The U.S. Policy towards Post-Saddam Iraq: Implications for the Middle Eastern Regional Security

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Abstract

The U.S. invasion of Iraq entailed with itself the overarching dynamics that have reshaped not only the Iraqi political and security landscape but have had a long-lasting impact on the entire region of the Middle East. The three phases of the U.S. military presence in Iraq are highlighted by the consistent setbacks that ultimately proved catastrophic for the region. First, the replacement of Baathist state structure with the so-called democratic setup led to political instability due to outbreak of civil war. Second, withdrawal of the U.S. troops led to establishment of ISIS, hence ensuing a new wave of terrorism. Third, return of the U.S. military under the disguise of countering ISIS eventually transformed into a proxy warfare with Iran. Resultantly, policy of the U.S. of promoting democracy in Iraq and utilizing it as a base for dominance across the region, respectively, could not prove fruitful for it and the region. Instead, Iraq witnessed the religiously motivated government that miserably failed to live up to the expectations of general public. On the other hand, instead of consolidating its position, the U.S. has experienced successive receding from the Middle East. This paper is thus an attempt to describe the political events in the post-U.S. invasion period to explore the reasons why the U.S. became a main factor of instability in Iraq and what would be its future trajectory regarding its military presence inside Iraq.

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Introduction

Iraq is believed to be a pivot of the Middle Eastern chaos with distinctive history of 40 years. The instability in Iraq has its roots embedded into the U.S. support of Saddam against Iran during Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The enormous secret supply of weapons, including tanks and bombs, and billions of dollars in military aid, through Israel and the Gulf States made Iraq the uncontested power in the region and the prime state of fostering the U.S. interests against the Islamic Republic of Iran.[1] The use of chemical weapons by Saddam onto the Iranian village in Khuzestan, were also overlooked by the U.S. only to be tackled at the later stage.[2] Nevertheless, the U.S. managed to halt the Iranian expansionist plans with the help of Iraq, leaving the latter with stockpiles of weapons and loans.

The emphasising demands of the Gulf States for the payback of loans were countered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and declaring it the province of Iraq.[3] That had alarmed the policy makers in Washington as Iraq became a threat to the Gulf monarchies which were the main source of energy for the US. Moreover, the sour relations of Iraq with Israel were also predicted to be a contentious issue that could lead to the probable Iraqi military misadventure. The "Operation Desert Storm" was thus launched against Iraq by the U.S. and its allies which destroyed the Iraqi military status and forced it to evacuate from Kuwait.[4] However, the U.S. didn't show any intent to replace Saddam for unknown reasons. The prime speculation might be the U.S. perception of Saddam as the source of stability for Iraq and the major factor in repelling the Iranian influence

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[1] Seymour M. Hersh, "U.S Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in its War Against Iran," *New York Times*, January 26, 1992,
 https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/26/world/us-secretly-gave-aid-to-iraq-early-in-its-war-against-iran.html

[2] Javed Ali, "Chemical Weapons and the Iran-Iraq War: A Case Study in Noncompliance", *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2001): 43-58

[3] Colin Warbrick, "The Invasion of Kuwait by Iraq," *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1991): 482-492.

[4] Michael Brill, "Remembering Desert Storm and the Gulf War(s) Odyssey of Iraq's Air Force," *Wilson Center,* January 14, 2021,
https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/remembering-desert-storm-and-gulf-wars-odyssey-iraqs-air-force-part-1

from Iraq.[5] On the other hand, Iraq was placed under embargo to weaken it regionally.

However, the 9/11 attacks completely transformed the security paradigm of the US. From arming the allies in the region, the U.S. actually deployed troops on the ground. The central idea was to invade foreign territories to eliminate the security threats and lay down the framework embodying "American Principles" to promote "Pan Americanism." The labelling of rogue elements was not limited to the non-state actors like the Taliban but also included their states ─ Iran, Iraq and North Korea ─ comprising the "Axis of Evil." Hence, after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the case of "Weapons of Mass Destruction" was put up to invade and topple Saddam in 2003. Eventually, the U.S. unilateral decision to invade Iraq, which initially seemed to be welcoming created chaotic circumstances later on, which Iraq has still been struggling to coup with.

This study, therefore, looks into the factors involving the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the consequential effects of it. The study has specifically focused on how the U.S. invasion became the crucial factor in breeding sectarianism, terrorism and proxy conflicts in Iraq. Hence, primarily the study addresses two questions i.e. a) Why has the U.S. troops become a leading factor of instability in the region? and b) How have the U.S. policies shaped Iraq's internal dynamics?

Theoretical Framework

The study delves into the key areas by utilising the tenets of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), proposed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in their book, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security (2003)*. The U.S. policies for Iraq would be analysed under two circumstances. First, the U.S. had to act preemptively to ensure its supremacy over the country in particular and the region as a whole without the UNSC approval that reflects the anarchic nature of international system as mentioned in RSCT. Second, once consolidated power, the U.S. got involved in fierce competition to maintain its exclusivity in Iraqi

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[5] James A. Baker, "Why the US Didn't March to Baghdad," *California Teachers Association*, September 08, 1996,
https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-09-08-op-41778-story.html

politics and hence utilised the strategies of power politics by fostering a comprehensive partnership with various political and military factions of Iraq that have regional impact as well which also testifies the RSCT proposition of interlinkages between the regional security issues.

Furthermore, the regional implications would be addressed by using two variables of Regional Security Complex Theory, i.e., anarchy and alignment. The anarchy is addressed as the outcome of the weakening of Iraq as a state through consistent intervention. Due to absence of any regional structure and existence of conflict formation in the Middle East, the region and the states have consistently remained in a security dilemma.[6] Hence, Iraq became the epicenter of regional chaos. On the other hand, as the threat perceptions evolved and mutual mistrust became a focal point between the rival states, regional realignment between regional actors and global powers has taken a new turn while interlinking the overall security situation of the region into one frame. After the collapse of the Saddam regime, the status quo in the Middle East was disturbed, and hence, it caused a change in the patterns of interaction between the regional players. Therefore, the regional alignments were also shifted. Through these two variables of RSCT, the article discusses the overarching effects of the U.S. policies in Iraq in the overall region.

Brief History of the U.S. Invasion of Iraq

The basis of the Iraq War, commonly known as the Gulf War II, can be traced back to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The financially exhausted Iraqi regime could not persuade Kuwait to consider some concessions in the loans that it had taken during its war with Iran. The neutrality of the U.S. in the inter-Gulf crisis at the beginning encouraged Saddam to invade Kuwait without any hesitation.[7] The role of Iraq in containing Iran during the war of 1980-88 was a big relief to the U.S. After the Kuwait war many U.S. policy makers were of the view that the

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[6] Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, Regions and Powers: *The Structure of International Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 216.
[7] Abdus Sattar Ghazali, "Was 1991 Gulf War a Prelude to the 2003 Iraq debacle," *OpEdNews.com*, Feb 24, 2008, https://www.opednews.com/articles/opedne_abdus_sa_080223_was_1991_gulf_war_a_.html

U.S. must restrain itself from further tilting towards Iraq. However, President Bush opposed that opinion, considering that Iraq, one day, might play a positive and long-term role in the Middle East.[8]

However, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, nearly a decade later, shook the U.S. to the core. The *modus operandi* battered the U.S. power status and hegemony before the world. It was quite natural for the U.S. to hunt down those who were responsible for shattering the security apparatus of the world's super power. Thus, operation "war on Terror" was thus launched, centering its focus on Afghanistan. According to the U.S., the backwardness of the Muslim countries and especially the anti-U.S. narrative prompted "Islamic Extremism" in the form of 9/11 attacks and hence the U.S. actions in the Arab (Muslim) world.[9] Hence, to "modernise" the world and to secure more civilised support for its status, the U.S. strategised to ally with moderate Muslims to implant values like democracy and pluralism.[10] 9/11 attacks, thus, provided an opportunity to mobilise the support for a war against Iraq which would discourage the anti-U.S. voices in the Middle East and the Muslim World from attacking the U.S. soil.

The U.S. needed to create an atmosphere where the invasion would look justifiable. The threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) served that purpose to muster up the population through the extensive media campaign and the monolithic notion made the WMDs automatically identified in the media as inseparably part of a global terrorism matrix i.e., establishing the links between Saddam regime and the *al-Qaeda* terrorists.[11] However, later on, a report concluded that Iraqi weapons were not a threat to the U.S. as its nuclear program had been suspended many years ago and nuclear capabilities were destroyed.[12]

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[8] Murray Waas, "Who Lost Kuwait," *Radio Islam*, Jan 30, 1991, https://mail.islam-radio.net/historia/zionism/wholostkuwait.html

[9] Angel M. Rabasa and *et al, The Muslim World After 9/1* (California: Rand Corporation, 2004, 50.

[10] Rabasa, *The Muslim World After 9/1.*

[11] Susan D. Moeller," Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Centre for International and Security Studies*, March 09, 2009, https://cissm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/wmdstudy_short.pdf

[12] Joseph Cirincione and et al, "WMD in Iraq: Evidence and Implications," *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy, Practice and Science*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2004): 51-55.

Under this pretext, the U.S. launched its operation "Iraqi Freedom" in March 2003 that led to the collapse of Saddam's regime.

Policy of Restructuring-Post-2003

For the US, outthrusting Saddam was a primary aim. The second drive was to reshape the Iraqi political structure. The restructuring of Iraq was aimed at two goals. The first one was to keep Iraq weak across all segments i.e. political, social and military, so as to prevent it from threatening the U.S. interests in the region again, while the second one was to keep Iraq dependent upon the U.S. and allow it the space for keeping its military presence inside Iraq ─ a vital tool to deter the anti-U.S. forces in the region i.e., Iran and other non-state factions.[13] The restructuring of the Iraqi state was carried out in two manners that had the adversarial effect on the Iraqi socio-political progress.

Power Transition from Sunnis to Shiites

The U.S. plan for Iraq was to introduce democratic values in an otherwise tribal society. The insistence on democracy was vital as it is one of the major tenets of "American Principles," which the U.S. aimed to achieve to quell the anti-American sentiments. Moreover, through democratic values, the U.S. tried to relegate the powers in the hierarchical order, which would close the prospects of consolidation of power residing with one individual particulalrly as a supreme leader of the nation. However, the democracy, which was expected to bring peace, created a complicated situation due to demographic reality, as Shiites being in the majority (65-70 per cent), dominated the political platforms. The long history of suppression against the Baathist regime had developed a sense of identity among the community members, and hence, Shiite political elites were more inclined towards their Shiite

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[13] Katherine Lawlor and Colonel Ketti Davison, "Iraq is Fragile, not Hopeless: How Iraq's Fragility Undermines Regional Stability," *Institute for the Study of War* (Washington DC), December 2020, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20is%20Fragile%2C%20Not%20Hopeless.pdf

identity rather than their overall political outlook and, therefore, leading the way for the greater influence of Iran inside Iraq.[14]

Throughout the rule of the Baathist regime from 1990 onwards, Iran was reluctant to open more cooperative ties with Iraq. It was mainly due to the effects of the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war that was revered as a religious duty and was pretty much vibrant in day to day proceedings of Iranian society.[15] Under that scenario, the removal of Saddam and the establishment of a new Shiite-led government provided an opportunity to Iran to influence the Iraqi political structure. Since Iraq had always remained the natural arena for the export of its revolution, Iran swiftly moved in by utilising the leverage of various members of Iraqi Shiite militias which were previously settled in Iran to escape the Baathist imprisonment.[16] Additionally, Iran's support to the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which consisted of all major Shiite parties in the 2005 elections, also highlighted the Iranian intentions of dominating the Iraqi political dynamics.[17] The U.S. policy of introducing the democratic setup faced the backlash as the power vacuum was filled by Iran and Iranian sponsored militias which actively controlled the parts of Iraq like the Badr Organisation controlling the south of Iraq.[18]

Furthermore, Ayatollah Sistani's non-secularist approach towards democracy further washed out the notion of liberal democracy in Iraq as envisaged by President Bush and others before they intervened in Iraq.[19] It highly disrupted and affected the U.S. future policy-making towards Iraq. Sistani's emphasis on the Sharia-based political system overshadowed the U.S. model of democracy with the "American

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[14] Fanar Haddad, "Sunni-Shia Relations after the Iraq War," *United States Institute of Peace*, Peace Brief 160 (Washington), November 15, 2013, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB160.pdf

[15] Anoush Ehteshami, "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, no. 4 (2003): 115-129

[16] Ibid

[17] Ahmed Ali and *et.al*, "Iran's Influence in Iraq", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Analysis 1806 (Washington), May 6, 2011, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-influence-iraq

[18] Kali Robinson, "How Much Influence Does Iran Have in Iraq?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 18, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-much-influence-does-iran-have-iraq

[19] Patrick Basham, "Can Iraq be Democratic?," *Policy Analysis*, no. 505 (January 2004): 1-28.

Principles." It ensured the authority of Iraq-based clerics over the Iraqi politics and society and their disapproval of the US-led system for the country.

De-Baathification and Sunni Rejection

To remove the remnants of Saddam's regime, the U.S. made a striking decision of disbanding the Baathist Party and removing its members from various official postings. The move was opposed by the Iraqi politicians as well as the Shiite clergy since it would be implied as the US-Shiite nexus and could lead to social unrest. Sunnis, who were the privileged community under Saddam, felt threatened at the hands of this perceived nexus. As a result, a civil war broke out, and a massive insurgency took place. The disfranchised Baathist military personnel and the tribal Sunnis largely perceived the Iranian influence overdisbanding of the Baathist regime.[20] Ultimately, to cope with the situation, the U.S. started to cooperate with the Sunni people to create a balance. However, the U.S. faced a dilemma since cooperating with one group was considered as opposition to the other, according to Vali Nasr.[21] The struggle on the behalf of Sunni population could not bear fruit because of the existing differences among various factions. These Sunni factions like *Hamas of Iraq* and *1920 Revolution Brigade* were nationalists and more closely aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and considered *jihad* lawful only in expelling the occupiers i.e. the U.S. troops.[22] Both groups were opposed to the Salafist factions, mainly *al-Qaeda,* which fostered the sectarian agenda and considered the killing of Shiites as the major part of jihad as well.

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[20] Vali Nasr, "The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future," Paper presented in a seminar at Carnegie Council, New York, October 18, 2006,
https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20061018-the-shia-revival-how-conflicts-within-islam-will-shape-the-future
[21] Howard W. Hewitt, "Vali Nasr: US Failure in Iraq is due to Sectarian Differences," *Wabash*, February 19, 2007,
https://www.wabash.edu/news/story/4367
[22] Muhammad Abu Rumman, "The Politics of Sunni Armed Groups in Iraq", *Sada*, August 18, 2008,
https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2008/08/the-politics-of-sunni-armed-groups-in-iraq?lang=en

Until 2006, the insurgency was mostly carried out by the Sunni militias in order to regain political authority. However, the bomb attack at the *Al-Askari Mosque* in 2006 ─ a major Shiite holy site reshaped the sectarian violence. Resultantly, the radical Shiite groups became involved in the armed clashes. The most notable was the *Mahdi Army* of *Muqtada Al-Sadr*. It was realised that the attacks on Sunni militias increased in the post-Askari Mosque bombings.[23] Under the increasingly volatile security situation, the U.S. decided to abandon its nation building objectives and prepared for the military withdrawal from Iraq.

Policy of Minimum Interference and Evacuation (Post-2011)

Throughout the U.S. presence in Iraq, the U.S. could not achieve its propagated objectives of political framework and security. The political objectives were hindered by the Shiite clergy which tilted the Iraqi political spectrum towards Iran. Similarly, the outbreak of civil and sectarian wars further made the security situation fragile in the country. The gravity of problems after the invasion was much more intense than the earlier anticipations of the US. As a result, the elongated existence of the U.S. troops without being able to curtail the aggregating violence resulted in its decline of support among the masses and eventually paved the way to its evacuation.[24] The evacuation of the U.S. troops was the amalgamation of two factors, i.e. the loss of approximately 4000 American lives and the US$1 trillion cost of war without any substantial result along with the election of President Obama who vehemently opposed the Iraq War.[25] However, the withdrawal of U.S. troops allowed the recurrence of violence as Iraq's security forces were both less

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[23] Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, "Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq," The Brookings Institution, Occasional Paper (Washington DC), October 2006, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/1018iraq_al-khalidi.pdf

[24] Robert K. Brigham, "The Lessons and Legacies of the War in Iraq," in *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* ed. Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 230.

[25] Scott Wilson and Karen DeYoung, "All U.S. Troops to Leave Iraq by the End of 2011,"*Washington Post,* October 21, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/all-us-troops-to-leave-iraq/2011/10/21/gIQAUyJi3L_story.html

equipped and poorly trained. Eventually, this led to the power vacuum yet again and resulted in the emergence of ISIS.

Rise of ISIS

ISIS mainly emerged from the "Salafist" brand of Islam which advocates the "return to the practices of *Salafs* (forefathers)." More broadly, Salafists emphasise the purity of Islamic practices. Being extremely adherent to this notion, ISIS believed in utilising any necessary means to establish the caliphate based upon Sharia and Islamic principles to the extent of adopting violent ways if it is deemed a requirement to out-thrust non-believers from the land of Muslims. In fulfilling their motives, ISIS destroyed some of the most ancient Christian sites considering it as a *Bid'ah* (innovation).[26]

The foundation of ISIS engulfed within itself the miscalculations of the US. ISIS emerged from *Al-Qaeda* in Iraq (AQI), after its founder, Al-Zarqawi, pledged his support to Osama bin Laden and renamed his organization from *Al-Tawhid wal Jihad* to AQI. The killing of Zarqawi in 2006 resulted in the succession of Abu Ayub Al-Masri, who renamed the organisation Islamic State for Iraq (ISI) with Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi as its leader.[27] Subsequently, after both Al-Masri and Omar were killed in 2010, the then ISI came under the leadership of Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi. It was he who took advantage of the 2011 uprising in Syria and sent his associate Abu Mohammad al-Golani, there to create an offshoot of ISI and thus, *Jabhat al Nusra* was formed. Ultimately, Baghdadi announced the unification of both ISI and JN under the banner of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in 2013.[28]

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[26] "ISIS has Destroyed Iraq's Oldest Christian Monastery, Satellite Images Confirm," *Guardian*, January 20, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/20/isis-has-destroyed-iraqs-oldest-christian-monastery-satellite-images-confirm

[27] Cameron Glenn, "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," *Wilson Centre*, October 28, 2019, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state

[28] Thomas Jocelyn, "Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Nusrah Front Emerge as Rebranded Single Entity," *The Long War Journal*, April 9, 2013,

The Arab Uprisings of 2011 and the subsequent evacuation of the U.S. troops from Iraq allowed the ISIS to mobilise its underground channels and to exploit the situation in Syria and Iraq. The skills which were required to articulate attacks and strategies were provided by ex-Baathist.[29] The situation in Syria allowed ISIS to expand by exploiting the existing differences between the Sunni rebels and the secular government of Bashar Al-Assad. Eventually, the influence of ISIS began to grow at the border region of Syria and Iraq and led to the subsequent downfall of Mosul in Iraq.

Anti-ISIS Alliance and Emergence of Iraqi Nationalist Identity

ISIS shortly took control of major Sunni-dominated areas like Mosul and Raqqa and imposed *jizya (religious text)* upon non-believers. Towns, cities and areas dominated by Sunni were all demolished shortly after and the markets became nonfunctional.[30] Clearly, the Sunni population of Iraq miscalculated the danger of ISIS and was exploited dually. First was their resentments from the Shiite led government while the second was the brutality they faced by the hands of ISIS.

Under such circumstances, the religious decree of Ayatollah Ali Sistani of defending Iraq mobilised the large portions of population and galvanised them under the banner of Popular Mobilisation Force (PMF) comprising of Shiite militias and Sunni groups. This decree united the Iraqi population against the common enemy i.e. ISIS. Furthermore, both Sunnis and Shiites felt rejected by the U.S. as they were left on their own to combat the terrorism. The formation of PMF helped in the development of the nationalistic identity of Iraq. Simultaneously, Iran sent its military advisors and assisted in funding and training of PMF, hence, becoming the chief party in combating ISIS on ground. The subsequent victories of PMF and

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https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op-eds/2013/04/09/al-qaeda-in-iraq-al-nusrah-front-emerge-as-rebranded-single-entity/

[29] Jason M. Breslow, "How Saddam's Former Soldiers Are Fuelling the Rise of ISIS," *PBS Frontline*, October 28, 2014,
https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/how-saddams-former-soldiers-are-fueling-the-rise-of-isis/

[30] Alice Martins, "ISIS; A Catastrophe for Sunni,*" Washington Post*, November 23, 2016, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2016/11/23/isis-a-catastrophe-for-sunnis/

eventually the defeat of ISIS allowed its members to reap economic and political advantages. On the contrary, the post-ISIS structural decay led to the grievances of common Iraqi masses who had eyed to transform the elite-based political system. Hence, with this background, importance of next Iraqi elections became momentous in the political history of Iraq.

Iraqi Election of 2018 and the Social Unrest

The 2018 elections of Iraq were the first elections after the defeat of ISIS. It was expected that the elections would be popular yet nail-biting as the foreign powers would interfere to influence the post-ISIS political structure of Iraq. The major parties which contested the elections were the nationalistic *Sairoon* (led by *Muqtada Al-Sadr*), pro-Iranian *Al-Fateh* (the political faction of Popular Mobilisation Force) and Victory Alliance of former Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi, among various other small factions. The politics of post-Saddam Iraq had remained sectarian, however, two developments reflected the post-sectarian tilt of Iraqi politics. Before the elections, the alliance between Iraqi Communists and Iraqi Shiite Islamists under Muqtada defied sectarian-based politics and called for the unity of all Iraqis.[31] Furthermore, there was also a split within the Shiite blocs, Dawa Party was split into Haider Al-Abadi's faction and Nouri Al-Maliki's faction, as reflected in the post-election scenario.[32]

Since the beginning, the U.S. had supported the Victory Alliance of Haider Al-Abadi. However, the election results added to the dismay of the US. The *Sairoon* stood first with 54 seats which had always demanded withdrawal of 'foreign forces' from the Iraqi soil, while the pro-Iranian *Fateh* Alliance stood second with 48 seats in the parliament. The US-backed Victory Alliance under former PM Haider Al-Abadi secured 42 seats and

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[31] Natasha Turak, "Cleric Who Fought US Troops is Winning Iraq's Election: Meet Moqtada al Sadr," *CNBC*, May 14, 2018,
https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/14/iraq-elections-who-is-moqtada-al-sadr.html
[32] Renad Mansour and Christine van den Toorn, "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Eelections: A Population in Transition," *London School of Economics Middle Eastern Centre*, Report (London), July 2018,
https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf

came in third place.[33] Since no party could form government alone, the formation of blocs took place with Haider Al-Abadi joining hands with Muqtada Al-Sadr to form the 'Islah Bloc' while the conservative Shiite parties like Fateh Alliance and State of Law Coalition of former pro-Iranian PM, Nouri Al-Maliki, formed the 'Bina Bloc.'[34] Naturally, the U.S. had its support to the Islah faction to thwart the Iranian influence. Since both the blocs claimed to be in the majority, the first parliamentary session of August 2018 remained in a deadlock which incited protests in the southern city of Basra which turned violent as the disillusioned masses attacked the Iranian consulate and the offices of PMF.[35]

Basra protests of 2018 forced the rivaling blocs to come to an understanding of forming the government. Eventually, after five months of delay, Adel Abdul Mahdi was elected as the new Prime Minister of Iraq.[36] The appointment of Adel Abdul Mahdi was largely seen as the victory of Iran over the U.S. for various reasons. Foremost was the unprecedented move by the Iraqi Sunnis, who decided to side with the pro-Iranian Bina faction which came as the consequence of Sunni participation in the PMF to fight against ISIS.[37] Hence, the pro-Iranian candidate, Mohammed al-Halbousi, was elected as the speaker of the parliament.[38] Another reason

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[33] Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi and Erwin Van Veen, "Iraq's Adolescent Democracy: Where to Go from Here?," *Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations*, CRU Report (The Hague), June 2020, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/iraqs-adolescent-democracy.pdf

[34] Renad Mansour, "Iraq's 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction Between Reform and the Status Quo," *London School of Economics Middle Eastern Centre*, Report (London) February 2019, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100099/1/Mansour_Iraq_s_2018_government_formation_2019.pdf

[35] "Basra Protests: Rioters Attack Iran Consulate," *BBC*, September 07, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45453215

[36] "Who is Adel Abdul Mahdi, Iraq's Prime Minister-Designate?," *New Arab*, October 04, 2018, https://www.newarab.com/analysis/who-adel-abdul-mahdi-iraqs-prime-minister-designate

[37] Inna Rudolf, "The Sunnis of Iraq's "Shia" Paramilitary Powerhouse," *The Century Foundation*, February 13, 2020, https://tcf.org/content/report/sunnis-iraqs-shia-paramilitary-powerhouse/?session=1

[38] "Deadlock Broken as Iraqi Parliament Elects Speaker," *Al Jazeera,* September 15, 2018,

was the unanimous decision by the Iraqi political factions to support the candidacy of Bahram Salih for the presidency of Iraq. Bahram Salih belonged to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which is seen as a pragmatic party having links to Iran, unlike its rival, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which shares deep ethnic sentiments. Furthermore, the KDP also lodged the Kurdish referendum in 2017, which led to the apprehensions of many Iraqi politicians. Finally, the Basra protests extinguished the chances for Haider Al-Abadi to remain as PM for one more term as his allies like Muqtada Al-Sadr started demanding his resignation.[39]

Regional Implications

The case study of Iraq is vital in understanding the overall geopolitics of the region. The Middle East was largely framed in the context of Arab-Israel relations. However, the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and the subsequent developments gave new meaning to the regional security complex. The weakening of Iraq as a unit, both at domestic and regional levels, reshaped the regional order. Iraq has provided the space for the varying states to compete with each other in the pursuit of their interests. Hence, various parties are eyeing to influence the Iraqi political spectrum, which has given regional security ─ a new direction in the following manner.

Iraq as a Proxy Battle Ground State

In the post-ISIS era, the Iranian backed militias under PMF gained both political momentum and victory. The political defeat of the U.S.-backed candidates in the general elections of 2018 led to the growing frustration of the U.S. over its consistent failure to dominate the political and security apparatus of Iraq. In a drastic turn of events, the varying statements by the

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https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/15/deadlock-broken-as-iraqi-parliament-elects-speaker

[39] Tamer El-Ghobashy, "Fiery Protests in Basra Extinguish Hope for Iraq's Pro-U.S. Prime Minister," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2018,
 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/unrest-in-iraqs-south-deals-fateful-political-blow-to-pro-us-premier/2018/09/10/10ffb578-b4f5-11e8-ae4f-2c1439c96d79_story.html

U.S. and Iran over the Iraqi protests transformed into a direct conflict as the U.S. attacked *Kataib-e-Hezbollah* which resulted in the killings of 25 fighters.[40] To attack the militia, which was helpful in defeating ISIS and has a strong social and political presence, led to the discontent of Iraqi politicians who considered the unilateral action by the U.S. as a breach of strategic partnership.[41] Resultantly, the U.S. embassy in Iraq, the largest diplomatic building of the U.S. around the globe was attacked which is widely believed as the orchestration of Iranian-backed militia members. As a consequence, on January 3rd, 2020, the U.S. conducted a drone strike at the Baghdad Airport which resulted in the assassination of the commander of Iran's Quds Force, General Qassem Soleimani and the leader of PMF, Abu Mahdi Muhaddis along with their associates. The military strike dramatically escalated the situation as it was the first event of its kind that the official of a state was killed in a third country. Naturally, Iranian reaction was inevitable and the largest military base of the US, *Ain Al-Assad* was attacked by Iranian missiles which led to the "severe injuries" of 110 U.S. troops.[42] Hence, it was the first time that Iraq became the hotbed for two foreign powers to attack each other directly.

The unfolding of rivalry between two foreign powers — the U.S. and Iran — inside the Iraqi territory further weakened and destabilised the country. Although the Iraqi parliament passed the resolution aiming at the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from their country yet, due to protests, the former Prime Minister (PM) Adel Abu Mahdi resigned, and the new PM Mustafa Al-Kadhimi was sworn into office.[43] Furthermore, the new PM didn't hold any political base and was a technocrat by profession. Due to this, the new government remained unstable and the new

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[40] Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Launches Airstrikes on Iranian-Backed Forces in Iraq and Syria," *Washington Post,* December 29, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/29/world/middleeast/us-airstrikes-iran-iraq-syria.html

[41] "Kataib Hezbollah: Iraq Condemns US Attacks on Iran-Backed Militia," *BBC*, December 30, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50951742

[42] "Number of US Troops wounded in Iran Attack Now at 110: Pentagon," *Al-Arabiya*, February 22, 2020, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2020/02/22/Number-of-US-troops-wounded-in-Iran-attack-now-at-110-Pentagon-

[43] W.J. Heninigan and Kimberly Dozier, "Iraqis Push for U.S. Troop Withdrawal in Symbolic Vote," *Time*, January 05, 2020, https://time.com/5759101/iraqi-parliament-vote-for-us-withdrawal/

elections were conducted in 2021. Nonetheless, those elections also failed to bring political stability as Muqtada, despite emerging victorious with 73 seats, was unable to form the government and the government formation remained in limbo for more than a year. Eventually, Muqtada had to announce his retirement from politics under the religious decree of Grand Ayatollah Kadhim Al-Haeri, a spiritual guide to the *Sadrist* Movement.[44] As a result, the MPs of Muqtada's coalition tender their resignation from the parliament and the vacuum was filled by the candidates of the pro-Iran coordination framework. This further consolidated Iran's influence and delivered a setback to the U.S. in its policy towards Iraq.

Intensification of Conflicts

Since the early 1990s, the primary focus of the regional states was to counter the terrorist outfits mainly *al-Qaeda* and its affiliates. The counter-terrorist activities gained new momentum in the post-9/11 years. However, as the US-led military operations led to the regime collapse in Iraq and the uprooting of terrorist outfits across the region, the power vacuum allowed the regional states to foster their agenda. The regional power poles, notably Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel, became involved in the regional tussle in various arenas. Hence, the focus was shifted from counter-insurgency to proxy battles as Iraq and Syria became the hotbed of Saudi-Iran and Iran-Israel proxy warfare, respectively. The proxy conflicts also spread across the smaller states like Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon. In an overall scenario, the rival groups funded by their sponsored states initiated the armed struggle against each other to influence the political setup of their host states. For example, in Lebanon, the formation of the March 8 Alliance and March 14 Alliance, supported by Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively, contested in a political struggle to dominate Lebanon. [45] The gravity of the situation was depicted after the Lebanese PM, Saad Hariri was summoned in Riyadh

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44 Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi, "Muqtada's Retirement from Iraqi Politics Shows the Power of the Maraji," *Manara Magazine*, November 14, 2022, https://manaramagazine.org/2022/11/iraqi-politics-the-power-of-the-maraji/
45 Bassem Ajami, "Polarised Divide Continues to Define Lebanese Politics," *Arab Weekly*, March 17, 2019, https://thearabweekly.com/polarised-divide-continues-define-lebanese-politics

and, later on, resigned from his premiership in December 2017 through a televised speech blaming Hezbollah's intervention in domestic politics. In a similar move, the visit of *Muqtada Al-Sadr* to Saudi Arabia depicted the efforts of Saudi-Iraq rapprochement in a unified Arab identity.[46] On the other hand, Iran also enhanced its support to the PMF and Nouri Al-Maliki's political faction, leading to disarray on the political front. In a more militaristic way, Syria became the focal point between Iran and Israel. To counter the Iranian advances, Israel has been actively involved in airstrikes across its border into Syria against Iranian military assets and Hezbollah forces since 2013.[47] In a more direct clash, Israel was accused of targeting Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in 2020, who was the chief figure of Iranian nuclear program.[48]

Hence, the power vacuum in Iraq tempted the regional states to increase their presence in the country and utilise it as the base to foster their interests in the region. In this regard, Iran has been the active state who has utilised the strategic advantage in Iraq and translated it into Syria and Lebanon. More importantly, after the October 7 attack of Hamas on Israel, Iran's so-called 'Axis of Resistance' was activated. Hezbollah and Houthis started targeting Israeli assets at the border and the Red Sea, respectively. At the same time, Iran-backed resistance groups in Iraq and Syria intensified their attacks on the U.S. and Israeli military assets through missile strikes.[49] Since the start of the Gaza War, the U.S. assets and troops in Iraq and bordering areas were attacked over 100 times by Islamic Resistance and other groups affiliated with Iran.[50] On the political front as

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[46] *Al Arabiya*, "Muqtada al-Sadr visits Saudi Arabia for the first time in 11 years," July 30, 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2017/07/30/Muqtada-al-Sadr-in-Saudi-Arabia-for-the-first-time-in-11-years-

[47] Gregory Aftandilian, "Israel-Iran Shadow War in Syria Intensifies Amid International Developments," Arab Centre (Washington DC), March 23, 2022, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/israel-iran-shadow-war-in-syria-intensifies-amid-international-developments/

[48] Ardavan Khoshnood, "The Assassination of Fakhrizadeh ─ A Major Iranian Counterintelligence Failure?," *Global Security and Intelligence Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2021): 199-207.

[49] "What is Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'?," *Reuters*, February 03, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-irans-axis-resistance-which-groups-are-involved-2024-01-29/

[50] Justin Salhani, "Who are the Islamic Resistance in Iraq?," *Al Jazeera*, February 10, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/10/analysis-who-is-the-islamic-resistance-in-iraq

well, the Iraqi government had demanded withdrawal of the U.S. forces, for which the delegations of both the states started negotiating in January 2024.[51] Consequently, the region which remained under the shadow of proxy conflicts after 2003, witnessed the transformation and intensification through the direct state-to-state confrontation. As a result, the region where the U.S. had successfully manoeuvred the Israel-Arab rapprochement through Abraham Accords in 2020, subsequently drew divisions on the basis of anti-Israel (anti-US) and pro-Palestine aspects. The rising power of the non-state actors, mostly affiliated with Iran, and Israel's continuous genocidal attacks over the Gaza population minimised the prospects of a consolidated Israel-Arab partnership under the U.S. umbrella. Instead, at the regional level, Arab states grew closer to Iran especially after the Saudi-Iran rapprochement and the reentrance of Iran's ally, Syria, into the Arab League in 2023. At the international level, the leverage which China utilised in materialising the KSA-Iran diplomatic accord gave it the space in the Middle East as a new unbiased external power.

Conclusion

The issue of Iraq has remained one of the major crises of the contemporary Middle East. Despite successfully eradicating the nuances of terrorism and, to an extent, creating a modern Iraqi nationalist identity by defying the ethno-sectarian roots, Iraq, as a state, still lags behind in the sectors of economy, infrastructure, energy, political stability and security. The issues of water and energy, in particular, on which major portion of the Iraqi economy is based, have been in crisis, which has given rise to unemployment, social unrest and grieved youth who are politically charged and more prone to aggression. As a result of its weakening, Iraq has turned into a new battleground for regional players. It is evident from Iran's missile attack onto the alleged Mossad's spy headquarter in Erbil in January 2024, consistent Turkish attacks against the alleged Kurdish militants in northern Iraq and the increased U.S. airstrikes against the pro-Iran Iraqi militias especially after the Gaza War. Finally, the Gaza War has created new dynamics whereby the Iranian proxy partners based across the

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[51] Helene Sallon, "United States Agrees to Negotiate Planned Troop Withdrawal from Iraq," *Le Monde*, January 27, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/27/united-states-agrees-to-negotiate-planned-troop-withdrawal-from-iraq_6470007_4.html

region have been actively targeting the Israeli and the U.S. assets. While the U.S. has responded to the Houthi attacks in Yemen, such a large military engagement in Iraq did not occur. Nonetheless, given the volatile state apparatus of Iraq, the possibility of yet another military frontier being reopened cannot be out-ruled. However, drawing from the aforementioned argumentation, it can be analysed that the primary conflict in Iraq is due to the longevity of the U.S. military presence inside the country that has, in turn, made the Iraqi militias more militant and aggressive. The peaceful and organised withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Iraq can prevent the collapse of the country and avert the Afghanistan situation of August 2021. Furthermore, to thwart the possibility of Iraq becoming a launching pad against other states in the region, it is pertinent to invest in Iraq's water and energy infrastructure. In this regard, two variables i.e. Iran-Saudi rapprochement and China's economy might can help to prevent Iraq from becoming the epicenter of regional wars.