arguing that religious narratives and institutions can serve as instruments of statecraft. This work challenges traditional realist assumptions by demonstrating how non-material factors, particularly religious affinity, can be strategically deployed to achieve foreign policy objectives. The integration of theological elements within realist frameworks represents an important theoretical innovation that helps explain Iran's multifaceted approach to influence projection.

The historical literature establishes crucial context for understanding contemporary dynamics. Ehteshami (2003) provides comprehensive analysis of Iran-Iraq relations in the immediate aftermath of Saddam Hussein's removal, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges created by the regime change. Wang (2007) examines how the 2003 Iraq War fundamentally altered the strategic landscape, creating conditions favorable to Iranian influence expansion. Islam (2024) offers detailed examination of Iran's foreign policy strategy toward post-

2003 Iraq, tracing the evolution from historical rivalry to strategic partnership. This work demonstrates how the removal of the Ba'athist regime eliminated a key strategic competitor and created opportunities for Iranian influence projection through religious and political networks.

Haddad (2016) provides critical analysis of Shi'a-centric state building in post-2003 Iraq, examining how demographic realities translated into political power. This work is essential for understanding how Iran capitalized on Shi'a political ascendancy to advance its strategic interests. The analysis of Sunni rejection and marginalization helps explain the sectarian polarization that Iran has both exploited and contributed to. Cepoi and Lazăr (2013) examine the tension between Iranian strategic interests and religious rivalry, particularly focusing on the competition between Najaf and Qom as centers of Shi'a religious authority. Their work highlights the complexity of Iranian influence, which operates simultaneously through cooperation and competition with Iraqi religious institutions.

The literature on Shi'a religious institutions provides crucial insights into mechanisms of Iranian influence. Sindawi (2007) offers comparative analysis of the Najaf and Qom seminaries, examining their distinct approaches to political engagement and religious authority. This work demonstrates how educational networks serve as vehicles for ideological transmission and political influence. Muth (2022) provides detailed examination of seminary education and its role in shaping modern Shi'a identity. The comparative study of Najaf and Qom reveals how different institutional environments produce varying approaches to political theology, with implications for Iranian influence strategies.

El-Dessouki (2017) provides comprehensive analysis of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and their internal and external roles. This work examines how Iranian support for Shi'a militias serves multiple strategic objectives, including security provision, political influence, and regional power projection. The analysis reveals how proxy networks blur the lines between state and non-state actors. Jahanbani (2020) offers regional comparative analysis of Iranian proxy networks, examining how Iran's support for various militant groups serves broader strategic objectives. The work places Iraqi militias within the context of Iran's regional proxy strategy, revealing common patterns and objectives across different theaters. Guzansky (2011) analyzes Iranian involvement in Iraq through the lens of proxy warfare and strategic influence. The work examines how Iran's support for Iraqi opposition groups during the Saddam era created enduring dependencies that continue to shape contemporary politics.

O'Connor (2015) provides military strategic analysis of Iranian influence operations, examining how Iran's "hidden hand" approach serves its strategic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability. The literature consistently identifies tension between Iranian influence and Iraqi sovereignty as a central dynamic. Al-Jubouri (2023) examines constitutional limitations on presidential power in Iraq, revealing how Iranian influence operates through informal networks that bypass formal institutional constraints.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs a realist framework to explore the ideological dimensions of Iranian influence on Iraqi politics following the 2003 invasion. Realism, a foundational paradigm in International Relations (IR), emphasizes state-centric analysis, power politics, and survival within an anarchic international system principle rooted in the works of Thucydides, Hobbes, and Morgenthau. Central to realism is the notion that states, as rational actors, prioritize their national interest and security, often through strategic power calculations (Murray 1996; Padelford 1949). Morgenthau's "six principles of political realism" stress the objective laws of political conduct, defining interests in terms of power and distinguishing politics from other domains. Iran's regional engagement, particularly in Iraq, reflects this realist logic. Its involvement ranging from political sponsorship to religious networking aligns with efforts to secure strategic depth and expand influence in a volatile geopolitical environment. These actions are guided by a cost-benefit calculus grounded in self-interest, reinforcing realism's assumptions about state behavior (Murray 1996; Padelford 1949). The realist concept of the security dilemma is especially relevant,

as Iran's efforts to enhance its security through influence in Iraq may provoke countermeasures, contributing to regional instability.

Different strands of realism provide complementary insights. While classical realism emphasizes human nature and the pursuit of power, neorealism, as developed by Waltz, focuses on the structure and polarity of the international system (Waltz 2008). Neoclassical realism integrates systemic factors with domestic variables, such as leadership perceptions and state capacity (Waltz 2008). Though traditionally centered on material power, realism can accommodate non-traditional instruments of influence, such as religion. In regions like the Middle East, where socio-political identities are deeply intertwined with religious affiliation, theology becomes a potent form of soft power (Paipais 2018). Iran's strategic promotion of Shi'a Islam enables it to build transnational religious solidarities, legitimize political engagement, and shape regional alliances thus using religious narratives to achieve foreign policy objectives (Paipais 2018).

Religious ideologies can thus serve as instruments of statecraft: legitimizing regimes, mobilizing domestic and transnational support, waging proxy conflicts, and advancing cultural influence. Iran's theological outreach fosters a collective Shi'a identity among Iraqi populations, which enhances its soft power and reinforces political convergence (Paipais 2018). Moreover, Tehran views a Shi'a-dominated Iraq as a potential ally in regional affairs and energy cooperation, as well as a buffer against adversarial influences, aligning religious affinity with national interest and strategic security goals (Paipais 2018).

Historical Context

From antiquity through the early modern period, the region encompassing present-day Iran and Iraq was governed by competing imperial powers. While Mesopotamia was shaped by empires such as the Assyrian, Babylonian, and later the Abbasid caliphates, Persia was influenced by the Achaemenid, Safavid, and Qajar dynasties. The emergence of Shi'a Islam in Iraq and its formal adoption as the state religion in Iran during the Safavid era introduced a sectarian dimension to their evolving relationship. Modern Iraq emerged in the 1920s from the Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra (Islam 2024). Iran initially viewed Iraq with suspicion, especially given Baghdad's territorial ambitions over the Shatt al-Arab waterway and the predominantly Arab province of Khuzestan. In response, Iran withheld recognition of Iraq until 1929 and supported Kurdish uprisings in the north.

The 1960s and 1970s were marked by both rivalry and intermittent détente. Iran strategically supported the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq to destabilize the Ba'athist regime, prompting Baghdad to grant significant concessions to Kurdish groups in 1970 (Islam 2024). In 1969, Iran annulled the 1937 treaty and asserted sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab, leading Iraq to deepen its alliance with the Soviet Union through the 1972 "Friendship Treaty" and to initiate military operations against the KDP in 1974. These tensions culminated in the 1975 Algiers Agreement, whereby Iran agreed to end its support for the Kurdish insurgency in exchange for sovereignty over half of the Shatt al-Arab. This episode exemplifies realist principles, demonstrating how strategic calculations based on power and national interest can lead to seemingly contradictory policies. The 1979 Islamic Revolution significantly altered the regional balance. Iran's new revolutionary regime adopted an anti-Western and anti-status quo stance, intensifying hostilities with Iraq. These tensions erupted into the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), a brutal conflict that deepened mutual animosities and left a legacy of unresolved grievances (Islam 2024).

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which resulted in the removal of Saddam Hussein, provided Iran with a strategic opportunity to reshape its relationship with Iraq and expand its regional influence. The collapse of Ba'athist rule created a power vacuum that enabled Iraq's long-marginalized Shi'a majority to assert political agency (Haddad 2016). Under Saddam Hussein, the Shi'a population had endured systematic repression and political exclusion (Muth 2022). The

transition to a new political order rooted in democratic principles unleashed latent Shi'a political mobilization and transformed Iraq's sectarian dynamics.

A defining feature of the post-2003 political landscape was the emergence of broad-based Shi'a political coalitions, often infused with religious ideology. The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) exemplified this trend, consolidating various Shi'a factions under a unified political platform that appealed to a significant segment of the electorate. Their electoral success translated Shi'a demographic dominance into institutional political power, enabling control over key state apparatuses and legislative processes. Religious authority has played a critical role in this transformation. The Shi'a clerical establishment in Najaf holds profound moral and social sway over the community (Haddad 2016). The pronouncements of leading religious figures continue to shape public opinion and electoral behavior. The post-2003 return of exiled clerics further amplified the political influence of the religious elite, reinforcing the entwining of theology and governance in Iraq's Shi'a-led political order (Wang 2007).

Historically, Iran's influence in post-2003 Iraqi politics reflects a complex interplay of religious, ideological, and strategic dimensions, shaped by both historical ties and evolving geopolitical calculations. Central to this influence is the longstanding relationship between the Shi'a seminaries of Najaf and Qom. While Najaf has historically served as the spiritual heart of Shi'a scholarship, emphasizing clerical independence from the state, Qom particularly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution has embodied a politicized theology centered on the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) (Muth 2022). Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran intensified efforts to deepen these clerical ties, particularly through Iraqi clerics who had studied in Qom and returned to Iraq to occupy prominent roles in the new political order (Wang 2007). Iran's support for religious institutions via funding for seminaries, mosques, and charitable organizations linked to Qom has further enabled the dissemination of Iranian-backed religious and ideological narratives (Muth 2022).

In addition to formal religious engagement, Iran has cultivated a network of proxies operating within Iraq's political and religious spheres. These groups, including Shi'a militias and political organizations, receive varying degrees of financial, logistical, and ideological support from Tehran, allowing Iran to project power indirectly while maintaining plausible deniability (Islam 2024; Rivera 2022). Militant groups such as the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah exemplify this proxy structure, often aligning their activities with Iranian objectives such as resisting U.S. influence, defending Shi'a dominance in Baghdad, and preserving regional stability under a Shi'a-led government (Rivera 2022). Many of these groups and political actors trace their origins to exile in Iran during the Saddam era, facilitating enduring partnerships post-2003 (Guzansky 2011). Iran has capitalized on these relationships by providing political and financial support to Shi'a parties, many of which reciprocate by advocating policies favorable to Iranian strategic interests, including opposition to Western influence and support for closer bilateral ties (Islam 2024).

Theological affinity reinforces these connections. Shared religious identity, particularly a Qom-influenced vision of Shi'ism, underpins collaboration between Iranian and Iraqi actors. Iranian religious discourse often invokes pan-Islamic unity and opposition to external enemies, themes that resonate with segments of the Iraqi Shi'a population (Guzansky 2011). Nonetheless, Iraq's strong national identity and internal Shi'a diversity limit Iran's ability to exert unchallenged influence. Resistance to foreign interference, intra-Shi'a competition, and the involvement of other regional powers such as the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Turkey further complicate Iran's hegemonic ambitions (Rivera 2022). Moreover, Iran's soft power projection through media and cultural institutions in Iraq plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and promoting Iranian-aligned interpretations of Shi'a Islam (Islam 2024). While these efforts have yielded influence, their effectiveness remains variable, shaped by Iraq's complex socio-political fabric and broader regional rivalries.

Mechanisms of Iranian Theological Influence on Iraq Religious and Political Institutions

As previously discussed, the *hawzat* (religious seminaries) in Najaf and Qom are two pivotal Shi'a religious institutions that have exerted profound influence on the socio-political dynamics of the Shi'a community, particularly in the context of Iraqi politics (Muth 2022). Functioning as powerful non-state actors, these institutions wield substantial authority through their religious legitimacy and transnational networks, enabling them to mobilize public sentiment and influence political discourse, thereby positioning themselves as critical players in regional power structures (Sindawi 2007). In the late nineteenth century, Iran and the broader Shi'a world were confronted with top-down modernization, which the *ulema* Shi'a scholars often viewed with suspicion due to tensions with Western secularism (Muth 2022). Influential figures such as Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Ayatollah Mohammad-Kazem Khurasani, and Ayatollah Mirza Muhammad-Hassan al-Shirazi contributed significantly to shaping the religious response to modernity, marking a turn toward political engagement by the clerical establishment (Muth 2022). This shift was most prominently demonstrated during the Tobacco Protest of 1891, a landmark event where the religious establishment catalyzed mass resistance, ultimately laying the groundwork for the Persian Constitutional Revolution. This mobilization illustrated a pivotal transformation of the *ulema* from a position of reclusion to one of political activism (Muth 2022).

In the contemporary era, the Najaf seminary, under the moral leadership of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has maintained a relatively apolitical stance, acting as a guiding ethical authority rather than seeking formal political power (Sindawi 2007). Despite Iraq's persistent instability, Najaf's clerical elite continue to exert considerable moral influence over the global Shi'a community. In contrast, the Qom seminary has adopted a more interventionist and ideologically driven approach, aligning itself with modernist and Islamist socio-political frameworks. It has sought to institutionalize political power through doctrines such as *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), thus shaping the theocratic model of governance in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Sindawi 2007; Muth 2022). Both seminaries serve as intellectual centers for *maraji' at-taqlid* (sources of emulation) and function as transnational hubs for Shi'a jurisprudence and political discourse (Sindawi 2007). However, their distinct political environments and historical trajectories have shaped divergent approaches to socio-political engagement.

The Shi'a religious leadership in Iraq is institutionally embodied in the *marja' iyya*, denoting the collective authority of the senior-most clerics, or *maraji'*, who guide religious practice and political behavior (Rizvi 2010). Although Ayatollah Sistani is its most visible figure, the *marja' iyya* represents a broader institution rooted in scholarly consensus and public adherence (Rizvi 2010). Based on the concept of *taqlid* (emulation), the *marja' iyya* commands considerable social and political authority across national boundaries (Rizvi 2018). As such, it functions as a non-state actor capable of shaping political outcomes, influencing public policy, and legitimizing or contesting state authority. The authority of the *marja'* arises from their scholarly credentials, ascetic reputation, and popular acceptance of their *fatwas* (legal opinions), creating global religious networks with profound political implications (Rizvi 2018). Within Iraq, especially in post-2003 contexts, the *marja' iyya* notably under Sistani has played a crucial role in fostering democratic participation, diffusing sectarian tensions, and shaping national identity (Khadim 2010; Muth 2022). Its statements and legal rulings have had a direct bearing on political engagement, civil society mobilization, and state legitimacy. The transnational dimension of the *marja' iyya* has far-reaching implications for regional geopolitics. The seminaries in Najaf and Qom command widespread followings, creating religious networks that may be perceived either as instruments of influence or sources of concern by regional actors. Najaf's relative autonomy has been a stabilizing factor in maintaining Iraq's independent political identity amidst foreign influence.

This religious-political dynamic becomes particularly salient in understanding Iran's post-2003 influence over Iraq. Following the U.S.-led invasion and the collapse of the Ba'athist regime, a power vacuum emerged as discussed above, creating fertile ground for regional powers

especially Iran to exert influence (Cepoi & Lazăr 2013). With its proximity and deep-rooted ideological ties to Iraqi Shi'a groups, Iran strategically sought to shape Iraq's political trajectory, particularly through its influence over the selection of prime ministers. Iran's support for figures like Ibrahim al-Jaafari (2005), Nouri al-Maliki (2006–2014), and Adel Abdul-Mahdi (2018) illustrates a strategy aimed at securing a compliant and stable neighbor (Al-Jubouri 2023). This influence, though often framed through religious affinity, primarily serves Iran's geopolitical interests. For instance, al-Maliki's tenure aligned with Iranian security goals despite exacerbating sectarian tensions (Al-Jubouri 2023), while Abdul-Mahdi's appointment was reportedly facilitated with Iranian backing to maintain regional equilibrium (Al-Jubouri 2023). Thus, Iran's role should be interpreted not merely through the lens of doctrinal solidarity but as a calculated effort to embed its influence in Iraq's power structures (Abrahms 2023). The interplay between the *marja' iyya*, the seminaries of Najaf and Qom, and Iranian strategic interests reveals a complex nexus of religious authority and political power that continues to shape the political landscape of Iraq and the broader Shi'a world.

Militias and Proxy Groups

Iran has consistently extended its influence across the Middle East through support for a range of non-state actors, particularly Shi'a militias and extremist organizations operating in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, the Palestinian territories, and other regions (Jahanbani 2020). A notable example is Iran's foundational role in establishing Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1985. Since its inception, Hezbollah has evolved into a hybrid organization functioning simultaneously as a militant group and a political party allowing Tehran to project power beyond its borders. This alliance not only advances Iran's strategic objective of countering Israel but also facilitates the creation of a land corridor extending from Tehran to the Mediterranean (Jahanbani 2020). In Iraq, Iran has cultivated deep ties with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), many of whose factions are ideologically aligned with the Islamic Republic and operationally linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (El-Dessouki 2017). These militias share a common ideological commitment to defending Shi'a Islam, protecting Shi'a holy sites, countering Western and Sunni influence, and propagating the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. Prominent PMF leaders have openly declared their allegiance to Iranian religious authorities, often prioritizing Tehran's directives over those of their own national governments. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has described the PMF as a "vital strategic asset" for Iraq's present and future, advocating for its institutional support and expansion (El-Dessouki 2017).

Iran's support for the PMF manifests through a comprehensive network of assistance—ranging from media and propaganda operations, military training, and strategic guidance, to financial subsidies, arms transfers, and diplomatic backing. The IRGC, particularly its elite Quds Force, plays a pivotal role in coordinating these efforts (El-Dessouki 2017). Notable figures such as Hadi al-Amiri, Qais al-Khazali, and the late Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis exemplify the depth of this cooperation. Their longstanding relationships with Iran, forged during the Iran-Iraq War and solidified through continued collaboration with Quds Force commanders like late Qassem Soleimani, underscore Tehran's sustained investment in cultivating a loyal and ideologically congruent militia elite. The PMF's political entrenchment within Iraq's institutional architecture has significant ramifications. Its formal integration into the state's security apparatus has blurred the lines between state and non-state power, creating parallel authority structures that challenge the central government's monopoly on legitimate force (El-Dessouki 2017). This duality undermines Iraq's sovereignty, particularly given the explicitly sectarian composition of many PMF factions, which intensifies intra-state tensions and exacerbates regional instability.

Analyzed through the prism of power politics, the emergence and persistence of these militias reflect strategic responses to state weakness. In the vacuum left by a fragile and often incapacitated Iraqi state, the PMF has positioned itself as both protector and provider delivering security and services while simultaneously advancing its own political and economic interests (El-Dessouki 2017). Their motivations are shaped by a complex interplay of religious ideology,

sectarian loyalty, and pragmatic ambitions for influence and wealth. Through these proxy forces, Iran has effectively extended its strategic depth into Iraq, securing its interests, projecting ideological influence, and maintaining a formidable buffer against adversaries.

Clerical Appointments and Education

Throughout modern Iranian history, many significant revolts and political movements have been led by Shi'a *ulama* (clergy). Traditionally, the Shi'a religious establishment maintained a posture of political quietism, avoiding direct confrontation with ruling authorities. However, in times of sociopolitical crisis and persecution, prominent clerics have taken on more active political roles (Golkar 2017). This transformation is perhaps most notably exemplified by the Tobacco Protest of the late 19th century, during which Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi issued a *fatwa* against the Qajar monarchy's concession of tobacco rights to the British. His decree mobilized mass civil disobedience, compelling the monarch to reverse the concession thereby inaugurating a new era of political engagement by the *ulama* (Golkar 2017).

From a strategic standpoint, cultural and religious instruments have long been utilized by states seeking to expand influence. Iran's theological engagement in Iraq can be interpreted as part of a broader effort to enhance its regional leverage and secure its geopolitical interests by shaping the political and religious landscape of its western neighbor. A central component of this influence is the concept of *marja' iyya*, or religious authority, which holds immense significance in Twelver Shi'ism (al-Qarawee 2017). Grand Ayatollahs, as the highest-ranking religious authorities, issue jurisprudential rulings that profoundly shape societal behavior and belief. Historically, Iraqi cities such as Najaf have been preeminent centers of Shi'a learning. However, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Qom emerged as a well-resourced and state-supported theological hub, advancing an ideologically charged interpretation of Shi'ism aligned with the political theology of the Islamic Republic (Gleave 2012). Iran's influence on the Iraqi clerical establishment does not typically manifest through direct appointments, but rather through the cultivation and sponsorship of clerics trained in Qom. These clerics, often integrated into Iraq's *hawza* networks, promote theological positions that resonate with Iranian state ideology (Gleave 2012). This intellectual cross-pollination is further facilitated by institutional support, including funding for mosques, religious schools, and charitable foundations that endorse clerics sympathetic to Iranian religious and political thought. While this does not necessarily constitute overt control, it fosters an environment where Iranian-influenced perspectives gain prominence within Iraqi religious and political discourse.

The role of education is particularly salient in this dynamic. The *hawzat* of Najaf and other Iraqi seminaries have traditionally upheld a legacy of scholastic independence. However, in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and the subsequent restructuring of Iraqi politics, Iran's financially robust religious institutions in Qom were well-positioned to provide resources, training, and doctrinal guidance to clerical circles in Iraq (Gleave 2012). Through this strategic engagement, Iranian theological narratives have increasingly permeated Iraq's educational and clerical institutions, subtly reshaping the contours of Iraqi Shi'a political theology.

Cultural Diplomacy

In international relations, a nation's soft power is fundamentally rooted in its cultural values, foreign policy orientation, and political principles (Wastnidge 2014). Public diplomacy operates as a critical conduit for projecting soft power, typically pursuing objectives that span the economic, political/military, and socio-cultural spheres. Among the various tools utilized to advance public diplomacy are international broadcasting, cultural exchanges, and strategic dialogues with foreign publics. This section specifically explores the cultural dimensions of Iran's public diplomacy in Iraq, adopting the term 'cultural diplomacy' to refer to these efforts. Cultural diplomacy is defined as the international projection of a nation's cultural policies through the dissemination of ideas, information, art, and heritage to engage external audiences and enhance

the nation's global image. In an increasingly image-conscious international environment, states are leveraging modern communication technologies to shape perceptions and expand influence (Wastnidge 2014).

Iran's soft power in Iraq is deeply shaped by historical, civilizational, and cultural affinities that bind the two nations. Shared historical legacies and socio-cultural elements of Iranian civilization embedded in Iraqi society foster intimate bonds between Iranian actors and segments of the Iraqi population. Notably, Iran's relationship with the Iraqi Kurdish region reflects a targeted and strategic use of cultural diplomacy, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) playing an instrumental role (Pourali et al. 2022). Through representative offices in the Kurdistan Region, Iran has facilitated dialogue with Kurdish groups, countered opposition activities, gathered intelligence, and promoted its cultural agenda through philanthropic ventures and public engagement. Tehran's longstanding support for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan has further embedded its influence within regional political dynamics, with cultural affinity being framed as a cornerstone of political solidarity (Pourali et al. 2022). Educational exchanges have also been central to Iran's strategy. Iranian universities, particularly Al-Mustafa International University and Ahlul Bayt International University, host large numbers of students from Iraq, particularly from Arab, Kurdish, and Shi'a backgrounds approximately 20% of the total student population (Pourali et al. 2022). These institutions serve not only as academic platforms but also as vehicles for ideological dissemination, especially within Shi'a-majority regions of Iraq. By leveraging theological commonality, Iran has reinforced its soft power influence among the 60% of Iraqis who identify as Shi'a. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), established in 1995, acts as a centralizing body for Iran's global cultural diplomacy apparatus, streamlining disparate efforts formerly coordinated by semi-autonomous state entities (Wastnidge 2014). Iran's international media initiatives further amplify its cultural outreach. The launch of Al-Alam, a 24-hour Arabic-language news channel in 2003, exemplifies Tehran's media strategy. Broadcasting news focused on Iraq, as well as on Lebanon, Palestine, and Africa, Al-Alam was introduced in response to the US-led invasion of Iraq. It aimed to counter Western media dominance by offering an alternative narrative aligned with Iranian geopolitical and ideological perspectives (Wastnidge 2014). The following Figure: 1 depicts components of Iran's cultural diplomacy in Iraq.

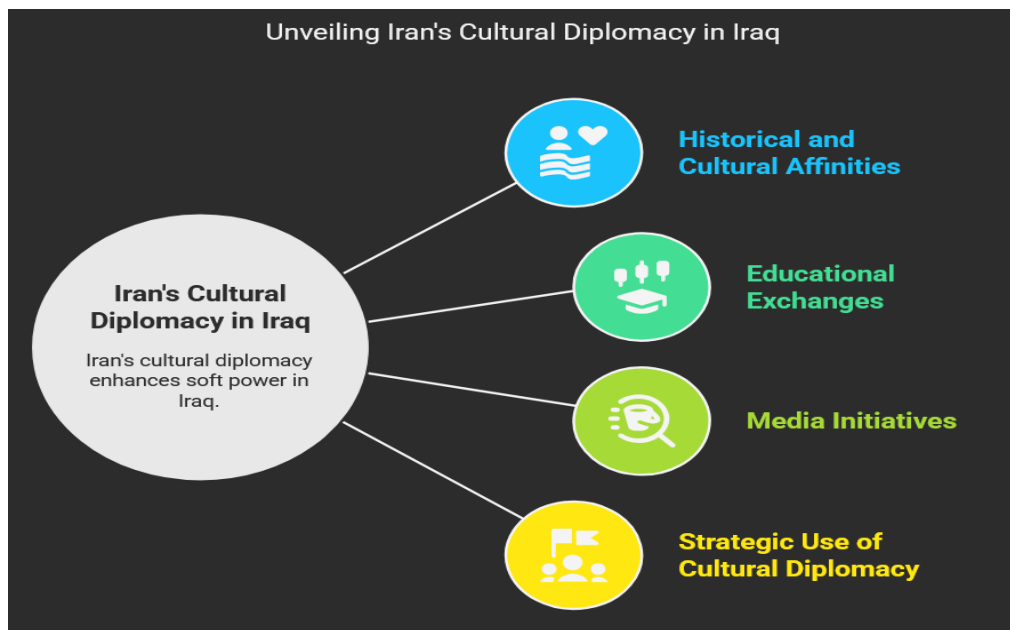


Figure 1: components of Iran's cultural diplomacy in Iraq (Source: DeVised by the authors)

Analysis

In the realist framework, states are principal actors in an anarchic international system driven by survival and power maximization. Based on above discussion, Iran's expansion of theological influence in Iraq transcends mere ideological affinity, functioning as a strategic instrument to advance its core national interests security, power, and economic advantage in a volatile regional environment. By cultivating robust ties with Shi'a political actors and religious communities, Iran seeks to establish a stable and sympathetic neighbor, thereby enhancing its regional stature, securing economic benefits, mitigating perceived threats, and consolidating domestic legitimacy. This religious affinity underpins Iran's use of soft power, complementing its conventional hard power capabilities. Through support for Shi'a militias and political factions, Iran projects influence via proxies, enabling deterrence and influence without overt military engagement. Economically, Iraq emerges as a pivotal partner, offering Iran alternative commercial avenues, especially under international sanctions, fostering enduring economic alliances rooted in shared religious identity and mutual trust.

Iran's approach in Iraq reflects a comprehensive realism strategy of alliance-building, creating strategic depth through a network of aligned actors to safeguard its interests. The 2003 U.S. invasion created a power vacuum that Tehran exploited, securing influence in Iraq's political and security structures. This influence challenges traditional Sunni Arab dominance, particularly Saudi Arabia, intensifying regional power rivalries and proxy conflicts in the Middle East. However, Iran's influence operates not only through state-to-state relations but also through non-state actors Shi'a militias and religious institutions that exercise significant autonomy and political power within Iraq, complicating the conventional realist state-centric model. These transnational religious networks transcend borders, undermining state sovereignty and illustrating the limits of realism in fully capturing the multifaceted nature of Iran-Iraq relations. Therefore, a nuanced realist analysis must integrate both hard and soft power dimensions, recognizing how Iran leverages shared religious and cultural identity to sustain its sphere of influence. This duality enables Tehran to pursue its strategic objectives more effectively by legitimizing its presence and reducing resistance within Iraq, while reinforcing its broader regional ambitions.

Implications and Policy Considerations

Iran's ideological influence over Iraq carries profound implications for regional security. The collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime created a power vacuum that Tehran has exploited by supporting Shi'a political factions and militias, thereby reshaping the regional balance of power. This shift has exacerbated sectarian tensions, fueling instability and conflict across the Middle East. The rise of Iran-backed non-state actors complicates the security environment by blurring the lines between conventional state warfare and irregular conflict, challenging the traditional Westphalian notion of state sovereignty. The expansion of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), closely affiliated with Iran, exemplifies how quasi-state entities can significantly affect regional security dynamics (Ehteshami 2003). The intensifying rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is further inflamed by sectarian polarization, increasing the risks of proxy conflicts and direct confrontations, thereby posing a severe threat to regional peace and stability. Iran's religious influence in Iraq substantially enhances its strategic depth. Iraq serves as a vital buffer zone that allows Iran to project influence, mitigate threats, and consolidate its regional position. By fostering alliances with aligned political and military actors often bound by shared Shi'a religious identity—Iran has cultivated a network of proxies that extends its ideological and political reach. This strategy enables Tehran to achieve its foreign policy objectives while minimizing the costs and risks associated with direct military engagement, thereby bolstering its standing on the global stage.

However, Iran's expanding religious influence poses significant challenges to Iraq's sovereignty. Tehran's involvement manifests in political patronage, financial support to allied factions, and the training and arming of militias. Many of these non-state actors maintain loyalties

that transcend Iraqi borders, undermining the central government's authority in Baghdad. This dual challenge confronts Iraq with the need to uphold its monopoly on legitimate use of force while grappling with diminished autonomy in policymaking free from external interference. Sectarian and factional rivalries, often reflecting divergent allegiances to Iran, further fracture the Iraqi state and impede its capacity for cohesive governance. Consequently, Iraq's ability to function as a unified and autonomous actor within the international system is increasingly compromised by external influence, primarily from Iran. The growing prominence of Iranian ideological influence in Iraq also reverberates beyond the region, affecting global powers and their strategic calculations. The United States faces mounting difficulties in advancing its objectives of regional stability and counterterrorism amid Iran's expanding sway. Saudi Arabia perceives Iran's ascendancy as a direct threat to its security and geopolitical influence, intensifying their rivalry and fueling proxy conflicts. Other key actors, including Turkey and Russia, respond variably to the shifting regional balance. Turkey, concerned about Kurdish aspirations and broader regional stability, remains wary of the expanding Shi'a influence (Cepoi and Lazăr 2013). Russia, while allied with Iran in certain arenas, may encounter conflicting interests that complicate its position. The international community confronts significant challenges in managing a landscape where traditional concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity are increasingly contested, and where the boundaries between state and non-state actors are becoming increasingly indistinct.

As a conclusion, this study investigates the multifaceted relationship between Iran and Iraq, focusing on the role of Iranian religious influence within the Iraqi political landscape. Employing the theoretical lens of political realism, the analysis explores how power, security, and national interests shape the interactions between the two states. The findings reveal a complex dynamic where religious ideology functions as a strategic instrument to advance national objectives in the realm of international relations. Iran's engagement in Iraq is driven by security imperatives and ambitions for regional dominance. Central to this strategy is the deployment of its religious doctrine particularly the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* which extends beyond theological discourse to encompass the cultivation of political actors, financial support for aligned groups, and the application of coercive power to safeguard its strategic interests within Iraq.

While Iraq maintains historical and cultural ties with Iran, it operates under the constraints imposed by realist principles. The Iraqi pursuit of national unity and sovereignty necessitates a delicate balance in managing relations with its powerful neighbor. Iraqi political leaders are acutely aware of the risks posed by Iranian overreach and frequently strive to assert autonomy, even as pragmatic engagement remains necessary. The realist framework provides a robust tool for interpreting the underlying motives and behavior patterns of both Iran and Iraq. It facilitates an understanding that transcends superficial ideological narratives, illuminating the strategic calculations underpinning their interactions. The contest for control over key Iraqi institutions such as the military and economic sectors exemplifies the fundamental realist struggle for power and influence. The intertwining of theological and political dimensions between Iran and Iraq is expected to endure, sustained by persistent sectarian divisions, historical grievances, political exclusion, and external interventions. The fragility of the Iraqi state manifested in corruption, weak governance, and the presence of influential non-state actors with ideological and material ties to Iran impedes the realization of a fully sovereign and cohesive Iraq. Iran's strategic ambitions, including its quest for regional leadership and its acute security concerns, will continue to shape its involvement in Iraqi affairs. The trajectory of this complex relationship remains uncertain and contingent on multiple internal and external factors. Strengthening Iraqi state institutions, advancing national reconciliation, and the emergence of a more assertive and independent political leadership may diminish Iranian influence. Moreover, the growing Iraqi popular demand for genuine sovereignty and rejection of undue foreign interference presents a significant counterbalance to Iran's dominance. The Iraqi government's ability to address socio-economic challenges and foster an inclusive political system will be crucial in shaping future bilateral dynamics. Regional and international developments will also play a decisive role. Changes in the U.S. military and diplomatic posture, evolving alliances among Middle Eastern

states, and the degree of international engagement or isolation of Iran will significantly affect the Iranian-Iraqi relationship.

In sum, Iranian religious influence on Iraqi politics constitutes a complex and multi-layered phenomenon best understood through the prism of political realism. The future of this entanglement will depend on the intricate interplay of Iraq's internal political evolution and broader regional and global dynamics.

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