

# Comparative Foreign Policies of Iran and Turkey in Iraq and Their Impact on Regional Balance (2003–2019)

Ashoor. Savari Pour<sup>1</sup>, Davood. Kiani<sup>2\*</sup>, Mehdi. Javdani Moghadam<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science and International Relations, Qo.C., Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science and International Relations, SR.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Department of Political Science and International Relations, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran

\* Corresponding author email address: davood.kiani@iau.ac.ir

Received: 2025-04-01

Revised: 2025-08-04

Accepted: 2025-08-13

Published: 2026-01-01

This article examines the comparative foreign policies of Iran and Turkey in Iraq between 2003 and 2019, focusing on their strategic objectives, instruments of influence, and implications for regional balance. Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraq emerged as a pivotal arena for geopolitical competition, where both Tehran and Ankara have sought to expand their spheres of influence. The study employs a theoretical framework combining offensive realism, balance of power theory, and regional security complex theory to explore the motivations and mechanisms underpinning each state's approach. Iran has pursued a strategy centered on constructing a Shia corridor, enhancing regional deterrence through proxy militias, and curbing U.S. influence. It has leveraged the Popular Mobilization Units, the Quds Force, religious diplomacy, and economic interdependence to assert dominance, particularly in Shia-majority areas. In contrast, Turkey has prioritized the Kurdish question, Turkmen advocacy, water security, and economic expansion. Its engagement with the Kurdistan Regional Government through trade and energy diplomacy, combined with a proactive military posture against the PKK, reflects a multidimensional approach to influence northern Iraq. The article also analyzes how both countries have employed soft power tools, such as religious networks and cultural outreach, and evaluates their impact on Iraq's political elite and post-ISIS stabilization efforts. A comparative analysis reveals significant divergence in military and religious strategies, yet occasional convergence in opposing Kurdish separatism. The study concludes that the Iran–Turkey rivalry in Iraq is emblematic of a broader contest for regional leadership and that Iraq's internal fragmentation and institutional weakness have made it susceptible to external domination. This rivalry has shaped not only Iraq's domestic order but also regional alignments involving the Gulf states, the United States, and Russia, making Iraq a microcosm of Middle Eastern geopolitical dynamics.

**Keywords:** *Iran foreign policy; Turkey foreign policy; Iraq; regional rivalry; Shia corridor; Kurdistan.*

## How to cite this article:

Savari Pour, A., Kiani, D., & Javdani Moghadam, M. (2026). Comparative Foreign Policies of Iran and Turkey in Iraq and Their Impact on Regional Balance (2003–2019). *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, 5(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.isslp.351>

## 1. Introduction

The post-2003 Middle East has witnessed profound transformations, especially in the case of Iraq, where the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime inaugurated a

new era marked by political instability, sectarian fragmentation, and geopolitical reconfigurations. Amid this vacuum, regional actors swiftly recalibrated their foreign policy strategies to assert influence in the evolving Iraqi landscape. Two non-Arab regional



powers—Iran and Turkey—have been particularly prominent in this regard, each pursuing divergent yet occasionally overlapping interests. Their foreign policy maneuvers in Iraq, though shaped by distinct ideological, historical, and strategic imperatives, have become increasingly central to the regional balance of power. The present study is rooted in the recognition of the necessity to understand the foreign policy trajectories of Iran and Turkey in Iraq, not only as bilateral interventions but also as components of a broader contest for regional hegemony. This rivalry has implications that stretch beyond Baghdad, impacting the security architecture of the Middle East and shaping the dynamics of regional coalitions and alignments.

Following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the country's geopolitical position underwent a radical transformation. Once ruled by a centralized and authoritarian regime, Iraq became a fragmented polity with weak institutional structures and sectarian divisions exacerbated by foreign interventions. The dissolution of the Ba'athist state opened space for various local, regional, and international actors to intervene, directly or indirectly, in the country's internal affairs. Iran was among the first to seize the opportunity to entrench itself politically, ideologically, and militarily in the new Iraq. It leveraged religious ties, especially with the Shia majority, and cultivated deep connections with emerging political elites and armed groups aligned with the Shia cause (Azizi, 2021; Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017). Tehran's support for the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), its influence over Baghdad's strategic decisions, and its ideological framing of resistance against Western and Israeli presence further solidified its role (K. Barzegar, 2008).

Turkey, on the other hand, approached post-2003 Iraq through a different lens. Initially skeptical of the war, Ankara gradually adapted its foreign policy to the new realities, emphasizing pragmatic economic engagement, security cooperation, and a strong focus on the Kurdish issue in northern Iraq (Balc, 2015; Inat, 2018). Turkish foreign policy sought to counteract the rise of Kurdish autonomy and militancy by establishing direct relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), deploying troops in the north, and conducting cross-border military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Over time, Ankara's policy combined elements of military assertiveness, economic

integration, and soft-power projection to balance Iran's growing influence (Tamer, 2016; Ulutaş, 2016).

This dual engagement of Iran and Turkey in Iraq transformed the country into a geopolitical arena where sectarian affiliations, ethnic claims, and strategic calculations intersected. Iran positioned itself as a protector of the Shia political majority and an anchor of the so-called "axis of resistance," while Turkey portrayed itself as a patron of the Sunni minority, Turkmen populations, and an economic stakeholder in northern Iraq (Hawramy, 2017; Koç, 2017). These competing visions materialized not only through state-level diplomacy but also via non-state actors, economic initiatives, and cultural diplomacy, each aiming to expand zones of influence while limiting the other's strategic depth.

Despite the increasing relevance of Iran–Turkey rivalry in Iraq, scholarly attention has often been fragmented or focused on isolated aspects of their engagement. Many studies examine either Iran's strategic alliances with Shia groups or Turkey's security dilemmas vis-à-vis the PKK and KRG. Others center on broader regional rivalries, such as those involving Saudi Arabia or the U.S., thus sidelining the bilateral dimensions of the Iran–Turkey competition in Iraq. For instance, literature on Turkey's military posture often overlooks its economic diplomacy with the KRG, while assessments of Iranian influence tend to understate its challenges in the post-Soleimani era (Azizi, 2021; Azizi & Cevik, 2022). Moreover, few comparative studies systematically explore how the policies of these two states intersect, diverge, or reshape Iraq's domestic politics and regional role over an extended timeframe. This research addresses this gap by offering a comparative assessment of Iran and Turkey's foreign policies in Iraq between 2003 and 2019, a period marked by dramatic shifts in regional order, including the Arab Spring, the rise and fall of ISIS, and increasing U.S. disengagement from the region.

What sets this study apart is its emphasis on the interplay between these two regional actors within a shared geopolitical arena, analyzed through the lens of offensive realism and the balance of power theory. By adopting this theoretical framework, the research underscores how both Iran and Turkey perceive Iraq not only as a neighboring state with deep historical ties but also as a pivotal battleground for strategic leverage. The

analysis pays special attention to the instrumentalization of sectarianism, the use of hard and soft power resources, and the shifting alliances with local Iraqi actors. Furthermore, the study contributes to the field by offering a periodized analysis that traces the evolution of foreign policy objectives, tools, and constraints over nearly two decades.

The geopolitical significance of Iraq for both Iran and Turkey is derived not only from its location at the heart of the Middle East but also from its demographic composition, energy resources, and its role as a buffer or bridge between rival powers. Iraq's Shia majority and Sunni minority, its Kurdish population, and its complex ethno-sectarian fabric make it an ideal ground for foreign influence and strategic projection. For Iran, Iraq serves as a critical component in its regional strategy to create a contiguous zone of influence stretching from Tehran to Beirut, often referred to as the "Shia Crescent" (Kayhan Barzegar, 2008; Ehteshami, 2003). For Turkey, control over security dynamics in northern Iraq, especially regarding Kurdish movements, is vital to its domestic stability and regional ambitions (Kardaş & Yeşiltaş, 2017; Sinkaya, 2014).

The historical depth of Iran–Turkey rivalry in Iraq also adds complexity to the present context. From the Ottoman–Safavid conflicts to the Cold War-era alignments and into the contemporary period of regional upheaval, both countries have repeatedly clashed and cooperated over the fate of Iraq. The Treaty of Zuhab in 1639 may have ended overt territorial conflicts, but the struggle for influence never truly ceased (Arcak, 2012; Cankaya, 1969). Today, that historical rivalry manifests not through pitched battles, but through diplomacy, economic deals, media influence, religious outreach, and proxy alignments.

This article is guided by the following core research question: What are the principal drivers of the Iran–Turkey rivalry over influence in Iraq, and how has this competition affected the regional balance of power between 2003 and 2019? Secondary questions include: What are the primary tools each country uses to extend its influence in Iraq? In what ways have Iraq's domestic shifts enabled or constrained Iranian and Turkish strategies? How has their engagement with non-state actors shaped the security and political order in Iraq? To what extent has this rivalry fostered instability or, paradoxically, balance in the region?

The overarching objective of the study is to offer a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how Iran and Turkey, as two regional powers with contrasting ideological frameworks and strategic priorities, have pursued influence in Iraq and how their actions have shaped broader regional configurations. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a more layered understanding of post-2003 Middle Eastern geopolitics, moving beyond simplistic binaries and emphasizing the complex interdependence of rivalry and cooperation that characterizes contemporary regional politics. Through this analysis, the article aims to illuminate how the Iraq question serves not merely as a bilateral concern but as a microcosm of larger strategic tensions in the Middle East.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Approach

Understanding the dynamics of Iran and Turkey's foreign policy competition in Iraq necessitates a theoretical lens capable of capturing both the structural imperatives and the regional complexities of their actions. This study adopts offensive realism and balance of power theory as its primary analytical framework, while also incorporating insights from regional security complex theory to account for the unique interdependencies and rivalry mechanisms at play in the Middle East. Together, these perspectives allow for a nuanced analysis of how two regional powers maneuver within a shared geopolitical arena, using both hard and soft power strategies to shape outcomes in a post-conflict and fragmented Iraq.

Offensive realism, a sub-school of neorealism developed most prominently by John Mearsheimer, posits that states operate in an anarchic international system where the absence of a central authority compels them to maximize their power relative to others for survival. In this view, security is not merely about defense but about the accumulation of capabilities sufficient to deter and dominate potential threats. Applying this to the Iran–Turkey rivalry in Iraq, both actors are seen as rational entities seeking to enhance their regional leverage by extending influence over a weak and strategically pivotal neighbor. Iraq, in this sense, becomes a contested space in which both Tehran and Ankara pursue offensive strategies—whether through military deployments, economic penetration, or alliance-building with

subnational groups—not simply to preserve their status quo, but to improve their relative power positions.

The fall of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent U.S. withdrawal from Iraq generated precisely the kind of power vacuum that offensive realists identify as a trigger for competition among regional actors. Iran swiftly mobilized its resources to secure a Shia-dominated regime aligned with its ideological and strategic interests, investing in armed militias, religious institutions, and political parties aligned with its vision of regional resistance (Azizi, 2021; Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017). Simultaneously, Turkey interpreted the instability in Iraq as a potential threat to its internal security, especially due to the empowerment of Kurdish factions along its borders. Ankara responded by intensifying its military and intelligence presence in northern Iraq, cultivating relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government, and framing its policy within a doctrine of preemptive defense (Inat, 2018; Tamer, 2016). Both states, by these measures, exhibit behavior consistent with the offensive realist expectation that states exploit regional instability to augment their strategic depth.

Balance of power theory complements this analysis by suggesting that the actions of Iran and Turkey are not only aggressive but are also mutually responsive. Each state's efforts to project power into Iraq serve not only to advance its own interests but also to counterbalance the perceived encroachments of the other. When Iran strengthened its ties with Baghdad and expanded its influence through the Popular Mobilization Units, Turkey responded by deepening its political and economic relations with the Kurdish north and increasing its military activities under the pretext of counterterrorism operations against the PKK (Balc, 2015; K. Barzegar, 2008). This reciprocal dynamic of strategic adjustment illustrates the classical balance of power mechanism, where states act to prevent any one actor from achieving overwhelming dominance within a region. It also explains the paradox wherein policies that appear cooperative in one domain—for instance, mutual opposition to Kurdish separatism—coexist with policies that are openly antagonistic in others, such as competition over political patronage in Baghdad.

To enrich this theoretical foundation, the study also draws upon the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) articulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. RSCT

posits that the security dynamics of a region are largely shaped by the interactions among a cluster of proximate states whose security concerns are so intertwined that their national security cannot realistically be considered in isolation from one another. In the Middle East, and particularly in the Iraq–Iran–Turkey triangle, this interdependence is amplified by historical legacies, transnational sectarian affiliations, and the presence of armed non-state actors. Iran and Turkey, by virtue of their geographical proximity and historical entanglements in Iraq, form part of the same regional security complex, wherein shifts in one country's security environment invariably provoke reactions in the others (Kayhan Barzegar, 2008; Kardaş & Yeşiltaş, 2017).

RSCT is particularly useful in understanding why Iraq, despite being a sovereign state, often becomes an arena of external contestation rather than a fully autonomous actor. The theory highlights how regional security interdependence can lead to persistent interventionism, where stronger states seek to shape the domestic order of their weaker neighbors to ensure that the latter's alignment does not jeopardize their own strategic environment. For Iran, maintaining a friendly regime in Baghdad is essential to the integrity of its “Axis of Resistance,” which includes Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, forming a corridor of influence stretching across the northern Middle East (Azizi, 2021; K. Barzegar, 2008). For Turkey, neutralizing the threat posed by Kurdish nationalism, which could inspire separatist sentiments within its own borders, justifies deep engagement in Iraq's political and security affairs (Ulutaş, 2016).

The key concepts grounding this theoretical approach require further elaboration. Foreign policy, in this context, refers to the aggregate of strategies, decisions, and actions undertaken by a state to protect its interests and enhance its influence beyond its borders. It encompasses diplomatic relations, military interventions, economic agreements, and cultural exchanges, all of which are deployed by both Iran and Turkey in their Iraq strategies. Regional balance denotes the relative distribution of power among neighboring states within a defined geographic area, which in turn influences the likelihood of conflict, alliance formation, and strategic accommodation. In the Middle East, the regional balance has been highly fluid, shaped by shifting

alliances, regime changes, and interventions by extra-regional powers such as the United States and Russia. Geopolitical rivalry, finally, refers to the sustained competition between states for dominance or preeminence within a strategic theater. This competition is often multidimensional, involving military posturing, economic leverage, ideological contestation, and the cultivation of proxies. The Iran–Turkey rivalry in Iraq encapsulates all these elements. Tehran’s ideological affinity with Iraq’s Shia majority and its resistance axis strategy contrast with Ankara’s pragmatic Sunni diplomacy and commercial integration efforts, especially in the Kurdish regions. While both states share certain threat perceptions—such as opposition to an independent Kurdistan—they diverge significantly in their visions for Iraq’s political future and their methods of influence (Gunter, 2011a; Koç, 2017).

The rationale for selecting this integrated theoretical framework lies in its ability to accommodate the multi-layered and dynamic nature of the Iran–Turkey rivalry in Iraq. Offensive realism captures the overarching logic of power maximization and strategic assertiveness that defines both countries’ regional conduct. Balance of power theory explains the interactive, often adversarial adjustments each state makes in response to the other’s initiatives. Meanwhile, regional security complex theory offers a meso-level perspective that contextualizes these behaviors within the broader pattern of interdependence, historical tension, and identity politics specific to the Middle East.

This composite framework also provides analytical flexibility. It allows the study to move beyond simple binaries such as cooperation versus conflict, and instead recognize that the Iran–Turkey relationship in Iraq oscillates across a continuum of simultaneous engagement and competition. For example, while both countries cooperated in opposing ISIS and have vested interests in maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity, they often undercut each other’s influence through rival networks and policy preferences. Similarly, their shared concerns about U.S. interventionism or the rise of Kurdish autonomy do not translate into a unified regional strategy, precisely because each seeks to be the dominant regional player, not a junior partner (Aygün, 2021; Barzegar, 2005).

Furthermore, this approach highlights how foreign policy is not merely reactive but deeply embedded in

historical memory and identity narratives. For Iran, the trauma of the Iran–Iraq War, combined with its revolutionary ideology, renders Iraq a site of both existential vulnerability and strategic opportunity. For Turkey, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the contemporary challenge of Kurdish separatism frame Iraq as a zone where historical claims and present insecurities converge. These deeper motivations reinforce the offensive realist assumption that states act under the shadow of fear, uncertainty, and ambition, seeking to transform their strategic environment in ways that enhance their long-term security.

Ultimately, the combination of offensive realism, balance of power theory, and regional security complex theory equips this study with the conceptual tools to dissect the Iran–Turkey competition in Iraq with theoretical rigor and contextual sensitivity. It enables the analysis to trace not only how these powers behave, but why they behave as they do, and how their rivalry contributes to the evolving configuration of regional order in the Middle East.

### 3. Historical Background of Iran–Turkey Relations in Iraq

The rivalry between Iran and Turkey over Iraq is deeply rooted in a long and tumultuous history that stretches back to the early modern era, particularly the geopolitical confrontation between the Ottoman and Safavid empires. Iraq, by virtue of its strategic location between Anatolia and Persia and its significance as a center of both political power and religious heritage, was a primary theater of conflict between the two empires. The Ottomans, representing the Sunni branch of Islam and aspiring to global Islamic leadership through the caliphate, sought to counter the Safavids, who had institutionalized Twelver Shi’ism as the state religion and positioned themselves as the defenders of Shiite Islam. This sectarian divergence served to deepen territorial and ideological competition. The Safavids viewed control over the Shiite holy cities of Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra as essential for their religious legitimacy, while the Ottomans were equally determined to hold these sites to preserve their Sunni hegemony (Arcak, 2012; Uluç, 2017).

The Treaty of Zuhab, signed in 1639, established a relatively stable boundary between the two empires, granting most of Mesopotamia, including Baghdad, to the



Ottomans. However, the treaty did not erase underlying tensions. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, intermittent military skirmishes and diplomatic maneuvering continued to define the Iran–Ottoman relationship. Iraq remained a buffer zone where influence was contested not only through direct military confrontation but also via patronage of local tribal leaders, religious institutions, and proxy actors. Although periods of accommodation emerged, the default dynamic remained adversarial, rooted in clashing imperial visions and religious worldviews. This foundational rivalry embedded patterns of competition that continue to shape Iran–Turkey relations in the modern era, particularly in contested spaces like Iraq (Kayhan Barzegar, 2008; Cankaya, 1969).

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East underwent a profound transformation. The European colonial powers, particularly Britain and France, carved the region into mandates, imposing artificial borders that disregarded historical, ethnic, and sectarian complexities. Iraq emerged as a new state under British mandate, combining Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and other minority groups within a single political unit. For Turkey, the loss of Iraq signaled not only the end of imperial ambitions in Mesopotamia but also a retreat into a new Republican nationalism under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who prioritized internal consolidation over regional expansion. Iran, meanwhile, under the Pahlavi dynasty, pursued a cautious foreign policy marked by pro-Western alignment and pragmatic diplomacy with regional neighbors (Arfa, 1964; Zonis, 1990).

During the Ba'athist period in Iraq, particularly under the rule of Saddam Hussein, both Iran and Turkey adopted containment strategies toward Baghdad, albeit for different reasons. Iraq's territorial claims and military build-up under Saddam threatened Iran's western border, culminating in the devastating Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). That conflict not only resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties but also deepened Tehran's strategic imperative to ensure that Iraq would never again pose such an existential threat. Iran's subsequent policy was aimed at cultivating ties with Iraqi Shiite opposition groups and building networks of influence that could be activated in the event of regime change (Barzegar, 2005; Maleki, 2006). Turkey, on the

other hand, maintained a complex relationship with Iraq during the Ba'athist era, focused primarily on border security, water rights, and the containment of Kurdish separatism. The PKK, which began its armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984, used northern Iraq as a base for operations, compelling Ankara to conduct limited cross-border incursions and to seek security arrangements with Baghdad (Gunter, 2011b; Inat, 2018). The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq marked a turning point that revived historical rivalries and presented new opportunities and threats for both Iran and Turkey. The fall of Saddam Hussein dismantled the Sunni-dominated power structure in Iraq and opened the political system to formerly marginalized groups, particularly the Shiites and Kurds. Iran rapidly moved to consolidate its influence by supporting Shiite political factions, investing in religious infrastructure, and deploying elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force to establish strategic depth in the newly emerging Iraqi order (Sinkaya, 2014; Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017). Tehran's deep sectarian and ideological affinity with the Iraqi Shiites allowed it to become a primary power broker in post-Saddam Iraq, often mediating government formation processes and influencing security and economic policies.

Turkey's initial reaction to the U.S. invasion was marked by caution and ambivalence. Ankara opposed the war and refused to allow American troops to launch a northern front from Turkish soil. However, once the regime change became irreversible, Turkey recalibrated its approach to Iraq, especially focusing on the developments in the Kurdish north. The consolidation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the strengthening of Kurdish autonomy posed a direct challenge to Turkish territorial integrity, particularly given the presence of a large Kurdish population within Turkey itself. Consequently, Turkey expanded its political and economic engagement with the KRG, while simultaneously intensifying its military posture in northern Iraq under the pretext of fighting the PKK (Tamer, 2016; Uzman & Balci, 2017). The paradox of Turkish policy—deepening economic ties with Erbil while militarily targeting Kurdish militants—reflected Ankara's broader struggle to balance regional ambitions with domestic security imperatives.

The post-2003 context also witnessed increased diplomatic rivalry between Iran and Turkey over the

political future of Iraq. Iran backed a centralized government with a dominant Shiite character, viewing a strong Baghdad aligned with Tehran as a means of extending the axis of resistance across the Levant. In contrast, Turkey advocated for Sunni inclusion and often supported figures and factions opposed to Iran's influence. During moments of crisis—such as government formation deadlocks or mass protests—both countries sought to sway outcomes in their favor by mobilizing political allies, offering economic incentives, or leveraging security partnerships. Iraq thus emerged not merely as a weak state in need of stabilization, but as a prize in the broader strategic competition between two former empires seeking to reclaim regional leadership in different forms (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2021; Atlantic, 2021).

Ideologically, Iran and Turkey's postures toward Iraq have remained divergent, shaped by their respective national identities and regional visions. Iran's foreign policy in Iraq is infused with revolutionary ideology, emphasizing Islamic unity under Shia leadership, resistance against Western imperialism, and solidarity with oppressed Shiite communities. This vision has translated into long-term support for Shiite militias, clerical networks, and the development of a "resistance economy" linking Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut (Askarieh, 2008; K. Barzegar, 2008). Turkey, on the other hand, has increasingly pursued a neo-Ottoman vision, particularly under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which seeks to revive Turkey's leadership role in Sunni Muslim regions of the former Ottoman Empire. While Turkish officials avoid using explicitly sectarian language, their emphasis on Sunni political participation, protection of Turkmen minorities, and economic integration of northern Iraq reflects a Sunni-centric geopolitical orientation (Aygün, 2021; Davutoğlu, 2008).

Despite these differences, there have been instances of tactical convergence. Both countries opposed the 2017 independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region, viewing it as a threat to territorial integrity and regional stability. Iran pressured Baghdad to reassert control over Kirkuk and other disputed territories, while Turkey threatened economic sanctions and closed airspace to the KRG (Hawramy, 2017; Koç, 2017). Their coordinated response to this crisis reflected a rare moment of strategic alignment, albeit one driven by self-interest

rather than genuine partnership. More broadly, the legacies of Ottoman–Safavid competition, the geopolitical restructuring after World War I, and the security realignments post-2003 have ensured that Iran and Turkey view Iraq through lenses shaped by both history and strategic necessity.

In sum, the historical backdrop of Iran–Turkey relations in Iraq reveals a continuum of rivalry punctuated by shifting contexts and evolving strategies. From imperial confrontations over sacred cities to modern-day struggles for influence over Baghdad's corridors of power, both states have engaged Iraq not merely as a neighbor but as a critical battleground in their respective quests for regional leadership. Their postures toward Iraq have been shaped by overlapping layers of history, ideology, security concerns, and geopolitical aspirations, rendering their engagement as much a product of past entanglements as of present ambitions. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential for making sense of the current contours of their competition and its implications for the broader Middle East.

#### 4. Turkey's Foreign Policy Toward Iraq

Turkey's foreign policy toward Iraq since the early 2000s has been shaped by a complex convergence of security imperatives, economic ambitions, identity politics, and regional competition. Anchored in both historical ties and contemporary strategic calculations, Ankara's approach has evolved from cautious containment to proactive engagement, especially in response to the power vacuum following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The central pillars of Turkish policy in Iraq include managing the Kurdish issue, asserting influence over the Turkmen minority, protecting water security, expanding economic reach, and maintaining regional leverage in the face of growing Iranian influence.

The Kurdish issue remains the most enduring and pressing driver of Turkish foreign policy in Iraq. Since the 1980s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S., and the EU, has maintained operational bases in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq. Ankara views these bases as existential threats to its territorial integrity and political stability. This concern intensified after the fall of Saddam Hussein, when the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) gained considerable autonomy under the new Iraqi constitution. The empowerment of the KRG,

particularly its control over security and natural resources, raised alarms in Ankara about the potential domino effect on Turkey's own Kurdish population. In response, Turkey adopted a dual strategy: militarily suppressing PKK elements in northern Iraq through cross-border operations, and diplomatically engaging with the KRG leadership to isolate the PKK and secure cooperation (Inat, 2018; Tamer, 2016).

Turkey's military actions in Iraq have been justified under the rubric of preemptive defense, an extension of its broader evolving security doctrine. The conceptual framework known as "Mavi Vatan" or Blue Homeland, though primarily focused on maritime strategy, reflects Ankara's assertive posture in surrounding regions, including northern Iraq. Turkish defense doctrine has increasingly embraced a forward defense strategy, under which threats are to be neutralized outside Turkish territory to prevent spillover effects. Operations such as Claw-Lightning and Claw-Eagle represent concrete manifestations of this doctrine, enabling Turkey to maintain a permanent military footprint in northern Iraq under the pretense of counterterrorism. This security strategy has faced criticism from the central Iraqi government, which has accused Turkey of violating its sovereignty, yet Ankara maintains that its operations are necessary and legitimate responses to ongoing PKK aggression (Gunter, 2011b; Kardaş & Yeşiltaş, 2017).

In addition to the Kurdish question, Turkey has long shown interest in the fate of the Turkmen minority in Iraq, who reside primarily in cities such as Kirkuk, Tal Afar, and Mosul. Ankara considers the Turkmen a cultural and historical extension of the Turkish nation, and their protection has often been cited as a moral and strategic obligation. Turkish officials have routinely condemned perceived discrimination against Turkmen by Kurdish and Arab actors, using this issue to justify greater political involvement in Iraq. However, critics argue that Turkey's emphasis on the Turkmen minority serves a dual purpose: it allows Ankara to justify broader strategic actions in northern Iraq while cultivating loyal constituencies that can act as proxies in local political dynamics (Koç, 2017; Salihi, 2017).

Water politics is another dimension of Turkey's Iraq policy, rooted in its upstream control of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The construction of large-scale dam projects under the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) has long been a point of contention between Turkey and

its downstream neighbors, Iraq and Syria. Turkey has often used water as a bargaining tool in broader diplomatic negotiations, including security cooperation and trade agreements. While Ankara officially denies weaponizing water resources, the ability to control the flow of water to Iraq gives Turkey significant leverage, particularly during periods of drought or political tension. The water issue underscores how natural resources have become instruments of geopolitical influence in Ankara's regional strategy (Ari, 2004; Mustafa, 2016).

Economically, Turkey has invested heavily in building a trade-based relationship with Iraq, especially with the KRG. Despite political frictions, the economic interdependence between Ankara and Erbil has deepened over the years. Turkish construction companies, infrastructure firms, and consumer goods providers dominate the KRG market, while Iraqi Kurdish oil flows to international markets through the Turkish port of Ceyhan. This arrangement has allowed the KRG to circumvent Baghdad and pursue semi-independent economic policies, with Turkey as its primary trade partner and conduit. Ankara's energy diplomacy in Iraq thus serves two strategic purposes: it ensures a steady flow of hydrocarbons essential for Turkey's energy security, and it gives Ankara influence over both Baghdad and Erbil by acting as a gatekeeper for northern Iraqi oil exports (Azad, 2015; Barzani, 2017).

Turkey's support for the KRG in exporting oil independently of Baghdad has, at times, strained its relations with the central Iraqi government. The 2014 agreement between Ankara and Erbil to export oil without Baghdad's approval was particularly contentious, drawing criticism from Iraqi leaders and legal challenges in international courts. However, Turkey has defended its actions by emphasizing mutual economic benefit and the need for energy diversification. In practice, these economic ties have created a symbiotic relationship, with Erbil reliant on Turkish transit routes and Ankara dependent on KRG stability to safeguard its trade and security interests in the north (Atlantic, 2021; K. Barzegar, 2008).

Beyond military and economic engagement, Turkey has also employed a range of soft power instruments to enhance its influence in Iraq. Education plays a significant role in this regard, with Turkish-language schools, scholarships, and cultural exchange programs



operating throughout the KRG and among Turkmen communities. Turkish media outlets such as TRT and Anadolu Agency maintain Arabic and Kurdish-language services that broadcast news content aligned with Ankara's foreign policy narrative. These platforms are instrumental in shaping public opinion and countering competing narratives, particularly those propagated by Iranian or Western-backed media (Anadolu, 2020; Aygün, 2021).

Religious networks also form part of Turkey's soft power apparatus. Though less ideologically driven than Iran's transnational Shia networks, Turkey promotes a moderate Sunni Islamic identity consistent with the teachings of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). By funding mosques, providing imams, and sponsoring religious education programs, Ankara seeks to project a culturally rooted yet politically palatable image of Sunni Islam that contrasts with both Salafi extremism and Shia political Islam. This soft power approach is particularly targeted at Sunni Arabs in northern and western Iraq, where local populations often feel marginalized by the Shia-dominated central government. By positioning itself as a patron of Sunni inclusion and stability, Turkey attempts to win hearts and minds while simultaneously balancing against Iranian influence in the same communities (Ali, 2017; Ulutaş, 2016).

The effectiveness of Turkey's soft power strategy, however, has been mixed. While Ankara has made notable inroads among Turkmen and certain Kurdish elites, it has faced resistance from Arab nationalist factions, Shiite groups aligned with Iran, and even segments of the Kurdish population wary of Turkish militarization. Moreover, Turkey's tendency to link humanitarian and cultural initiatives to broader geopolitical aims has led to skepticism about its true intentions. This tension reflects the broader dilemma of Turkish foreign policy in Iraq: how to balance assertiveness with partnership, strategic interests with ideological narratives, and security concerns with respect for sovereignty.

Turkey's policy is further complicated by the regional context, where competition with Iran, uncertainty about U.S. commitments, and internal political pressures intersect to shape foreign policy decisions. Ankara's approach to Iraq cannot be understood in isolation; it is part of a broader strategy that includes engagement in

Syria, alignment with Qatar, and a fluctuating relationship with the Gulf states and Russia. In this broader picture, Iraq is both a site of strategic opportunity and a source of chronic security dilemmas. The need to simultaneously combat the PKK, counterbalance Iranian influence, secure energy supplies, and promote Turkish economic interests makes Iraq one of the most complex foreign policy theaters for Ankara (Azizi & Cevik, 2022; Rezaei, 2019). In conclusion, Turkey's foreign policy toward Iraq represents a blend of hard power calculation and soft power projection, all guided by the imperative of regional influence and domestic stability. Through military operations, economic partnerships, cultural initiatives, and religious outreach, Ankara has sought to embed itself deeply in the evolving Iraqi political order. Yet this multifaceted strategy is not without contradictions. The simultaneous engagement with the KRG and operations against Kurdish militants, the promotion of Sunni networks alongside economic ties with Shia-dominated Baghdad, and the assertion of sovereignty over water while demanding respect for Turkish security needs all highlight the inherent tensions in Turkey's Iraq policy. Understanding these complexities is essential to grasp the wider regional contest in which Ankara is a key player and Iraq remains a central arena.

## 5. Iran's Foreign Policy Toward Iraq

In the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iran swiftly recalibrated its foreign policy to exploit the emerging vacuum and reposition Iraq as a critical component in its regional strategy. Tehran's goals in post-Saddam Iraq have revolved around three core imperatives: the consolidation of a Shia corridor extending from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon; the establishment of a robust regional deterrence architecture; and the projection of an anti-U.S. posture aimed at eroding American influence in the region. These goals, driven by a combination of ideological affinity and strategic necessity, have shaped Iran's multifaceted approach that blends military presence, political patronage, and soft power to entrench its influence in Iraq's evolving political landscape.

Central to Iran's post-2003 strategy has been the cultivation of a contiguous zone of influence, often

referred to as the “Shia Crescent.” This concept envisions a geopolitical arc dominated by Tehran-aligned actors across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, which serves as a conduit for Iranian interests and a buffer against adversaries. Iraq’s majority-Shia population and its proximity to Iran’s western border make it the linchpin of this project. Tehran has therefore prioritized the establishment of a politically sympathetic government in Baghdad and the empowerment of Shia factions that are ideologically aligned or strategically compliant with Iranian objectives (Azizi, 2021; K. Barzegar, 2008). Through direct support to Shia parties, electoral mobilization, and security cooperation, Iran has entrenched its role as the primary external influencer of Iraqi Shia politics.

A second pillar of Iran’s strategy is deterrence—both against regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, and against the United States, which maintains a military footprint in Iraq. Iran has sought to construct a layered deterrence architecture through its support for non-state armed groups, the most prominent of which in Iraq is the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), or Hashd al-Shaabi. Formed in 2014 in response to the Islamic State (ISIS) offensive, the PMU quickly evolved into a coalition of militias, many of which are closely tied to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force. These groups not only played a decisive role in the defeat of ISIS, but have since become institutionalized within Iraq’s formal security apparatus, thereby providing Tehran with significant leverage over Iraq’s internal security dynamics (Kardaş & Yeşiltaş, 2017; Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017).

The Quds Force, an elite unit of the IRGC tasked with external operations, has played a pivotal role in coordinating Iran’s military and political activities in Iraq. Under the leadership of the late General Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force acted as the linchpin of Iran’s proxy warfare strategy, organizing, training, and arming Shia militias that could serve both as instruments of counterterrorism and tools of political coercion. These militias—such as Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization—operate as semi-autonomous actors that blur the lines between state and non-state authority in Iraq. Through these forces, Iran has maintained the capacity to influence Iraqi decision-making, disrupt U.S. military operations, and

counterbalance the presence of other regional actors (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2021; Azizi, 2021).

In addition to hard power instruments, Iran has skillfully employed religious diplomacy as a soft power tool to build cultural and ideological affinity in Iraq. The theological connections between the holy cities of Najaf and Qom provide the foundation for a transnational Shia identity that Iran has long sought to harness. Iranian clerics, religious foundations, and seminaries have cultivated relationships with their Iraqi counterparts, sponsoring educational exchanges, religious pilgrimages, and doctrinal alignment. These efforts not only reinforce Iran’s legitimacy among Iraq’s Shia population but also provide Tehran with indirect influence over religious institutions that hold significant political sway in the country (Barzegar, 2014; Ulutaş, 2016).

Religious tourism constitutes one of the most visible and impactful aspects of Iran’s soft power in Iraq. Each year, millions of Iranian pilgrims travel to Shiite shrines in Najaf and Karbala, particularly during Arbæen and Ashura commemorations. These mass pilgrimages serve not only as religious acts but also as demonstrations of sociopolitical solidarity between the two nations. Iran has invested heavily in transportation infrastructure, hospitality services, and security arrangements to facilitate these pilgrimages, framing them as symbols of Islamic unity and shared destiny. The economic benefits of religious tourism also create interdependencies that further bind Iraq’s Shia heartland to Iran’s regional vision (Hawramy, 2017; Sinkaya, 2014).

Cultural diplomacy extends beyond religious rituals to include language promotion, media outreach, and educational cooperation. Iranian-funded media outlets such as Al-Alam and Press TV maintain Arabic-language programming tailored to Iraqi audiences, promoting narratives aligned with Tehran’s worldview and countering Western and Gulf media influence. Meanwhile, Iranian universities have hosted thousands of Iraqi students, particularly in the fields of Islamic jurisprudence, medicine, and engineering. These exchanges not only create a cadre of professionals with favorable views of Iran but also strengthen institutional linkages between the two states (Azizi & Cevik, 2022; Rezaei, 2019).

A crucial dimension of Iran’s influence has been its role in shaping Iraq’s post-Saddam political elite. Tehran has

cultivated a broad network of allies across multiple Shia parties, including the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Dawa Party, and the Fatah Alliance. Many of these actors spent years in exile in Iran during the Ba'athist era and returned to Iraq after 2003 with strong personal and organizational ties to the Iranian establishment. Through political funding, ideological alignment, and patronage networks, Iran has maintained a seat at every table where major political decisions are made in Baghdad. Iranian officials often serve as behind-the-scenes mediators in coalition negotiations and crises, leveraging their relationships to steer outcomes that favor stability—defined in Tehran as a government resistant to U.S. pressure and sympathetic to Iranian interests (Ehteshami, 2003; Keynoush, 2016).

During the period of ISIS's rise and subsequent defeat, Iran's influence grew markedly. While the U.S. focused on aerial campaigns and limited troop deployments, Iran embedded itself in ground-level operations alongside Iraqi security forces and Shia militias. This gave Tehran an edge in post-ISIS reconstruction and security realignment. Iran portrayed itself as a reliable ally that provided material support and human capital when Iraq was at its most vulnerable, a narrative that continues to resonate among key segments of the Iraqi population. Moreover, Iran has used its influence in post-conflict stabilization efforts to promote reconstruction contracts for Iranian firms, facilitate border trade, and deepen economic interdependence with Iraq's southern provinces (Anadolu, 2020; Kayhan Barzegar, 2008).

Yet Iran's growing influence has not gone uncontested. Iraqi nationalist sentiments, internal Shia rivalries, and pressure from the U.S. and its Gulf allies have at times constrained Iran's maneuverability. The assassination of Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020 underscored the risks associated with overreach, as it exposed the vulnerabilities of Iran's command-and-control network and provoked anti-Iranian backlash among certain Iraqi constituencies. Protests in Baghdad and other southern cities in 2019 and 2020 also featured slogans critical of both the United States and Iran, reflecting a broader public desire for Iraqi sovereignty free from foreign domination (Ali, 2017; Atlantic, 2021). Despite these challenges, Iran remains a deeply entrenched actor in Iraqi politics and society. Its multi-pronged strategy—combining ideological alignment, military entrenchment, religious diplomacy, and

economic integration—has enabled Tehran to maintain influence regardless of electoral outcomes or foreign pressure. This resilience is a function not only of Iranian planning but also of the structural realities of post-2003 Iraq: weak institutions, fragmented identities, and a regional context that incentivizes external patronage. Iran's ability to adapt to changing circumstances—by promoting new political faces, recalibrating its militia strategies, and emphasizing cultural ties—has allowed it to remain a dominant force even amid shifting geopolitical sands (Barzegar, 2005; Salim & El-Ghobashy, 2019).

In summary, Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq is emblematic of its broader regional strategy: pragmatic in form, ideological in tone, and deeply embedded in the terrain of sectarian and strategic politics. By mobilizing a unique blend of hard and soft power instruments, Tehran has managed to turn Iraq from a historical rival into a strategic ally and a forward base in its regional deterrence calculus. The Islamic Republic's approach is not without its contradictions, particularly in its claim to support national sovereignty while deeply embedding itself in Iraqi internal affairs. Nonetheless, the durability and adaptability of Iran's presence in Iraq suggest that its influence will remain a decisive factor in the future of Iraqi politics and the broader balance of power in the Middle East.

## 6. Comparative Analysis: Iran vs. Turkey in Iraq

The strategic rivalry between Iran and Turkey in Iraq is multifaceted, shaped by a blend of historical legacies, ideological differences, and regional ambitions. Both nations have developed distinctive yet occasionally overlapping instruments of influence—military, economic, religious, and political—to assert themselves in the post-Saddam Iraqi context. While their competition is most evident in their divergent policies toward the central government, the Kurds, and Iraq's sectarian and ethnic communities, there are also instances where pragmatic convergence has tempered direct confrontation. Iraq thus emerges not only as a contested space for power projection but as a reflection of the broader realignments in the regional and international order.

In terms of military influence, Iran has arguably been more successful in embedding itself within Iraq's security architecture. Tehran's military engagement in

Iraq has been operationalized primarily through the Quds Force and a web of affiliated Shia militias under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). These groups, including Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah, have received arms, funding, and training from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, enabling Iran to establish a quasi-sovereign military presence without the burden of direct occupation (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2021; Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017). The strategic value of these militias lies in their dual utility: they serve as a deterrent against external threats, particularly U.S. forces, while simultaneously offering Iran leverage over Baghdad's internal political and security affairs. Tehran's use of asymmetric warfare and proxy networks has allowed it to maintain a flexible yet formidable influence in Iraq's post-conflict landscape.

Turkey, by contrast, has relied more on conventional military means to pursue its objectives in Iraq, particularly in the north. Anchored in a doctrine of proactive defense, Ankara has conducted repeated cross-border operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which maintains strongholds in the Qandil Mountains and other areas of the Kurdistan Region. Unlike Iran, Turkey has not cultivated domestic Iraqi militias but has instead established a semi-permanent military presence through bases such as Bashiqa near Mosul (Gunter, 2011b; Tamer, 2016). These deployments are justified by Ankara as counterterrorism measures, yet they also serve to project Turkish power deeper into Iraqi territory. Turkey's military strategy is more spatially constrained than Iran's, but its regular incursions and strong military-intelligence presence in the north ensure that it remains a dominant actor in shaping Kurdish dynamics and limiting the PKK's influence.

Economically, both Iran and Turkey have employed trade, investment, and energy as tools of influence, albeit in distinct ways. Iran's economic engagement with Iraq is centered around cross-border trade in goods, energy exports, and financial support to pro-Iranian entities. Iranian businesses, particularly in construction, food, and medicine, dominate southern Iraqi markets, while energy cooperation includes electricity exports and gas pipeline connections to cities like Basra and Baghdad (K. Barzegar, 2008; Sinkaya, 2014). Iran has also benefited from currency swaps and informal banking arrangements that allow it to mitigate the effects of

international sanctions. This economic interdependence not only strengthens Iran's influence in Iraq's Shia south but also embeds it in the country's broader political economy.

Turkey's economic strategy in Iraq, on the other hand, has prioritized formal trade routes, infrastructure development, and investment in the Kurdistan Region. Turkish firms are the leading contractors in Erbil and Dohuk, supplying everything from consumer goods to construction services. Ankara's most strategic economic engagement, however, lies in its energy diplomacy. Through a bilateral agreement with the KRG, Turkey facilitates the export of Kurdish oil via the Ceyhan pipeline, bypassing Baghdad and granting Erbil an economic lifeline. While this arrangement has angered the central government, it has positioned Turkey as a crucial actor in Iraq's energy sector and a de facto gatekeeper of Kurdish economic survival (Azad, 2015; Barzani, 2017). Thus, while Iran dominates the formal and informal economies of the Shia south, Turkey has constructed a parallel economic sphere of influence in the north.

In the religious domain, Iran has a clear advantage due to its deep-rooted ideological and theological ties with Iraq's Shia community. Iranian clerics maintain strong relationships with seminaries in Najaf and Karbala, and Tehran has invested in religious foundations, shrine renovations, and educational programs that reinforce transnational Shia identity. The annual Arbäeen pilgrimage, which draws millions of Iranians to Iraq's holy cities, not only fosters people-to-people ties but also reflects Iran's religious soft power in action (Barzegar, 2014; Hawramy, 2017). Furthermore, Iran has strategically sponsored Iraqi clerics and institutions that align with its political objectives, thereby extending its influence into Iraq's religious establishment.

Turkey's religious diplomacy, though less ideologically driven, focuses on promoting a moderate Sunni Islam aligned with the teachings of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Through mosque construction, religious education, and Sunni clerical training, Ankara seeks to bolster its appeal among Sunni Arabs and Turkmen in northern and western Iraq. Turkish religious soft power, while not as institutionally entrenched as Iran's, serves to counterbalance Tehran's dominance in the Shia religious sphere and projects Turkey as a cultural and spiritual leader of Sunni Islam in Iraq (Ali,

2017; Ulutaş, 2016). However, the effectiveness of Turkish religious influence is limited by internal sectarian divisions in Iraq and suspicion among Shia communities.

Politically, Iran has been far more successful in shaping the composition and direction of Iraq's political elite. Tehran has cultivated long-term relationships with key Shia parties and leaders, many of whom spent years in exile in Iran during the Ba'athist regime. These ties have translated into durable alliances in Baghdad's corridors of power, giving Iran a decisive voice in government formation processes and parliamentary coalitions (Ehteshami, 2003; Rezaei, 2019). Even in times of political instability or public protests, Iranian officials have acted as mediators and power brokers, underscoring Tehran's centrality in Iraq's post-2003 political order.

Turkey's political engagement has been more fragmented and primarily centered around Sunni Arab groups, Turkmen parties, and Kurdish actors in the KRG. Ankara has supported Sunni inclusion in Iraqi politics and has maintained relations with political figures opposed to Iranian dominance. Yet Turkey's influence in Baghdad is limited by a lack of organic linkages to the Shia majority and the perception that its interests are too closely tied to Kurdish and Turkmen agendas (Koç, 2017; Salihi, 2017). While Turkey has made diplomatic overtures to the central government, its leverage remains mostly economic and regional rather than political in the conventional sense.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq serves as both a point of convergence and contention in Iran-Turkey relations. For Turkey, the KRG represents a critical buffer against both the PKK and Iranian expansion. Ankara's relationship with Erbil is marked by deep economic ties, military cooperation, and strategic alignment on regional issues. However, this relationship has occasionally clashed with Ankara's domestic concerns over Kurdish nationalism, as seen during the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, which Turkey strongly opposed despite its close ties with the KRG leadership (Sputnik, 2017; Uzman & Balci, 2017).

Iran's approach to the KRG is more ambivalent. While Tehran maintains security and political ties with some Kurdish factions, it views Kurdish separatism as a threat to its own territorial integrity and opposes any moves toward independence. Iran supported Baghdad's efforts

to reassert control over Kirkuk following the 2017 referendum and has leveraged Shia militias to counterbalance Kurdish autonomy when necessary (Azizi, 2021; Barzegar, 2005). Thus, Iraqi Kurdistan functions as a contested arena where Turkey and Iran pursue divergent goals—Ankara seeks economic integration and security cooperation, while Tehran aims to prevent secessionist momentum and protect its Shia allies in disputed territories.

The Iran-Turkey rivalry in Iraq has also shaped broader regional alignments. Iran's entrenchment in Iraq is viewed with alarm by the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which perceive Tehran's influence as a direct threat to Sunni Arab dominance. In response, some Gulf countries have sought to increase their economic and diplomatic engagement in Iraq, occasionally aligning with Turkish positions, especially in advocating for Sunni inclusion and countering Iranian-backed militias (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2021; Mustafa, 2016). Turkey, while historically at odds with the Gulf states over issues like the Muslim Brotherhood, has found moments of alignment with them on containing Iranian expansion in Iraq and Syria.

The United States has played a dual role in this rivalry—simultaneously countering Iranian influence through sanctions and military presence, while often relying on Turkey as a NATO ally and regional partner. However, U.S. relations with both countries have fluctuated, and its gradual disengagement from Iraq has created a vacuum that Tehran has been quick to exploit, while Ankara has maneuvered to protect its interests in the north (Kagan, 1998; Powell, 1996). Russia, for its part, has remained relatively neutral in the Iraq file but has leveraged its ties with both Ankara and Tehran in Syria to position itself as a strategic balancer in regional affairs.

In conclusion, the competition between Iran and Turkey in Iraq is emblematic of a broader struggle for regional preeminence, played out through distinct yet occasionally intersecting strategies. Iran has relied on ideological affinity, political penetration, and proxy networks to dominate the Shia south and the central government. Turkey, constrained by geography and demographic realities, has focused on military deterrence, economic leverage, and Sunni-Turkmen engagement in the north. While moments of tactical convergence have emerged—such as opposition to Kurdish independence—fundamental differences in



vision, ideology, and strategic calculus ensure that Iraq will remain a battleground for their enduring rivalry. This contest has not only shaped Iraq's internal dynamics but has also reverberated across the regional landscape, influencing alliances, fueling sectarian polarization, and redefining the post-Arab Spring balance of power in the Middle East.

## 7. Conclusion

The trajectory of Iran and Turkey's foreign policy engagement in Iraq from 2003 to 2019 reveals a deeply entrenched regional rivalry shaped by historical legacies, strategic interests, and geopolitical transformations. Iraq, emerging from the ruins of Saddam Hussein's regime, became a crucial arena for both states to assert their influence, protect their borders, and advance their broader regional ambitions. The resulting competition has profoundly impacted Iraq's internal politics, security structure, and foreign relations, while also recalibrating the balance of power in the Middle East.

Iran's approach to Iraq has been anchored in a combination of ideological affinity and security pragmatism. It views Iraq not just as a neighboring state but as a vital component of its regional deterrence architecture. By cultivating deep ties with Iraq's Shia political parties, supporting militia networks, and embedding itself in the country's religious and cultural fabric, Iran has effectively created a sphere of influence that extends from Tehran to Baghdad and beyond. This influence serves Tehran's broader strategic goals of counterbalancing U.S. presence, deterring regional adversaries, and constructing a Shia axis that reinforces its leadership position in the Islamic world. Iran's ability to adapt to shifting political currents in Baghdad, to invest in both hard and soft power instruments, and to integrate its religious diplomacy with geopolitical objectives has made it an enduring and often dominant actor in Iraqi affairs.

Turkey, meanwhile, has pursued a more pragmatic and multifaceted strategy in Iraq, shaped primarily by concerns over Kurdish separatism, economic opportunity, and regional positioning. Ankara's security doctrine emphasizes the need to neutralize perceived threats before they materialize within its own territory. Consequently, Turkey has maintained a strong military presence in northern Iraq, conducting operations against PKK strongholds while simultaneously building

cooperative ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government. This dual approach—combining coercion and cooperation—reflects Turkey's broader attempt to balance its domestic Kurdish issue with the geopolitical imperatives of regional engagement. Economically, Turkey has leveraged its proximity and market strength to become a dominant trade partner and infrastructure investor, particularly in the Kurdish north. In addition, Turkey has used soft power tools, such as education, cultural outreach, and religious networks, to bolster its influence among Sunni Arabs and Turkmen populations. The instruments of influence employed by the two states have demonstrated both strategic divergence and tactical convergence. Iran's reliance on militias and religious institutions contrasts with Turkey's emphasis on state-to-state diplomacy and commercial engagement. Iran has embedded itself in Iraq's central institutions and Shia-majority provinces, whereas Turkey has entrenched its position primarily in the north through economic and military channels. Despite these differences, both states have found common ground when their core interests overlap, as seen in their opposition to Kurdish independence and their mutual desire to manage instability that could spill over into their territories.

At the same time, their competition has heightened Iraq's vulnerabilities. The presence of multiple external patrons has fragmented the Iraqi political landscape, encouraged the proliferation of armed non-state actors, and complicated efforts at national reconciliation and state-building. Both Iran and Turkey, in pursuing their respective goals, have contributed to a geopolitical environment where Iraq's sovereignty is frequently compromised, and its domestic politics are entangled in regional rivalries. This dynamic has weakened Iraq's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy or construct a cohesive national identity, as political actors often align themselves with external powers for support and legitimacy.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq stands out as a particularly contested space in this rivalry. For Turkey, the KRG is simultaneously a strategic partner and a security concern. Ankara's economic ties with Erbil have brought mutual benefits but have also been accompanied by military interventions against Kurdish militant groups. For Iran, the KRG represents a potential threat to territorial cohesion and a barrier to its vision of a unified

Shia arc. Iran has responded by supporting Shia groups in disputed territories and using its influence in Baghdad to curtail Kurdish ambitions. This triangulated dynamic has rendered the Kurdistan Region a focal point of both cooperation and confrontation between Ankara and Tehran.

Beyond Iraq's borders, the Iran-Turkey rivalry has influenced broader regional alignments. Gulf states have watched Tehran's growing influence in Baghdad with unease, often viewing Turkey as a potential counterweight. Meanwhile, the United States has seen Turkey as a NATO partner and logistical ally, even as relations have strained over diverging policies in Syria and Iraq. Russia has adopted a balancing role, maintaining relations with both Ankara and Tehran, while leveraging their competition to expand its own regional influence. In this complex matrix of alliances and rivalries, Iraq has become a microcosm of Middle Eastern geopolitics—a site where global and regional powers intersect, compete, and occasionally cooperate. The comparative analysis of Iran and Turkey in Iraq also sheds light on the adaptability of regional powers in a post-hegemonic Middle East. With the United States reducing its direct footprint and traditional Arab powers facing internal and external constraints, non-Arab regional states like Iran and Turkey have filled the vacuum, redefining the contours of power and influence. Their rivalry is not merely about Iraq, but about who will shape the political future of the region, who will define the terms of security and identity, and who will mediate the post-conflict order that emerges from decades of war and upheaval.

Iraq, for its part, has oscillated between agency and dependency. While some Iraqi leaders have sought to balance between Iran and Turkey to extract economic and political benefits, others have been drawn into the orbit of one or the other. The result is a fragmented state that struggles to assert full sovereignty while navigating the interests of powerful neighbors. Iraq's political fragility, sectarian divides, and unresolved disputes over territory and resources make it susceptible to external manipulation. Until Iraq develops resilient institutions, inclusive governance, and a coherent national strategy, it will remain a terrain of competition rather than cooperation.

Looking ahead, the Iran-Turkey rivalry in Iraq is likely to persist, though its intensity may fluctuate depending on

domestic developments within each country and the evolving international context. Economic interdependence, shared security concerns, and diplomatic pragmatism may generate moments of dialogue and coordination. However, the underlying competition for influence, legitimacy, and leadership will continue to drive divergent policies. The challenge for Iraq will be to navigate this rivalry without becoming a perpetual battleground, and to transform its strategic location from a liability into an asset through balanced diplomacy and internal reform.

In conclusion, the study of Iran and Turkey's foreign policies in Iraq from 2003 to 2019 reveals not only the mechanisms of regional rivalry but also the broader transformation of Middle Eastern geopolitics in the post-American era. It demonstrates how history, ideology, and strategic calculation converge to shape the behavior of regional powers and how fragile states like Iraq are both arenas and actors in these unfolding dynamics. The Iran-Turkey competition in Iraq is not a relic of imperial pasts or a purely sectarian conflict; it is a modern contest for power in a region where influence is asserted not only by force but also through networks, ideas, and institutions. Understanding this rivalry is key to grasping the complexities of contemporary Middle Eastern politics and to envisioning a future where regional stability is not imposed from outside but constructed from within.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

## Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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