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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | iii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS | iv |
| ACRONYMS | viii |
| ABSTRACT | ix |
| ÖZET | x |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |

Iran's Influence in Iraq Between 2011-2020

Chapter I

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

| | |
|---|----|
| 1.1 Theoretical Frame | 6 |
| 1.2 Methodology and Literature Review..... | 9 |
| 1.3 Historical Relations of Iran and Iraq | 13 |
| 1.3.1 Iran and Iraq Relations in 1968 until 1978..... | 14 |
| 1.3.2 Islamic Revolution and The Baath Regime..... | 16 |
| 1.3.3. The Longest War of Iran-Iraq | 18 |
| 1.3.4 Iraqi Shiites in Iran | 20 |
| 1.3.5 The Invasion of Kuwait and Iran's role in Shiite-Kurds Uprising | 21 |
| 1.4 Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq until 2003..... | 24 |
| 1.5 Concluding Remarks | 24 |

Chapter II

IRAN'S RELIGIOUS AND ECONOMICAL INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

| | |
|---|----|
| 2. Introductory Remarks..... | 25 |
| 2.1 Iran's Religious Influence in Iraq..... | 25 |
| 2.1.1 Sistani factor in Iraq | 27 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 2.1.2 Iran's link with Najaf | 29 |
| 2.2 Iran's Economical Influence | 30 |
| 2.3 Iran's other modes of influence..... | 33 |
| 2.4 Concluding Remarks | 34 |

Chapter III
POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF IRAN IN IRAQ

| | |
|---|----|
| 3.Introductory Remarks..... | 35 |
| 3.1 Iran's political allies in Iraq | 36 |
| 3.2 Political Influence of Iran in Iraq from 2003-2011 | 39 |
| 3.3 Iran political influence in Iraq from 2011-2020..... | 43 |
| 3.3.1 Iran's influence during PM Maliki's period (2010-2014)..... | 43 |
| 3.3.2 The Rise of IS in Iraq | 44 |
| 3.3.3 Iran's influence in the era of US-backed PM Abadi | 45 |
| 3.3.4 Iran and Abadi's power conflict..... | 47 |
| 3.3.5 May 2018 Assembly Elections..... | 48 |
| 3.3.6 The power conflict of Iran and Abadi reached the peak | 49 |
| 3.3.7 Spread of anti Iran Protests in 2018 | 51 |
| 3.3.8 Iran-backed Mahdi took office | 52 |
| 3.3.9 Anti-Iran protests and Mahdi's resignation in 2019..... | 54 |
| 3.3.10 IRGC- QF General Soleimani's assassination | 55 |
| 3.3.11 U.S backed Kazimi took office | 56 |
| 3.4 Concluding Remarks | 57 |

Chapter IV
THE MILITARY INFLUENCE OF IRAN IN IRAQ

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| 4. General Background..... | 59 |
|----------------------------|----|

| | |
|--|----|
| 4.1 Iran’s Revolution and Iraqi’s exile in Iran | 59 |
| 4.2 The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps | 59 |
| 4.2.1 IRGC’s External Activities | 60 |
| 4.2.2 IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani | 60 |
| 4.3 Iran’s first military proxy: The Badr Brigade | 61 |
| 4.4 Iran’s military strategy in the post-Saddam era..... | 62 |
| 4.4.1 Deployment of the Badr militias after 20 years exile in Iran | 63 |
| 4.4.2 Iran’s role in training of Iraqi Shiite militias..... | 66 |
| 4.4.3 Iranian Lethal Aid to Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups | 67 |
| 4.5 Iran’s military strategy after 2011 in Iraq | 68 |
| 4.5.1 Deployment of Iraqi paramilitary forces in Syria | 68 |
| 4.5.2 Iraqi Shiites groups deployed to Syria | 70 |
| 4.5.3 Iran’s Reaction Towards Emergence of IS in Iraq | 71 |
| 4.5.3.1 Iran was the first country to send aid to Iraq..... | 72 |
| 4.5.4 The formation of the PMF..... | 73 |
| 4.5.4.1 The PMF and the pro-Khamenei Faction | 73 |
| 4.5.5 The Defeat of IS and The Growth of Iran-backed Iraqi Militias..... | 74 |
| 4.5.6 Iran’s role in forcing Kurds out of Kirkuk | 75 |
| 4.5.6.1 Iran’s military threat against the Kurdistan Region of Iraq..... | 76 |
| 4.5.7 Iran’s military policy after the post-IS period in Iraq | 78 |
| 4.5.7.1 The Iranian missiles transferred to Iraq..... | 78 |
| 4.5.7.2 The Iraqi Shiite fighter’s role in the crackdown the anti-Iran protests | 80 |
| 4.5.8 The Road to Sulaimani and Muhendis’s assassination | 81 |
| 4.6 Concluding Remarks | 84 |

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| CONCLUSION | 85 |
| REFERENCES..... | 88 |

ACRONYMS

AAH: The Asaib Ahl Haq

CF: Coalition Forces

ICP: The Iraqi Communist Party

IDP: The Islamic Dawa Party

INA: Iraqi National Alliance

IRGC-QF: Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force

IS: Islamic State

ISF: Iraqi Security Forces

JAM: Jaish al Mahdi

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party

KH: Ketaib Hezbollah

PMF: Popular Mobilization Forces

PMO: Prime Minister Office

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

SCIRI: The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq

SOFA: Statue of Force Agreement

UIA: United Iraqi Alliance

UN: United Nations

USSR: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

UNSC: The United Nations Security Council

ICP: The Iraqi Communist Party

IKR: Iraqi Kurdistan Region

ABSTRACT

Following the U.S occupation of Iraq, Iran's influence in Iraq increased gradually and finally Tehran became the most influential foreign country in Iraq. Iraq is of vital importance for the "national security" issue, which is at the top of Iran's regional and foreign policy. Before 2003, it was experienced how Iraq, which shares more than a thousand kilometers of border with it, poses a danger to Iran's national security. Iran's influence in Iraq is very important to prevent this situation from happening again, to protect the interests in the region, and most importantly to secure the "logistic line" from Iran to Lebanon. In this perspective, Iran has started to increase its influence in Iraq since 1980 and these activities gradually intensified in 2003. In 2011, when the US withdrew from Iraq, Iran focused on increasing its influence in the country through various means including political, military, economic and religious. The purpose of this thesis is on Iran's increasing influence and how this was achieved, despite the difficulties and obstacles in different periods between 2011 and 2020. As a result, this thesis argues that Iran is trying to increase its influence in Iraq for its national security, and that it will continue to exist in Iraq in a comprehensive way to eliminate possible threats. Besides that, Iran and US power conflict in Iraq also discussed in the thesis which has a negative impact on Iran's influencer tool inside Iraq.

ÖZET

ABD'nin 2003'te Irak'ı işgal etmesinden sonra İran'ın ülke içindeki farklı boyutlarda aşamalı bir şekilde artan bir nüfuzu meydana geldi. İranlı yetkililere göre Irak kendi ülkelerinin ulusal güvenliği için dünyadaki en önemli ülke arasında yer alıyor. Bunun kendilerine göre bazı sebepleri var; Irak ile 1300 kilometrelik sınır ve bu sınır üzerinde İran'a tehdit arz edebilecek Kürt ve Sünni nüfuzu, Bağdat'ta Tahran karşıtı bir rejimin iş başına geçmesi olasılığı, Suriye ve Lübnan'a kadar uzayan lojistik hattın güvenliği yer alıyor. Bu sebeplerden dolayı Saddam rejiminin 2003'te devrilmesinden sonra İran ülke içinde çoğunlukta Şiiiler üzerinden askeri, siyasi, ekonomik ve dini bir nüfuzu inşa etme gayreti içerisine girdi. Bu tez de Tahran'ın ABD'nin 2011'de Irak'tan çekilmesinden sonra Bağdat'ta yönelik izlediği politika neticesinde artan ve dönemsel olarak azalan farklı etkilerini incelemektedir. Tezin her bir bölümünde İran'ın Irak içindeki dini, ekonomik, askeri ve siyasi nüfuzu, bunun Tahran tarafından nasıl konsolide edildiği detaylı bir şekilde ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Arap Baharı'ndan sonra İran'ın Irak'taki nüfuzlarını kullanarak Suriye'deki çıkarlarını koruma içerisine girdiği, ardından DEAŞ'ın ortaya çıkması ve sonrasında izlediği askeri stratejiler neticesinde siyasi nüfuzunun arttığı ve ülkede en güçlü yabancı güç haline dönüştüğü farklı boyutlarla analiz ediliyor. İran'ın ABD ile Irak toprakları üzerinde girdiği güç çekişmesinde kan kaybeden taraf haline gelmesi ve ardından İran karşıtı hareketlerin ortaya çıkması da tez içinde yer almaktadır.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S occupation of Iraq has transformed the strategic landscape in the Middle East triggering critical changes, one of which was the nature of the relationship between Iraq and Iran. The critical change that the U.S occupation led to happen was the demolition of the wall separating Iraq from Shiites of Iran after hundreds of years.

From Ottoman Empire until its collapse 1534-1917, later on, the Iraqi monarchy which is established in 1920, and during the era of the Baath Regime till 2003, Iraq was under the control of the Sunni minority, and Iraqi Shiites were oppressed and excluded from the socio-economic and political life of the country. The occupation of Iraq by the U.S caused the removal of Saddam's regime in 2003, changed the power balance between the Shiite-Sunni in Iraq. The highest Shiite religious marjai Grand Ayatollah al Sistani ordered Iraqi Shiites not to resist the occupation. (Povey:175) Iran officially rejected the U.S occupation of Iraq but on the ground pursued a policy of active neutrality, stayed cautious, and abstained from affairs that could have hurt the U.S. Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militias who had deployed since the 1980s inside Iran, did not actively oppose the U.S. (Juneau: 125) Moreover, Sistani's order not to resist against U.S troops shows that he decided to cooperate with the U.S conditionally because he saw the fall of Saddam as the beginning of a major political shift in favor of Shiite. The Shiites who were in Iran since the 1980s, after the fall of Saddam returned to Iraq. They were organized, armed, trained and financially supported by Tehran since the 1980s. The Supreme Council of Islami Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its military wing formed by Iran in 1982 in order to fight against the Baath Regime. Apart from SCIRI, many of the oldest Shiite political movement Al Dawa members were hosted by Tehran for at least three decades. Besides SCIRI and Al Dawa, Tehran had very close relations with a prominent Shiite cleric's son Muqtada al Sadr. After the fall of Saddam, Iraqi Shiites who were exiled in Iran, crossed the border over Iraqi Kurdistan Region and returned to the country.

The occupation of Iraq provided Tehran with a window of opportunity to exert influence in Iraq, which had previously been a hostile country. Saddam Hussein and his pro-Sunni Baath Party were seen as the Arab bulwark against Iran's ideological- export of the Islamic

Revolution- expansion to the region. The occupation removed the bulwark and opened the floodgates for Iranian regional ascendancy. Many Pro-Sunni Arab countries blamed the U.S and claimed that Washington had delivered Iraq on a golden plate to Iran. Through its armed proxies, Tehran gained a wide variety of political and security advantages. Iranian direct interference and meddling domestic issues of Iraq from 2003 till 2011 was more invisible, limited, and not publicized by Iraqi authorities. Iranian political influence and particularly military presence became more recognizable, after the withdrawal of U.S troops from Iraq. For instance, Iranian top regional commander and representative of Iraq's foreign policy, Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps- Quds Force Commander Qassem Soliamani, traveled to Baghdad secretly during 2003-2011. After U.S troops' presence ended in Iraq, he was seen beside Iraqi politicians and military officials, his visits publicized, welcomed in the protocol, and finally, Baghdad appointed him as a military adviser to Iraq in 2014.

The aim of this thesis sheds light on Iranian vicissitudes influence in Iraq during the period of 2011-2020. Therefore, each part of the thesis explains different aspects of Iranian influence in the country. I tried to underline opportunities and challenges that Iran faced during this period in Iraq. The thesis will try to answer the following questions: How Iran increased and exerted its influence inside Iraq in this period. What kind of power dynamics does Iran can control in Iraq? How did Tehran use its military and political influence during this period in order to keep Baghdad under its control?

The U.S dismantled Iraqi Army including intelligence and other security establishments in which Sunnis had the most powerful positions. Decision of dismantling Sunni controlled security establishments and de-baathification process, created a golden chance for Iran backed Iraqi Shiites to sweep into newly formed government institutions. Firstly, SCIRI's military wing Badr's members who were trained and fought side by side with the IRGC against Saddam regime, took positions inside Iraqi army, Interior Ministry and Intelligence Service. Later on, Iraqi Shiites participated in the election with one united list- United Iraqi Alliance-, had an important role in drafting the constitution, and had a majority of candidates in the Iraqi parliament after the first election in the post-Saddam period in 2005. The dominant Shiite presence in the central government of Iraq and holding key positions inside the government clearly shows a change in power balance from Sunni to Shiite political leadership(Povey:170). The shift in the balance of power in Iraq, gave Iran the opportunity to exercise influence over the country. Iran backed SCIRI, Dawa, Sadr Movement and Iraqi Kurds formed the first

government after the fall of Saddam. According to Thomas Juneau, political and military changes inside the country after 2003, provided a good opportunity for Iran to be a dominant and the sole foreign power in Iraq (Juneau: 115).

The U.S occupation of Iraq which took nearly nine years was ended in December 2011 by The Obama's administration. Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq from the occupation until the withdrawal of U.S troops from Iraq (2003-2011) was to support traditional allies SCIRI, Al Dawa, Sadr Movement, and to a lesser extent Kurds and some Sunni political parties. The Iranian political motivation was to shape the Baghdad government decisions in order to prevent Tehran's regional interests. The political system in Iraq after 2003, based on ethnic and sectarian proportion. The cabinets were formed on this system and the Shiites were thus up to 60 percent population, and took the most important positions since 2003. Shiite political figures who were loyal to Iran like Islamic Dawa Party prominent figure PM Nouri al-Maliki took the most powerful position in the government. It is worth mentioning that political parties loyal to Iran, became the most cooperative side for the U.S after 2003. Besides exerting political influence over Iraq, Tehran founded many special armed groups and increased its military influence inside Iraq. Iran's motivation was through its political and military dynamics, to influence Baghdad's decisions and make sure that Iraq will not be a hostile country that used to be a national threat again (Povey:180).

Since 2003, Iran has tried to influence governments in Baghdad. Between 2003 and 2011, there were three distinct eras of Iranian influence and leverage in Iraq. The first stage is since 2003, the period after the fall of Saddam represented a stage of risk and opportunity for Iran. The second stage is about Iran's policy towards Iraq in 2005. Iraq strengthened its ties with Iraqi allies, consolidated relations with old friends, supported the Shiite-led government and armed groups. The third stage is about developments in 2009 where Iran's allies have become more divided. Although Iran increased its support to Shiite armed groups loyal to Tehran, Iran had limited power to control all Iraqi Shiite factions.

Arab Spring protests erupted in Syria after the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011. Iraq, the Shiite-dominated government backed by Iran, has complex relations with Syrian President Bashar Assad. Former Iraqi PM Maliki accused Syria for destabilizing Iraq but after the Syria Uprising, Iraq became the defender of the Syria regime because of Iran's regional policy (Hinnesbusch and Saouli: 173). Iran sees Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as members of the Axis of

Resistance, an anti-US and anti-Zionist union. Tehran supported anti-government protests in Egypt and Tunisia, and viewed itself as a reformist country for the demands of the people in North Africa and Gulf countries. While the wave of protests arrived in Syrian capital Damascus, Iran's stance changed from defender of reforms to protector of a status quo, and supported its loyal ally, Bashar Assad. The Syrian crisis, which began with anti-government demonstrations before growing into a full-fledged civil war, has had a significant influence on Iraq. In June 2014, the Islamic State (IS), which had its stronghold in the Syrian town of Raqqa, was able to take a third of Iraq's territory. After the emergence and rise of ISIL in Iraq, Tehran sent military support to both Baghdad and Erbil. Baghdad government, due to weakening of Iraqi Security Forces, lack of enough military sources and air operations, officially requested military help from the Obama Administration and U.S troops stationed in the country again. Despite many conflicts and hostility in the past, pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite militias and U.S forces cooperated on the ground against IS in Iraq. Although Iran sees U.S presence in Iraq as a national threat, Iran tolerated US military presence in 2014, because it preferred that to the alternative of ISIL(Pollack:3)

The elimination of IS by Iran-backed Shiite militias with the support of anti-IS coalition forces commanded by the United States in 2018 greatly boosted Iran's power inside Iraq. Shiite militias transferred military gains to political gains in the general elections in 2018. After eliminating ISIL presence in Iraq, Iran has focused on the threats from a renewed US military presence. A new power conflict between Tehran and Washington started on Iraqi soil after the defeat of ISIL in 2018. After that, Iran used its influence to urge Trump Administration to pull US troops out of Iraq and this dangerous power conflict between Tehran and Washington after defeat of IS, led to the assassination of Soleimani in January 2020.

The second chapter of the thesis is about Iran's political influence in Iraq. The question asked in this chapter is how did Iran's political influence evolve from 2011 till 2020? This chapter analyses how Iran has formed political allies among Iraqi Shiites since 1982. I examined Iran's role in uniting Iraqi Shiites under one umbrella in order to dominate the political system of the country after the post-Saddam era. I argue that Iran's political influence is diverse and it does not just depend solely on Iraqi Shiite political parties. After U.S troops' withdrawal, Iran created Sunni allies and to a lesser extent with Kurdish parties in order to maintain and guarantee its political influence in Baghdad. Iran's political allies' power increased significantly after the defeat of ISIL in 2018. Military gain on the war front became an

advantage or political gain in the general elections. Although Iran's actors became very powerful in the political life of the country, the anti-Iran sentiment also rose simultaneously. Anti-government protests and unrest led the Iran-backed government body to resign. Shiite parties loyal to Iran were viewed as a status quo and obstacles for reforms in the political system which works in favor of Tehran. Besides this, the Tehran and Washington power conflict in Iraq showed that Iran's influence in the government is insufficient to appoint another loyal candidate for PM's position. These major developments like the emergence of ISIL and anti-government protests show that Iran's political influence is not stable and very much depended on Iraqi internal dynamics, regional developments like the Syria crisis, and to a lesser extent U.S presence in Iraq.

The third chapter of the thesis sheds light on the military influence of Iran in Iraq. According to findings of this chapter, as an outcome of Iran's increasing military influence in Iraq, Baghdad which used to be neutral towards Gulf countries, after the defeat of IS, became a strong part of the axis of resistance. Tehran, through many special militia groups which are directly linked to it, very easily threatens U.S interests and Washington allies like Sunnis and Kurds for the sake of exerting its influence. In this chapter, I explain that Iraqi Shiite proxy groups are very beneficial for Iran due to some reason. Iran shares with Iraq almost 1300 kilometers of the border. Tehran's military influence inside Iraq helps it to decrease threats of national security, eliminating threats of U.S presence in Iraq, using them against Gulf countries like attacking Saudi Arabia's Aramco, deploying Iraqi militias in Syria to help Bashar Assad, and trying to control Kurdish dynamics. Apart from that, Iran uses its proxies to keep balance in power against Washington allies in the country or any parties that will hurt Iran's interests.

The fourth chapter is about Iran's religious and economical relation with Iran. This part of the thesis explains the conflict between Qom and Najaf from a religious perspective. It gives the definition of "Velat-e Faqih" of Iran and Iraq's people's approach to this concept. Iran sees Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as an obstacle and challenge to its influence over Iraq. Although Iran tries to exert its religious impact on Najaf, it is not successful so far. Secondly, in this chapter, economical influences are also discussed. In this part of the chapter, I will explain how Iran and Iraq's economic relations have developed since 2011.

Chapter I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Introductory Remarks

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the historical relations between Iraq and Iran. In addition to these historical relations, I will draw attention to the impacts of the Islamic revolution that took place in Iran in 1979 on bilateral relations, the road to a bloody eight-year Iran-Iraq war, and the disputes that continue until today. I will emphasise Iran's changing foreign policy towards Iraq after the war. In addition, in this chapter I will discuss the relations between Iraqi Shiites, one of the most affected parties of the war, and Iran, and their political and military organisation within Iranian territory, and how they were armed and supported by Tehran before 2003. In this context, I will also try to explain how Iran formed political and military allies that are strong in Iraq today after the war, and laid the foundation for these dynamics.

1.1 Theoretical Frame

In this study, neoclassical realism is considered as a suitable method and will be used when analysing Iran's foreign policy and influence in Iraq. Coined by Gideon Rose in an article called "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy" in 1988, neoclassical realism is thought to be one of the optimal international relations approaches with regard to foreign policy analysis. In this approach, the pressure of the international system on a state's foreign policy is evaluated in relation to this state's local dynamics, and also foreign policy strategies are determined through this consideration (Kiraz, 2018). Neoclassical realism has a focus on the interaction between states' internal dynamics and the international system, analysing the several variables influencing foreign policy decision processes such as the perceptions of the decision makers, the pressure of the international system, the distribution of power capabilities among states, and the intentions and threats of other states (Mencutek, Aras & Coşkun, 2020). According to Rose, neoclassical realism incorporates internal and external variables, using some updated content from the classical realist approach:

"Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact

of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical.” (Gideon, 1998).

Rose argues that, according to the neoclassical realists, relative material power and the international system are dominant factors shaping a nation’s foreign policy over time (Gideon, 1998). Rather than system theories, neoclassical realism’s mission is defined mostly in terms of the foreign policy of a state (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009). It is said to “explain the likely diplomatic, economic, and military responses of particular states to systemic imperatives, but it cannot explain the systemic consequences of those responses” (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009).

In neoclassical realism, domestic politics and ideational influences are integrated in analyses (Rathbun, 2008), and they are also used to explain the concept of power, considering them key elements in the anarchic system (Rathbun, 2008). Neoclassical realism uses the balance of power doctrine, the role of an actor and its perception of threats or intentions, the psychology of state elites, public opinion in the state, and innenpolitik matters as well. Therefore, it is argued that when determining foreign policy, the internal situation is accepted to be a motivative element, while the international sphere is seen as a limited driver (Hunt, 2017).

States pursue interests, according to neoclassical realists, by attempting to expand their influence over their external environment. This situation is not an exception for Iran. It is essential to emphasise that Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq is based on national security considerations. Historical developments between the two countries show that Iraq, which shares a long border with Iran, is very critical of and directly affects Iran’s national security (Juneau, 2015:104). The memories of the Iraq-Iran war are still alive in the minds of people. Iran views Iraq as the first line of defence. For instance, the former Intelligence Minister of Iran, Ali Yunesi, said in 2004 that they view Iraq as the most important country in the world for Iran (Juneau, 2015:108). There are some reasons why Iraq is the most important country for Iran. Iraq received a great deal of attention in terms of Iran’s foreign policy because of its geographical adjacency, economic wealth, and human capital. Iraq has a population of over 30 million people, and is second only to Saudi Arabia in terms of oil reserves, with 124 billion barrels, enough to produce three million barrels a day for more than a century. Iraq stands as Iran's gateway to the rest of the Gulf States and the Arab World, allowing Tehran to expand its influence throughout the region. As a result, if Iraq is not under its control, Iran will be cut

off from the Shiite presence in Syria and south of Lebanon (Hussain & Kamuran, 2016:3). Iran sees Iraq as a historical, geographical and religious extension of the country. As a result, Iran considers Iraq to be one of its provinces, rather than a separate country. In this sense, the first Iranian President after the Islamic Revolution, Abu Al-Hasan Bani-Sadr, declared that “Iraq has always been a part of Faris”, and the Gulf region has traditionally belonged to Iran (Hussain & Kamuran, 2016:4).

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, Kurds and Arabs, who are a minority in Iran and are located on the Iraq-Iran border, raise concerns for Iran national security as well. Both nations are historically affected by political changes in Iraq. As a result, maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity is a top priority for Iran: the split of Iraq, whether legal or *de facto*, would be risky and dangerous to Iran. Therefore, any foreign military presence, anti-Iranian governments in Baghdad, or fragment full of security risks, mean that Iraq is viewed by Tehran as a national security threat.

After 2001, Iran's power grew, and this power is now the primary driver of foreign policy. Iran's pre-emptive approach regarding Iraq is no different. According to Sara Bazoobandi, Iran has grown to be one of the region's most powerful and important countries, and its foreign policy has been shaped by three factors: sovereignty, influence, and the balance of power. After 2003, Iran mostly implemented factors of influence in Iraq. The influence factor is characterised as a desire to keep a strong grip on newly created governments in neighbouring countries following occupation. In the case of Iraq, the ‘influence factor’ has translated into maintaining a strong influence in the post-Saddam Iraqi administration, and has become a significant tactic for Iran's dealings with Iraq (Bazoobandi:2014).

The situation in 2003 in Iraq presented challenges and opportunities for Iran. Iran was alarmed by the US occupation of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Iran was surrounded by the US on the west and east side of the country (Juneau, 2015:108). As mentioned above, Iraq has a direct impact on Iran's national security. According to Iran's perspective, the occupation of Iraq was the beginning of a hostile operation against Iran. The Vice President of Iran's Parliament, Mohammed Abtahi, said that after toppling Saddam Hussain the US would turn its attention towards Iran and Syria. Iran's foreign policy, including Iranian leaders' statements, show that Tehran preferred a weak Saddam Hussain to a pro-American government in Baghdad. As Hashim Rafsanjani said, “We consider the US to be more

dangerous than Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party.” (Taremi,2005). Although there were challenges such as national security concerns, Iran had opportunities at the same time. Iran's old friends became political and military allies after the fall of Saddam in 2003. As a part of its foreign policy towards Iraq, Tehran created ties with diverse groups in Iraq, and was not dependent solely on old friends and allies such as Iraqi Shiites. These diverse ties are described as the most important component of Tehran’s power in Iraq after 2003 (Juneau, 2015:109). Iran has supported the establishment of a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq since 2003. Iran has attempted to infiltrate Iraqi governments in order to preserve a relatively robust coalition that is friendly to Iran and provides overall support for Tehran's regional foreign policy aims. Iran has actively engaged in promoting unity among Iraq's Shiite political parties in order to maintain its dominance with a Shiite-dominated political system (Bazoobandi: 2014).

Iran’s policy towards Iraq also had an impact on Iranian domestic politics. After 2002, Iran's security was challenged by the enormous US military presence in Iraq, as well as the threats of insecurity in Baghdad. Therefore, changes and developments shaped the power balance inside Iran. After the US occupation, hardliners and conservatives took control of the Iraq policy. IRGC-Quds Force and The Ministry of Intelligence and Security play a major role in implementing Iran’s Iraq policy. It is worth mentioning that Iran’s Baghdad ambassadors were all IRGC veterans. According to hardliners, Iraq’s post-2003 vacuum offered Iran a good opportunity to become a dominant player in Iraq. Moderate conservatives, on the other hand, were quickly marginalised after 2003, and had little effect on the Iraq policy (Juneau, 2015:115).

1.2 Methodology and Literature Review

As a methodology, the topic of this research is a qualitative case study, and primary and secondary materials, such as scholarly journal papers, academic books, and official records, will be used in this dissertation. The research question of the thesis is related to the current issue in Iraq. Therefore, there is no extensive research nor academic books directly related to this topic. As a result of the absence of data on this issue, in the thesis mostly secondary sources are used. The study has some potential limitations on which it is necessary to shed light. I should remind readers that most of the sources that are used in the thesis belong to western publications and their institution research centres. I tried to use first-hand sources

such as Persian and Kurdish texts, in order to have different unbiased perspectives and views about the topic, but I should emphasise that these sources were very limited. For the literature review, I looked at Iranian influence in Iraq from 2011 until 2020. Most sources which are available were focused on either a very short period or indirectly mentioned some part of the research question. I tried to collect all of these data and bring them together according to the period of time. In the following paragraphs I will describe some of the sources that I used in my dissertation.

Jabar Fallah's book "The Shiite Movement", which was published in 2003, gives a clear definition of Iraqi Shiite groups and their historical relations with Iran. The book mentions Iran's revolution and its impact on the Iraqi Shiite movement, and their relations with the Baath Regime in the 1980s. Fallah's book is a good source for understanding Iraqi Shiite reactions against Ayatollah Khomeini and their relations with the revolution, but the book is more about the historical background of the Shiite Movement in Iraq, rather than Iran's relations with Iraq.

Phebe Marr and Ibrahim al Marashi's book titled "The Modern History of Iraq" is also a good source for understanding the economic, social and cultural changes in Iraq after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Although most of the book is about Iraq's history after 1920, the authors shed more light on the Saddam Hussein regime and his relations with Iran. In the final chapter of the book, "Economic, Social and Cultural Change in Iraq 2007-2011", it is argued that one of the most important challenges in front of Iraq is dealing with foreign influence and control, as well as Iraq's traditional desire for independence. The book is a good source for historical relations between Iran and Iraq, but it does not cover the period after 2011. Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei's book "Iran, Revolution and Proxy Wars" is the newest source for understanding Iran's role in Iraq and its relations with Iraqi Shiite groups. In the fifth chapter of the book, which is written by Rezaei himself, he highlights the role of Iran-backed Badr Groups in Iraq and how they handled the government. Rezaei gives some snapshots of the Iranian military and its political influence in Iraq. It is an important source to understand Iranian current interference in Iraq, but it does not extensively provide data about the period between 2011 and 2020. Caroleen Sayej Marji's book titled "Patriotic Ayatollah" talks about Iran's and Iraq's religious relations, and the rift between the Najaf and Qom ecores. The author examines Grand Ayatollah Hussain Ali Sistani's role in Iraq, and his reactions to Iran and Iraq politics. The book explains that Sistani is an important figure for the Iraqi Shiite movement and an obstacle for Iran's expanded influence inside Iraq. The book is important in

terms of understanding the role of religion in bilateral relations, but political and military relations are not mentioned by the author. Thomas Juneau's book "Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign Policy" gives information about Iran's policy in Iraq. The author discusses Iran's role in Iraq based on neoclassical realism theory. According to Juneau, the reason behind the high political and military motivation of Iran in Iraq is related to national security and interests. The chapter on Iran's policy in Iraq gives clear information about Iran's aim and goals in Iraq, and this is extensively used in this thesis. The book was written in 2015, so it does not cover any critical changes which occurred between 2015 and 2020. Another book that is related to the content of this thesis is Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli's book titled "The War for Syria". In Chapter 10 of the book, "Iraq and Syria Relations and the Syrian Uprising", it is explained how Baghdad reacted to the Syrian Civil War. The authors argue that the country most affected by Syria's war was Iraq, and they highlight these effects in detail. The book only gives information about Iraqi-Syrian relations in the wake of the Syrian Civil War, and how Iran brought the countries close to each other.

Elaheh Rostami Povey's book "Iran's Influence" is also another source that is used in this thesis. The fourth chapter of the book is titled "Relationship between Iran and Iraq". In this chapter, the author explains the historical relations between the two countries and describes how the later US occupation of Iraq changed the balance of power from Sunnis to Shiites. As a periodisation, the book covers only Iranian foreign policy towards Iraq until 2011. The former Iraqi Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani's book, which is written in Kurdish and titled "To History", was very beneficial when it came to understanding Iran's role in taking disputed areas from the Kurds after 2017. Barzani claims that the IRGC and Lebanon's Hezbollah participated in the massive attacks against the Peshmerga in October 2017. It is important for the purposes of this thesis to use first-hand information about Iran's role in Iraq, but Barzani only talks about the Iranian role in retaking Kirkuk, not other periods. Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, in his book "Morning of Damascus", gives some information about Iran's role in Iraq. The book is written in Persian and contains the newest information about Iran's role in the Syria Crisis. One chapter of the book is related to Iran's military involvement in Iraq and how the country reacted against the emergence of ISIL in 2014. The book only covers the crisis in 2014 and does not include any data about how Iran meddled in Iraq's affairs. Zana Gulmohammadi's book is titled "The Making of Foreign Policy in Iraq", and in the fifth chapter of the book the author discusses Iran's role in Iraq's foreign policy post-Saddam. The author divides Iranian

influence and leverage in Iraq between 2003 and 2016 into four stages. Golmohammadi's book covers only important developments from the Iraqi Government's point of view.

Apart from these books, there are many very well detailed think-tank reports on Iran's recent activity in Iraq from 2011 till 2020, which give concrete information about the topic of the thesis. One of these reports, written by Michael Knight, is called "Sulaimani is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq", and it was published by the Counter Terrorism Service in 2020. The author explains Iran's military influence in Iraq, and how Sulaimani's death changed the balance very briefly. Although the report is useful, it does not give the big picture about Iranian influence in Iraq. Another report which was written by Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knight and Ahmed Ali defines Iran's influence in Iraq until 2011. The authors explain Iran's aims and how it consolidated its influence through special paramilitary groups, Shiite political parties, and soft power, such as the economy and public diplomacy. The report is an important source when it comes to understanding Iran's role in Iraq only until 2011.

Beston Husen Arif's article titled "Iran's Struggle for Strategic Dominance in a Post-ISIS in Iraq" gives a clear vision about Iranian interests, aims and motivation in Iraq. Arif's study focuses on Iran's military and political strategy in the post-IS period. The author focuses only on Iranian influence in Iraq after the defeat of IS. Another report, which was published by Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, titled "Iranian Strategy in Iraq", is an important source which needs to be mentioned. The authors describe the military and political influence of Iran in Iraq until 2011. Renad Mansour and Fallah Jabar wrote an extensive report about the Popular Mobilization Organization (PMO) and Iraq's future. The two authors explain the PMO's fight with IS and their growing influence with assistance from Iran. The focus of the report is only on the PMO and Iran's influence on the PMO. In Ali Reza Nader's report "Iran's role in Iraq", published in 2015, the author examines Iranian objectives and influence in light of IS's ascendance. In particular, the paper has a focus on Iran's ties with Iraqi Shiite parties and militias and the implications of Iran's sectarian policies for US interests. The article covers only the period of 2015, and there is no data about the years after 2015. Ariana Tabatai and Dina Esfandiary's "Iran's ISIS Policy", published in 2015, gives a clear vision about how Iran reacted against IS in Iraq. The report is an examination of Iran's relation with paramilitary groups and Iran's increased influence in Iraq after the emergence of IS in 2014. The period of time covered by the report is also very limited, and it does not cover the years after 2015.

Stanford University's project on Mapping Military Organizations is a useful study in terms of examining the biographies of all of the Iraqi Shiite leaders close to Iran. The project includes all Shiite leaders who have had direct or indirect links with Iran, their activities, ideologies, and histories. Apart from western-based think-tank reports, there are various media reports on Iran's role in Iraq. The US based Al Monitor's Iraq section frequently covers Iran's activities, and its role and influence in Iraq. The Middle East Eye, which is based in London, also publishes important revealed reports about how Iran tries to increase or control Iraq's politics and military. Reuters is also one of the media outlets that gives clear information about Iran's activity inside Iraq. For example, Reuters has exclusively reported on Iran's ballistic missile programme, Iran's attack on Saudi Arabia from Iraq, and Iran's deployment in Iraq, and these reports included important information for this study. Media reports are also very limited, and they only cover the current issues of the present day, or one specific topic related to the political life of Iraq.

1.3 Historical Relations of Iran and Iraq

The Ottoman Empire controlled Iraq from 1534 till 1917, and its policy favoured Arab Sunnis for state offices. During this period, Sunnis were powerful in Iraq. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Iraqi monarchy in the 1920s, Arab Sunni elite families were still dominant in the economic and political life of the country. Abdulkarim Qasim, who was a top officer in the military, ended the Hashemite Monarchy via a coup in 1958 (Povey, 2010:170). In Tehran, the Iraqi revolution of 1958 created tremendous concern and introduced severe strains in the relations between two countries. The monarchy in Iraq was toppled. The new administration was "revolutionary", with perplexingly radical language. The Iranian Shah was concerned by the strengthening of Iraq's links with the Soviet Union, the general mood of revolution and instability on Iran's frontiers, and the growth of republican feeling (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:12). The revolutionary and communist government of Abd al-Karim Qasim in Iraq adopted the policy of 'Arab' interests in the Persian Gulf, which concerned Iran. The joint administration of the Shatt al Arab problem was re-opened by Iran. When Shah opened the Shatt issue, Iraq claimed the entire Shatt river and also terrain around the Abadan region, including three miles of land (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:15). Iraq deported hundreds of Iranians from the country and imposed restrictions on others' activities. By April 1960, however, both governments had decided to use discussion to resolve their issues

(Lawrence & Potter, 2004:17). Negotiations between the two countries concerning Shatt's joint administration collapsed in 1961. Basra was the only deep water port in Iraq, and Basra's only access to the sea was the Shatt. One cannot see Iraq, a champion of Pan-Arabism, ceding "Arab" territories to Iran. Despite many high-level visits and talks between two countries in the later 1960s, the Shatt problem continued to prove intractable (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:18).

1.3.1 Iran and Iraq Relations from 1968 until 1978

In 1968, the Baath party seized power in Iraq, exacerbating relations between the two countries. In a bloody coup, the Baath regime took power, faced internal rivals (the Shiite Movement), and consolidated its Pan-Arabism policy. This change of regime in neighbouring Iraq was enough to worry Iran. There were many factors that led Iran to worry about the drastic changes in the government of Baghdad. Within Iraq, the new government adopted socialism and an anti-Western foreign policy stance. It had strong military and economic relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which was the main issue of concern to the Iranian Shah (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:18). An unstructured front for liberalising Khuzestan was endorsed by the Baath regime. In Yemen, Baghdad helped the left-leaning revolutionaries as well. Such actions put Iraq and Iran on opposing sides in the midst of severe local conflicts and rebellions (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:19).

It is important to emphasise that, apart from the Iran-Iraq skirmishes, Iraqi Shiites in the country were facing several pan-Arabist Baath regime challenges (Fallah, 2003:206). The religious Shiite leadership, which had some access to national leadership in 1963, had none in this period. The leadership of the Baath dropped primarily into Sunni hands. Mutual mistrust was compounded by inaccessibility of power (Fallah, 2003:202). In Iraq, four major areas of conflict arose against the Shiite Movement at that time. First, the state's campaign for secularisation largely targeted the independent Shiite religious establishment. Second, the Baath state reproduced the ethnic, religious and communal imbalances in terms of political representation and the uneven distribution of economic benefits. The third issue was the ideological conflict between the Baath's nationalist philosophy and the Shiite Islamic Movement's particularistic Islamic discourse, such as the Dawa Party. The fourth field was regional politics, i.e. relations between Iraq and Iran, which were strained except for a short interval of cooperation (1975 to 1988), and which ultimately led to a prolonged eight-year war (Fallah, 2003:207).

There was already non-heavy conflict between the two countries over the administration of Shatt issue and territorial disputes. Discussions and delegation meetings continued after the Baath regime regarding the Shatt issue as well, but all attempts failed. Muhsin al Hakim, an Iraqi Shiite cleric in Najaf, asked to mediate between Iran and Iraq. With regard to mediation with Iran, al-Hakim demanded that the Iraqi President sign an official letter empowering him to undertake such a mission. Hakim demanded the release of 25,000 detainees as well. Iraq's President Ahmed Hassan al Bakr refused Hakim's demands. The Baath regime stated in January 1970 that Iran had assisted a group attempting to overthrow the regime, resulting in the execution of 37 men and women. Subsequently, the regime closed the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad and its consulates in three cities, and deported thousands of Iranians from Iraq (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:19). Mahdi al- Hakim, the son of Muhsin al-Hakim, was accused of collaborating with the Kurds who, according to the official point of view, were spying for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Iraq's repression of Hakim increased after the failure of the mediation attempts with Iran. The Kufa University initiative, a structure set up by influential Shiite scholars and notables and supported by al-Hakim himself, was suspended. The funds raised for it were seized. Besides that, Faili-Shiite Kurds and Arabs of Iranian descent were identified as Iranian subjects, and any people from this group living around the holy cities were deported to Iran by Iraq. On 2nd June 1970, at the height of the first almost open conflict with the Baath, Muhsin al-Hakim died. Huge crowds of people chanted anti-Baath slogans as they attended his funeral (Fallah, 2003:203). The Baath regime was closely monitoring dissident religious groups and parties such as the Dawa Party. Sahib al Dakhil, Dawa's Iraq representative, was arrested on 28th September 1971, and he never appeared again. In December 1974, the Baath regime executed five leading members of the Dawa Party Fallah (2003:203).

Apart from border disputes, the Shatt issue, and suppression of Iraqi Shiites and Iraqi claims on Khuzistan, new questions emerged between the two countries when the British withdrew from the Persian Gulf (Fallah, 2003:203). Bahrain and three of its islands, which are called Tunbs and Abu Musa, have long-standing claims from Iran. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) revealed in April 1970 that the majority of Bahrainis favour independence rather than union with Iran. The Iranian Parliament passed a resolution along these lines in May 1970. Iranian troops forcibly took those three islands on November 30th 1971, one day before the British military's evacuation from the Gulf was completed (Fallah, 2003:203). Most Arab states and Iraq strongly rejected the Iranian takeover of the three islands by forces. The Baath regime suspended diplomatic relations with Iran, and so did Britain, in reaction to Iran's

actions. Baath then expelled the country's Iraqis of Iranian descent and reclaimed Khuzistan as an Iraqi territory. On the border there were clashes, but they did not escalate into broader combat. Iraq had allowed the Shah's radical left opponents to operate from Iraq's soil. In exchange, Iran provided Iraqi Kurds with heavy weapons to carry out attacks inside Iraq (Fallah, 2003:203).

1.3.2 The Islamic Revolution and the Baath Regime

On 1st February 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini returned victoriously to Tehran as the head of a successful revolution. The Revolution, which took place in Iran, had a political impact in the region. One of the countries which was influenced directly by the Iran Revolution was Iraq (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:343). Baghdad was greatly shaken by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in the same manner that Tehran was shaken by the 1958 Iraqi Revolution (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:21). In the case of Iraq, Iran and Iraq share a long border, and Baghdad worried about the "spillover" impact of the Iranian revolt. The Iranian vision of a modern, revolutionary Islam resonated with people all around the Gulf area, casting doubt on the Iraqi version of secular Arab nationalism. The potential attraction of the Revolution to Iraq's large Shiite population was especially troubling for Iraq (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:26).

The Iraqi Islamic Shiite social movement arose at this juncture as the latest challenger to a formidable regime. They hastily moved from covert educational activities to open mass political struggle and urban guerrilla warfare. In this transition, the demonstrative impact of the Iranian Revolution was decisive (Fallah, 2003:225). After the Iranian Revolution, there were mass protests against the Baath regime in Iraq by the Iraqi Shiite Movement, which was linked to Tehran. Baghdad worried that Iran's revolution scenario could be replicated in Iraq itself. In February 1980, Saddam Hussein clearly stated his point of view regarding this issue on various occasions, one of which was as follows: “[U]nless the inhabitants of Iraq demonstrated their loyalty to a specifically Iraqi state, the country would be divided into three ‘mini-states’: one Arab Sunni, one Arab Shiite and one Kurdish.” (Fallah, 2003:226).

It is worth mentioning that Saddam’s reaction to the Iran Revolution was very rough and doubtful. From the very beginning, he viewed Khomeini’s revolution as a national security threat to his regime. Hussein acknowledged in a conversation with Egypt's President Mubarak that Islamic Tehran represented a greater threat to Baghdad than Israel, because, unlike Israel,

Iran had an intellectual tool capable of undermining Iraq both as a political structure and as a nation-state (Fallah, 2003:226).

Before the revolution, relations between Ayatollah Khomeini and Iraq were not bad. Iraq's President Abdul Salam Arif in Najaf hosted Khomeini in 1964. In early 1970, the Baath regime and Khomeini cooperated when there was high tension between Shah and Baath. After the Algiers Agreement in 1975 between Iraq and Iran, the Baath regime put Khomeini under tight surveillance. Shah requested that Khomeini be deported from Baghdad in 1978 as a part of the Algiers Agreement between the two countries. He left Iraq on 6th October 1978 and moved to France, and while leaving Iraq, hundreds of Shiites and ordinary people flocked to see him (Fallah, 2003:226).

Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iraqi Shiite's protests against the Baath regime expanded (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:22). To mark the victory of Ayatollah Khomeini, from 11th February 1979 onwards, Shiite cleric Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr proclaimed a three-day holiday at the Najaf hawza (religious university). On the same day, after the evening prayer, a peaceful procession from Masjid al-Khadhra was arranged, during which Khomeini's images were hoisted aloft (Fallah, 2003:227). By all accounts, the protest and open expression of support for the Iranian Revolution were an alarming challenge to the Baath Regime. A series of interrelated incidents then led to what became known as the Rajab Uprising. After Muhsin al Hakim's death, al Sadr became the prominent Shiite cleric in Najaf, and he had good relations with Khomeini. Al-Sadr sent a permanent envoy to Tehran to give relations between Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution a more structural character. Al Sadr's visit to Tehran was made public with a religious and influential delegation. The Baath regime prevented Sadr's visit to Tehran and stopped his attempts to engage closely with Khomeini. The Iranian leadership advised al Sadr to leave Iraq urgently for his safety. On May 19th 1979, a short telegram sent by Khomeini to the Arabic Service in Radio Tehran was broadcast, in which he openly addressed al-Sadr: "*Samahat [your Grace] Hujjat al-Islam al-Hajj Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al- Sadr: we have been informed that your holiness has decided to leave Iraq because of some events [bawadith, i.e. disturbances]. I do not see good [min alsaleh] coming from your leaving the holy city of Najaf, the centre of Islamic learning, and I am worried about this matter. I hope, God willing, that the concerns of your holiness shall vanish. May peace and God's mercy be upon you.*" (Fallah, 2003:229).

On 1st June 1979, al Sadr replied to Khomeini. His message carried Arabist political themes, and he said that instead of departing from Iraq he had the responsibility to protect holy Najaf (Fallah, 2003:231). Baath security organs cracked down on hidden Iraqi Shiites who had pledged themselves to Iran's Revolution, including the Najaf religious network and members of Dawa. On 12th June 1979, al Sadr was arrested and kept in Baghdad. Later on, mass demonstrations broke out in densely Shiite populated areas. It was the first time that this kind of organised demonstration had taken place for the Shiite marjia in Iraq. For the past two centuries, the Shiite religious authority has been referred to as marjai, which literally means "source of imitation", and figuratively refers to "the position of a living Shiite supreme legal authority" who allegedly has the sole power to interpret sharia (Islamic law). Marjai is the main collector and manager of religious taxes, as well as the administrator of religious educational and non-educational foundations, and has the power to grab control over society's sanctity through the direction of rituals, rites, and religious ceremonies (Khalaji, 2006). On 16th July 1979, President Bakr officially resigned, and Saddam Hussain became President of Iraq, the Baath Party's General Secretary, and the armed forces' Commander-in-Chief (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:351). Saddam's regime executed between 200 and 260 Dawa members. Al Sadr was put under house arrest. On April 1st 1980, the Iraqi government claimed that the banned Iraqi Shiite Party "Dawa" had orchestrated an assassination attempt against Tariq Aziz, who was a high ranking official in the Baath regime. The Iraqi government retaliated by detaining suspected Shiites and expelling 35,000 Iranians (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:232). On April 4th 1980, Sadr was arrested for a second time. According to Dawa sources, Sadr issued two important fatwas, which prohibited engaging with Baath members and endorsed armed struggle. After arresting Sadr, he was secretly escorted to Baghdad along with his sister, Bint al-Huda, and on 9th April, al Sadr's body, but not that of his sister, was taken to the Salam Cemetery in Najaf for burial. He was possibly executed the day before (Fallah, 2003:233). It should be noted that the demonstration after the Iranian Revolution in Iraq was a test of the capability of the Shiite movement against the Baath regime, which suppressed them very harshly by executing Sadr and hundreds of Dawa members. During the era of Baath, Iraqi Shiite relations with Baghdad changed from restricted cultural opposition to a huge bloody political conflict (Fallah, 2003:233).

1.3.3. The Longest War between Iran and Iraq

At the outset of the Iranian Revolution, there were already open hostilities between the two states. The Iranian Revolution influenced the Iraqi Shiite Movement and inspired them to

organise against the Baath Regime, which resulted in the death of al Sadr in 1980. Saddam Hussein saw the Iranian Revolution as an opportunity. Iran was in turmoil, executions, revolt and mass dismissals devastated the Iranian army. The available Iranian military units were fighting a low-level insurgency in Iranian Kurdistan. In October 1979, Iraq had officially condemned the 1975 Algiers Agreement, and called for Iran's withdrawal from the three islands in the Persian Gulf. Before Iraq's Iran invasion, Saddam tore up the Algiers Agreement on Iraqi television. The Iraqi side reclaimed densely Arab populated and oil-rich Khuzestan, which showed that Iraq had its eye on the natural sources of Iran. It was Saddam's choice to fight and, given his war aims, he was most likely attempting to provoke conflict (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:22). The war effort between Khomeini and Saddam Hussain became a personal test of wills. Khomeini had little respect for the man who, in 1978, had expelled him. On his part, Saddam found the militant Islamic leader to be a challenge to his own revolutionary credentials and also to his regime. A conflict of philosophies was behind the personal struggle, with the Iraqis promoting secular Arab nationalism and socialism and Iran preaching the rebirth of a militant Islam (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:359).

Iraq first tried to destabilise Iran by using Iranian opposition, such as Shahpur Bahktiyar, the last Prime Minister under the Shah, and General Ghulami Ali Uwaisi, the former Chief of Staff. Iraq supported their attempts to contact tribal and military opponents within Iran in the hope of overthrowing the regime from inside. Two military coups were attempted by Pro-Shah forces in 1980, but both failed. In the decision of Baghdad to take the initiative itself, this could have been a crucial turning point (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:360). Iraqi air forces carried out a series of pre-emptive attack actions on Iran's military airfield on 22nd September, and Iraqi forces invaded Iranian territory, such as the town of Abadan and Khorramshahr on Shatt al Arab (Tripp, 2007:224). Saddam Hussein claimed that the deployment of his army on Iranian soil in September 1980 would allow him to accomplish three objectives: seriously weakening, perhaps even overthrowing, the Islamic government in Iran and replacing it with a government obliged to or at least favourable to Iraq; strengthening its role as a protector of the Arab cause in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East; and restoring absolute Iraqi influence over the Shatt al-Arab (Lawrence & Potter, 2004:23). Instead of undermining the Khomeini government, the Iraqi offensive gave more insurgent elements in Iran the chance to grab control of the whole government system and helped strengthen the regime in the long run (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:363). Nothing happened on the military front after Iraq's initial offensive. Iran counter-attacked in 1982, and was more successful than

many predicted. Iraqi forces were pushed out of much of the territories they controlled in the 1980s, suffering heavy losses, and an estimated 40,000 Iraqi soldiers were taken prisoner (Tripp, 2007:226). Iraq's air force did significant damage to Iran's oil facilities on Kharg Island in 1984 and 1985. Iraq's air operation worried other countries which were importing oil from Iran, and Iran relied on them for its oil exports. The Iraqi assault on the Iranian oil industry and the shipping trade with Iran led to Iranian reprisals against ships trading with Iraq or with Iraqi allies in the Arab Gulf who were funding Iraq's war effort. The risks of the escalating 'tanker war' had become so high by 1987 that Kuwait began leasing Soviet and US tankers, purposely intensifying global and particularly American naval involvement. Under these circumstances, The US frequently attacked Iranian naval units, and by 1988 most of the Iranian naval capacity had been destroyed. It was viewed that US naval forces' participation in the war in the waters of the Gulf, effectively on Iraq's side, in the summer of 1988 seemed to be one of the main factors in inducing Iran to recognise the terms of the UN cease-fire, as set out in the 1987 UNSC Resolution (Tripp, 2007:230). The war between Iraq and Iran came to an end when Khomeini decided, in his own words, "to drink a cup of poison" and to put an end to his dream of invading Iraq. On 18th July 1988, UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cueller obtained formal approval from Iran of the UN Resolution on the immediate cessation of fire and withdrawal from internationally recognised borders (Fallah, 2003:264). At the end of hostilities, unverifiable human casualty figures over the eight years of bloody war were issued by both countries. Iraq claimed the loss of over 350,000 persons, while at least 600,000 deaths were mourned by Iran. The estimated human toll of the war was 680,000 dead and 1.5 million injured and missing (Pierre, 2015: 470).

1.3.4 Iraqi Shiites in Iran

The Iraqi Shiites fought as well as the Iraqi Sunnis did. The war was not common in the South, although it was not actively criticised. It is apparent that the Iraqi Shiites were not prepared to make a common cause with the Iranian Shiites (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:384). However, these moves were followed by continued extreme repression of any possible opposition of the Shiites. After Muhammed Baqir al-Hakim, who headed the Islamic Iraqi Opposition in Tehran, agreed in 1983 to form an exile government, some of Hakim's family members who were still in Iraq were arrested by the Baath regime and executed on 6th May 1983. More than ten members of the family were executed in March 1985, and Mahdi al-Hakim, who led a European opposition group, was assassinated in Khartoum in January 1988 (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:385). In 1980, at the time of the execution of Baqir al-Sadr, large

deportations of Iraqis of "Iranian origin" continued. This group may have surpassed 200,000 by the end of the war. These moves decapitated the Shiite opposition inside Iraq, leading most of its base of support to shift outside Iran's region. This growing number of alienated, bitter and disappointed Iraqis provided an ideal resource for the Iranians and the exiled Iraqi Shiite opposition leadership to mobilise (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:386). Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim declared in Tehran the establishment of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) on 17th November 1982. It provided an all-encompassing structure for Islamist activism in Iraq. The founding of SCIRI signaled a change of strategy and tactics promoted by Iran. Iraqi refugees who were in Iran and had the support of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps - Quds Force (IRGC-QF) - established Iran's first Iraqi military proxy, which was called Badr Brigade or Badr Organisation, in 1982. The Badr was the military wing of the SCIRI, which aimed to bring Iran's Revolution to Iraq. Badr's militias sided among Iranian soldiers against the Iraqi army for eight years. During this period of time, the Badr grew into a strong militia group and used guerrilla war tactics against the Iraqi army (Counter Extremism Project, 2015).

1.3.5 The Invasion of Kuwait and Iran's Role in the Shiite-Kurds Uprising

The opposition in general and the Islamists in particular were cut off from the main urban centre of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, which were equal to half of Iraq's population at that time. Their organisational networks were broken physically. The opposition was in disarray in the inter-war era, and so was the Baath scheme. Iraq was a great military giant but an economic dwarf. Social tensions were high and it was impossible to sustain a 1 million-man army. The country had two options: either a choice between reform or recovery, or another military adventure (Fallah, 2003:267). Global and regional political developments intensified economic hardships. Socio-political shifts in Eastern Europe worried the ruling class and caused deep concerns. The very ideological foundations of the Baath law dealt a fatal blow: the economic system was a command economy, a one party system, and had self-constructed legitimacy. Developments in Eastern Europe had impacts on the same countries in the Middle East. For instance, in 1989, anti-government protests erupted in Jordan and Algeria. Protests brought about democratic changes in these two Arab countries. A similar package of reforms was proposed by the Iraqi President: economic liberalisation and a new constitution. The reform package was given but never delivered, and it was followed by the invasion of Kuwait. Iraqi troops crossed the border into Kuwait on 2nd August 1990, establishing a domestic puppet government and declaring a 'unity' between the two nations, all within a matter of

weeks. The invasion and annexation of Kuwait served several purposes, including securing abundant oil riches to relieve Iraqi economic pressures, rekindling the flames of common patriotism among Iraqis, going hand in hand with nationalism, and, last but not least, obtaining the assent of the generation of war. In January and February 1991, US-led coalition forces launched an air campaign and ground war to repel Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. As a result of the US operation, perhaps about 50,000 military personnel and 10,000 to 15,000 civilians were thought to have died (Fallah, 2003:268). The decision to occupy Kuwait was one of the most fateful decisions in modern Iraqi history. Under one set of expectations, Iraq entered Kuwait but soon faced a very different reality. Instead of a rapid conquest, Iraq experienced a massive international conflict at comparatively minor costs and crippling long-term costs and effects (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:390). After the withdrawal of the Iraqi army from Kuwait, some soldiers in the south of Iraq revolted against Saddam's regime with their tanks on 1st March 1991 in Basra. Armoured vehicles then targeted the main point of authority of the government, the mayor's office, the headquarters of the Baath Party, and security centres. By the third day of the uprising, the military began to regroup and reorganise, and by 17th March the intifada in Basra was over. Fighting was fierce, and many took refuge across the Shatt in Iran. Thousands were killed or executed, with bodies left in the street. Iran backed SCIRI and its military wing, and the Badr Corps' role in the uprising was very obvious. The protesters' slogans were distinctly Shiite and called for a Shiite ruler and an Islamic Revolution, which was a clear sign of influence from the SCIRI and Iraqis coming from Iran (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:445). Iran's involvement in the uprising became one of the main factors for the failure of the intifada. Badr and SCIRI played too much of a part in the rebellion. The fighters came with banners and slogans from the Islamic Revolution, demanding Shiite rule. The slogans gave rise to fears of sectarianism and of outside organisations from Iran (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:447-450). However, there was no rebellion in the five central provinces of Baghdad, Anbar, Salahaddin, Mosul and Diyala, in which the Sunni population was densely populated (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:472).

Although the Shiite uprising failed, the Kurds were successful and took control of Erbil, Duhok and Sulaimani provinces in the north. In this region, the Iraqi army had neither ground nor air control over Iraqi Kurdistan (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:479). The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) had full control over these three provinces. In 1995, Iranian forces entered Iraqi Kurdistan in order to repel the armed opposition Iranian Kurdish party, called the Iran-Kurdistan Democratic Party. In July 1995,

Iranians made a major incursion, in collusion with the PUK, into Kurdistan territory (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:480). In August 1996, the PKK, which had moved to improve its situation along the Iraq-Iran border, attacked the KDP. The PKK was supported by the PUK, Iran and Syria to repel the KDP from Erbil. Barzani asked for military help from Baghdad and invited the Iraqi army to the north. On 11th September 1996, the KDP controlled all of Iraqi Kurdistan up to the Iranian border. On 14th October 1996, the PUK recrossed the Iranian border in force, backed by Iranians, and reached the Sulaimani outskirts. Iraqi Kurdistan was essentially split into two parts when the cease-fire eventually took effect (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:486).

After the Gulf War, the number of Iraqis who were in exile may have reached 1.5 million. The Iran and Iraq War, the Shiite and Kurdish uprisings and UN sanctions on Iraq pushed the number of Iraqis in exile to reach 2 to 3 million by the mid-1990s. The largest group of this Iraqi diaspora was in Iran, numbering 500,000 to 1 million (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:487).

The death of Muhammed Baqir al Sadr and many Iraqi Shiites who fled to Iran created a room for Ayatollah Muhammed Sadiq al Sadr, usually called Sadr II, to expand his network among all Shiites in Iraq. Sadr II succeeded in building vast networks of followers among peasants and urban lower classes in Baghdad and Nasiriya (Fallah, 2003: 271). Sadr II, openly criticised Muhammed Baqir al Hakim and Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who were in Iran at that time. Sadr II, from his mosque in Kufa, began to challenge the regime. He asked for the release of Shiite prisoners, refusing to limit his activities. As a result, day by day he had a larger crowd and more followers. In February 1999, Sadr II and his two sons were assassinated by the Baath regime (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:485). The Baath regime executed Sadr I in 1980 and Sadr II in 1999. The remaining Sadr's other followers and family were also under the threat of great repercussions from the Baath regime. The Sadr movement opened up a gap among the Shiites who remained in Iraq and had to suffer from Saddam's brutal policies, and those who fled or left and fought under foreign sponsorship like in Iran. The conflict between the Sadr movement and the Iran-backed SCIRI became more visible after the fall of Saddam in 2003. After the Gulf War and the US invasion of Iraq, the main opposition which was backed by Iran became well known. The opposition backed by Tehran were the KDP and PUK in the north, two Shiite Islamist Groups; SCIRI and the Islamic Dawa Party located its headquarters in Iran until 2003 (Marr & Al Marashi, 2017:487).

1.4 Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq until 2003

After the Islamic Revolution, Tehran's foreign policy towards Iraq from 1980 until 2003 was divided into two parts. Most analysts and Iranian experts agree that the Islamic Republic's early foreign policy was ideologically-driven, where the revolutionary Shiite Islamist identity and ideology had a central role (Uzun, 2018:118). The Iran and Iraq war played an important role in the shift of Iranian foreign policy from an ideological perspective to a more pragmatic and real-politik one. At the beginning of the war until the end of it in 1988, Iran's policy towards Iraq was focused on exporting the Islamic Revolution to Iraq. However, Iran could not defeat Iraq, and most Middle Eastern states and western countries allied with Iraq. Iran was regionally and internationally isolated after 1989 (Uzun, 2018:129). Finally Iran was unsuccessful in exporting the revolution to Iraq. These factors forced Iran to change its foreign policy towards Iraq and the entire region. Instead of trying to export the revolution with very limited power, Iran established sub-state level relations with Shiites. As a result of this real-politik policy, Iran formed SCIRI in Tehran as a bulwark against the Saddam regime. SCIRI and its cleric leader, Baqir al-Hakim, followed Khomeini's interpretation of velayat-e faqih and attempted to establish an Islamic theocracy in Iraq. In Iraq, Iran gained an ally through their backing and endorsement of an Iranian-style theocracy against the Arabnationalist Baath regime (Uzun, 2018: 143). In addition to the formation of SCIRI in Tehran for Iraqi Shiites, Iran supported the two main Iraqi Kurdish political parties, KDP and PUK, until 2003. Both parties from time to time got support from Iran for resistance against their common enemy The Baath Regime. Iraqi Kurds and some Iraqi Shiites were considered Iranian influence tools in Iraq until 2003. Iran has tried to gain some influence in Iraq through these two groups

1.5 Concluding Remarks

Until before the fall of Saddam's regime, Iran had set out a long strategic plan to become more influential in Iraq. Instead of exporting the Islamic Revolution to Iraq, Iran changed its policy and implemented a national defense strategy to prevent Baghdad from becoming stronger. By doing this, Iran started to undermine the Baath regime and established a strong political and military network inside and outside Iraq through its first Iraqi proxy group, called "Badr Corps". Besides Badr Corps, through SCIRI and the Shiite Islamist identity, the clerical regime in Iran easily accessed the Shiite clerical network in Iraq in order to reach and form sub-state groups.

Chapter II

IRAN'S RELIGIOUS AND ECONOMICAL INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

2. Introductory Remarks

In this chapter, I will explain Iran's religious and economical influence in Iraq. I will try to answer the following questions: How do Iraqi Shiites approach Iranian Islamic ideology? What kind of religious obstacles exist in front of Iran in Iraq? Besides religious influence, Tehran's economical influence is also discussed. I will investigate how Iran's and Iraq's economic relations have strengthened year by year since the fall of Saddam's regime, how Iraq's energy dependence on Iran has increased gradually, and how Iran uses this dependence as leverage against Baghdad's government in order to protect its political interests.

2.1 Iran's Religious Influence in Iraq

The Shiite religious authority has been referred to as *marjaiya*, which literally means "source of imitation", and figuratively refers to "the position of a living Shiite supreme legal authority" who allegedly has the sole authority to interpret sharia law (Islamic law) (Khalaji, 2006:1). Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq are two important religious study centres for Shiites. Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani of Najaf is the *marja* with the largest following in today's Shiite world. Nearly 80% of Shiite worshippers follow Sistani, according to religious authorities, whether through confidential pilgrimage polling or through Qom *marja* offices ((Khalaji, 2006:7). Thus, Iran's religious influence in Iraq is very critical for its policy of expansion in Iraq through Shiism.

Iraq's religious links are an important part of Iran's revolutionary religious narrative and policy. After Iran, Iraq is home to the second largest Shiite population in the world. About 60% to 75% of Iraqis are Shiite. Two significant Shiite sites are also in Iraq: Karbala and Najaf. Imam Hussein, the Third Imam or leader of Shiite Muslims, is buried in Karbala, where Shiites from all over the globe visit his shrine. Karbala is crucial to the Iranian revolutionary narrative and continues to play a crucial role in Iranian society and politics today. The first Imam, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the immediate heir of the Prophet, is buried in Najaf, making it an important holy place for Shiite Muslims. Najaf has been the target of

Iranian investment and other initiatives due to its traditional prominence in the Shiite world, and it is the third holiest destination for Shiite Muslims after Mecca and Medina. Najaf is also a traditional Shiite learning centre, where thousands of clerics reside and lecture in the hope of gaining new converts among the city's religious students and pilgrims (Eistenstadt, Ahmed & Knights, 2011:15).

Iran's religious connections with Iraq are crucial to the country's national security and foreign policy agenda. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has used the notion of Velayat-e Faqih, or the guardianship of the Islamic jurist, which is a type of hybrid government system that was incorporated into Iran's constitution and conceptualised by the Qom Seminary. The idea of Velayat-e Faqih is an invention of Shiite Islam used by the government and the state to justify the rule of the clergy. Iran's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, proposed Velayat-e Faqih as a tool that gives faqih, or jurists, political leadership when the divinely inspired imam (the Prophet's successor) is absent. He thought that the features of the faqih made him the best-qualified individual for the community. Khomeini was widely accepted to be in the position of such a man. Velayat-e Faqih is therefore utterly fundamental to modern Shiite Islam, and it is important to understand both how the Iranian government functions and how Iran acts outside its borders to influence other Shiite political and religious groups. Iran's long-term objectives, from a religious point of view, are designed to pull the entire Shiite community into the circle of control of the Islamic Republic, while at the same time reducing the comparative power of the clerics in Iraqi Najaf, particularly Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Sistani is Iraq's most powerful Shiite cleric and has millions of followers worldwide but he behaves primarily as a religious authority and often distances himself from political parties, but he has a strong role in the nomination of the Prime Minister (PM), and he issued fatwas in order to arm thousands of Iraqi Shiites against Islamic State (IS) in 2014. Sistani opposes clerics' formal control, which contrasts sharply with Iran's approach to religion and governance, in which clerics wield absolute power. The Najaf Seminary, also known as al-Hawza al-Ilmiyya, has, for its part, continued to follow its conventional approach and does not engage in politics or attempt to empower the clergy over the state. During the leadership of Abu Al Qasim al-Khoei (1970–1992), this approach was widely seen. Al-Khoei chose to separate himself from politics and maintained at the Najaf Seminary a quietist position, refusing to accept the idea of Velayat-e Faqih supported by the seminary of Qom. When Sistani succeeded al-Khoei in 1992, this distinction between Najaf and Qom became even more clearly established. As a result, a campaign of criticism against him was launched

by the Iranians, accusing him of being the English Marjah (Husein, 2018:352). If an Iranian-backed Ayatollah were to become the successor of Sistani, it would mean the end of the Najaf school and the expansion of Iran's religious influence over Iraq (Husein, 2018:354). Sistani's paramount influence in Iraqi politics has been evident whether with regard to his call for participation in the electoral process following the US-led invasion, his views on PMs, or even the fight against IS (Al-Monitor, 2019). While Sistani's popularity in Iran has been a cause of concern for the Islamic Republic, the scope of his operations in the country provides Tehran with power. Sistani would lose a major source of revenue and influence if Tehran were to close his offices in Iran. As a result, he was careful not to criticize or challenge openly Khamanei or Iran's policies (Eisdenstadt, Knights & Ahmed, 2011:14).

2.1.1 Sistani factor in Iraq

In 1930, Ayatollah Ali Hussaini al-Sistani was born in Mashhad, Iran, and studied in Qom. He moved to Najaf in the early 1950s, and built his career as a cleric. He has been one of the most influential Iraqi Shiite Marjas of Iranian origin living in Iraq since 1992. He succeeded his current position from Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei. Sistani, who is located in Najaf, faced heavy suppression from the Baath Regime until 2003. The Najaf seminary, which has been around for a thousand years, was forced to close due to pressure from Saddam's regime. Many Iranian and Iraqi clerics emigrated to Iran, leaving the seminary to a tiny group of students and clerics who were denied all freedoms. Ayatollah Sistani was confined under house imprisonment for 11 years, and was unable to lecture. The Najaf seminary was almost completely inactive, whereas the Qom seminary, which was supported politically and financially by the Iranian government, grew and flourished (Khafaji, 2006:3). After the fall of Saddam and the occupation of Iraq, Sistani's role grew year by year. Unlike the founder of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Khomeini, Sistani never developed a state theory (Sayej, 2018: 106). Following the fall of the Baath regime and the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, he rejected the Iranian model for a new Iraqi government on many occasions by saying, "Forming a government based on the idea of the absolute guardianship of the jurist was out of the question." (Sayej, 2018: 107). Sistani always denied the opportunity to meet with US officials, but instead issued fatwas which were in the interests of US policy in Iraq, such as supporting elections and constitutional process. He frequently insisted on the ending of foreign occupation in Iraq, indirectly meaning the US and then Iran (Sayej, 2018: 108). Whatever his sharia views, Sistani played a critical role in post-Saddam Iraq, whether

advising the government on referendums, elections, and the development of the constitution, or removing Iran-backed Shiite PMs such as Nouri al Maliki, Haidar al Abadi and lastly Adel Abd Mahdi.

Sistani's policies are obviously not the same as those used by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. Sistani and his advisers have stated publicly on numerous occasions that he is uninterested in politics. Examining his assertion and comparing it to his actions reveals that he has no intention of assuming any official political post, such as that of the Supreme Leader (Khafaji, 2006:17). Since the fall of Saddam in 2003 and up until 2020, developments inside Iraq show that Sistani has limited power against Iranian influence. He exercised his power only when the government was in a very weak position or the country was in a transitional period and faced a great threat, such as the emergence of IS in 2014. When looking at the critical moments in Iraq between 2011 and 2020, it can be seen that Sistani emerged as a mediator and a person who has influence over Shiite political parties. Therefore, after Baghdad, Najaf became an important political centre in Iraq. Sistani's decisions are sometimes in favour of Iran's interests and sometimes not. For instance, Maliki, who served twice as PM until 2014 and was supported by the IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Suleimani, was rejected by Sistani (Mamouri, 2014). Along with Sistani, some Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis rejected his nomination for a third term in office. Although Sistani stayed as a bulwark against Iran's political influence in 2014 by rejecting Maliki, he ordered the formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) against IS in the same year. The formation of the PMF by Sistani's fatwa increased Iran's military influence inside Iraq. Iranian backed Shiite militias became the strongest faction under the umbrella of the PMF (Mansour, 2017). Iran's military allies were legitimised by the Iraqi government through joining the PMF. For a short time, the removal of Maliki could have hurt Iranian interests, but the formation of the PMF served Iranian long term strategies enormously. When there was a deadlock in the formation of the government in Iraq in 2018, Sistani played a major role by rejecting Haidar Al-Abadi's nomination for the second time as PM (Al Arabiya, 2018). Iran viewed Abadi as a US-backed PM. Therefore, the removal of Abadi served Iranian political interests in Iraq for a short period. Abadi was succeeded by Adel Abd Mahdi, who was strongly supported by Iran and Suleimani. In the era of Mahdi, Iran consolidated its power inside the PMF, appointing close allies to critical positions inside the government. Although Sistani did not support Mahdi's nomination, his rejection of Abadi led Mahdi to take office instead. After one year, Mahdi faced strong anti-government protests. Following the death of many protestors, his resignation was requested.

Mahdi stayed in office until Sistani's call for the Iraqi Parliament to review its governmental options. As a result, it was not the deaths of many people, but Sistani's call which led Mahdi to resign in 2019. It is claimed that Sistani warned Suleimani that if Iran did not stop its interference, he would not be able to calm down the Iraqi streets (Al-Monitor, 2019).

2.1.2 Iran's link with Najaf

The seminary of Najaf is recognised worldwide and has generated and attracted many ulama (Islamic scholars) over the years (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015). For Iranian religious tourists, these sites are enormous attractions. Approximately 40,000 Iranian pilgrims visit Iraq's sacred sites each month, while three to four million religious tourists are projected to visit Iraq's holy towns during Ashura commemorations. Since the formation of Iraqi Shiite religious parties in 2003, Najaf has become the country's most prominent political centre outside of Baghdad. For these reasons, Iran has attempted to play a significant role in Najaf's political, economic, and religious life by investing in critical infrastructure projects and making strategic investments (Husein, 2018:352). Religious ties between Iran and Iraq are important in terms of Iran's national security; Iranian security officials have also advocated growing Iraqi Shiite feelings of connection with Iran as a means of deterring US military strikes, claiming that Iraqis would retaliate if their religious brethren were attacked. Iran's moral and religious influence on Iraq is not as strong as it would like. Iran's religious policies in Iraq are aimed at bringing Shiites into the Islamic Republic's orbit and away from the hegemony of Najaf's strong clerics, such as Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who rejects Velayat-e Faqih and advocates for a religiously pluralistic government (Nader, 2016:3).

According to a 2007 poll, 62% of Iraqi Shiites believe that the Iranian government encourages sectarianism. In 2010, 48% of Iraqi Shiites said that Iran's relations with Iraqi political leaders were bad. Many Iraqis, for example, criticised ISCI and the Dawa party for supporting Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iran-Iraq War. In 2007, SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), thus removing the reference to the Islamic Revolution from its name. The group also started to emphasise its devotion to Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Najaf as a way of gaining local legitimacy. About 80% of Iraqi Shiites considered Sistani to be their religious leader as of 2006, earning him more than \$700 million in religious taxes annually. Sistani has offered scholarships to over 65,000 religious students studying in Iran since 2011 (Husein, 2018:352). There were approximately 110,000 students at the seminary in Iran, concentrated mainly in the holy city of Qom, in 2018. According to Sistani's

office, in 2013, Sistani granted scholarships to 49,000 students at 300 seminaries in Iran (Al-Monitor, 2019). He has also provided health insurance and housing assistance to tens of thousands of seminary students residing in Iran. Iran's presence in religious cities grew so extensive in 2009 that the Iraqi Interior Minister forbade the use of Farsi signs in Karbala. The same year, Shiites marched in the streets of Karbala to protest the \$100 million government grant to an Iranian company to renovate the holy city.

2.2 Iran's Economical Influence

Economic cooperation between Tehran and Baghdad has historical roots. Iran and Iraq share 910 miles of border, and there are eight border gates between them for trade. Apart from these official gates, there are also some non-official passages such as the ones in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In recent years, economic sanctions against Iran have strengthened this relationship. Given the failure of the Iraqi economy to meet domestic demand in many areas, and given foreign sanctions on Iran, Iraq and Iran both have great motives to expand commerce. After the removal of Saddam in Iraq and the rise of the Shiite-controlled government in Baghdad, economic relations between the two countries have grown substantially. In an attempt to help the economy and to prove to its people that it can work around sanctions and provide adequate services, Iraq is one of the few countries to have opened its doors to Iran. Since 2003, both countries have been working actively to strengthen their trade relations, and bilateral trade between the two countries has risen gradually year by year. For instance, the growth in trade figures between the two countries has been as follows: \$580 million in 2003, \$1.5 billion in 2006, \$2.8 billion in 2007, \$7 billion in 2009, \$9 billion in 2010, \$12 billion in 2015, \$6.2 billion in 2016 and \$12 billion in 2018 (Husein, 2019:354). However, due to Iranian protectionist practices and government subsidies, the trade balance between the two nations is heavily skewed in Iran's favor. Iraqi exporters receive substantial tax cuts and other benefits, while high import tariffs are levied on Iraqi goods by Iran. Fresh fruit, refined foodstuffs, low-cost consumer goods, automobiles, cement, glass, and bricks are the most common Iranian exports to Iraq. Iraq's principal exports to Iran are crude and processed petroleum products. In Iraq, Iran now has five banks, in Baghdad, Najaf, and Karbala (Eisenstadt & Knights, 2011:12).

Iran has continued to cooperate with Iraq in various sectors since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, especially in the energy and electricity sectors. As a fast and cost-effective way to fix

its chronic energy shortages, Iraq has signed contracts in recent years to import electricity and natural gas from Iran. In 2013, Iraq signed an agreement to import 25 million cubic meters of natural gas per day from Iran to support a number of Baghdad-based power plants with a total capacity of 5000 megawatts (MW). Iraq has also signed an agreement to purchase up to 1,200 MW of electricity directly from Iran. After US President Trump withdrew from the nuclear agreement signed with Iran in 2015 and reimposed economic sanctions against Tehran in May 2018, tensions between the US and Iran have risen. Iraq has not suspended its significant economic ties with Iran, prompting US threats to Iraqi leaders to minimise trade with Iran. In exchange, Tehran considers Baghdad to be a crucial trading partner that could help it bypass US sanctions (Husein, 2019:354).

Trade relations between two countries improved during the era of former Iraqi PM Nouri al Maliki, from 2006 till 2014. A free trade zone around the city of Basra was established by the two countries. Currently, there are plans to open two more free trade zones as well, which have been named Mehran and Baneh-Merivan. Al Maliki has visited Iran on many occasions in order to discuss and accept agreements on economic cooperation (Terry, 2010). Iran announced \$1 billion in loans for Iranian exports to Iraq. In addition to these loans, in 2005 planning was extended for the construction of a new airport near Najaf, which opened in August 2008. A \$1 billion contract was awarded by the Iraqi government to an Iranian company to help rebuild Basra and restore ancient historical Persian sites in southern Iraq. Iran won a \$1.5 billion contract in February 2009 to develop the Basra complex of homes, hotels, schools, markets and other commercial buildings (Terry, 2010).

Iraq has also been a major destination for religious Iranian visitors. Every month, some 40,000 Iranian pilgrims reportedly visit holy sites in Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya and Samarra, with an estimated 3 to 4 million visiting Iraq during the annual commemorations of Ashura. When one considers pilgrims from abroad, the overall number of reliable tourists surpasses ten million annually. This lucrative trade is increasingly dominated by the Iranian travel agencies (Eisenstadt, Knights & Ahmed, 2011:13). As long as Iraq is unable to meet the domestic demand for cheap produce, manufactured food products, consumer goods, and electricity, these products and services will rely on Iran. Iranian attempts to build such dependencies through unfair trade practices are part of a plan to use all available national power instruments to increase its control over Iraq to undermine the Iraqi state to manipulate its domestic politics (Eisenstadt, Knights & Ahmed, 2011:14).

Iran's non-oil exports to Iraq totalled around \$10 billion in 2018, and this figure was projected to reach 20 billion dollars by 2020 (Tammer, 2018). Following the US' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran has been concentrating its efforts on securing access to the Iraqi market, which is Iran's second-largest non-oil importer. Iran's Vice President, Eshaq Jahangiri, announced a \$3 billion credit line for Iraq's reconstruction during a visit to Baghdad on March 7th 2018. Tehran also wants to invest in economic schemes that will help it maintain its influence in Iraq, such as assisting to develop economic foundations tied to the PMF, such as AAH and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and enhancing current welfare programs (Tamer, 2018). Iran-backed militias have dominated business dealings, benefiting directly from Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah interests. Shihbl al Zaydi, leader and founder of Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, which is a pro-Iran armed group, became one of the richest businessmen in Iraq, with direct links to the Ministry of Communications. Significant leaders of the militia have leveraged their influence to create massive real estate portfolios. Through the alliance between Iran-allied Iraqi politicians Mohamed al-Kawtharani and Adnan Hussein Kawtharani, Lebanese Hezbollah's commanders have been involved in multiple Iraqi contract awards. At least four private banks run by militia-controlled businessmen continue to use dollar auctions from the Central Bank of Iraq to secure Iran's hard currency (Knights, 2020).

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, on 18th Nov 2018 during a press conference in Tehran with Iraqi President Barham Salih, said that bilateral trade between Iran and Iraq could increase from its current \$12 billion to \$20 billion, and spoke of expanding economic ties and relations between the two countries (Al-Monitor, 2018). Following Iraqi President Barham Salih's Tehran visit, Iranian President Hasan Rouhani arrived in Baghdad on March 11th 2019. By developing close trade ties with Iraq, Iran is attempting to reduce the negative effect of the US sanctions on Iran's economy. An agreement was signed by Rouhani and the former Iraq PM Adel Abdul Mahdi to connect the two countries by rail, linking the border towns of Shalamcheh and Basra. With 48 kilometers of track between them, Iran will be able to move goods to southern Iraq and even longer distances to the north through onward transit. The two countries had previously agreed, together with the government in Damascus, to link Iraq and Syria by rail to allow Iran to export goods to the Mediterranean via the port of Latakia (Al-Monitor, 2019). As stated earlier, Iraq is one of the few countries to have opened its doors to Iran. As US sanctions against Iran have been reimposed, banking transactions are now the biggest obstacle, slowing down the rate of economic cooperation. The problem has escalated to the point that national currency transactions are being performed. Owing to the same US

banking constraints, a total of 1.5 billion dollars claimed by Iranian firms remains unpaid by Iraqi debtors (Al-Monitor, 2019). Following US sanctions in May 2018, the Iraqi government faces challenges to repay its electricity debt to Iran. Tehran claims that Baghdad must pay at least 5 billion dollars in debt to Iran for natural gas and electricity (VOA News, 2020). Iran cut the electricity which it exports to Iraq in the summer of 2018. After the electricity was cut, there were anti-government protests which led to the burning of the Iranian consulate in the south of the country. At that time, Iran claimed that the Baghdad government had 1 billion dollars in debt owed to Tehran. However, it is claimed that Iran was using electricity as a leverage tool against Baghdad to expand its influence (Al-Monitor, 2018).

2.3 Iran's other modes of influence

Iran uses its embassy in Baghdad and consulates in Basra, Karbala, Najaf, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah to exert political and military influence in Iraq. Ambassadors and consuls who are appointed in Iraq have served in the IRGC-QF. Iranian Ambassadors Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, Hassan Danaifar and the current ambassador Iraj Masjidi, who were born in Iraq but whose families were expelled by Saddam Hussein, served the IRGC QF. Their appointments underscore the importance of Iran's security services in shaping and implementing Iraqi policies (Eistenstadt, 2015:11). The Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation (ICRO) is Iran's primary cultural diplomacy tool. The ICRO was founded in 1995 as a tool for strengthening cultural ties with other countries, particularly those in the region. The organisation is linked to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and is overseen by the Supreme Leader, who appoints the ICRO Board of Directors directly. Members of the ICRO work freely in foreign countries, although they occasionally collaborate with Iranian embassies and consulates (Husein, 2018). Iran's worldwide media outlets are another tool it has employed to expand its global influence, particularly in surrounding countries. Iran has also fought for Iraqi "hearts and minds" by broadcasting Arabic-language news and entertainment to Iraq (and the Arab world) through the al-Alam TV network. The programmes represent the propaganda line of Tehran regarding region-related news. On the eve of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Al-Alam was launched (Eistenstadt, 2015:4). Tasnim News Agency, Mehr News Agency, ISNA News Agency, Fars News and IRNA are among Iran's news agencies that have Arabic news services and generate information pertaining to the Arab world. As a result, Tehran employs a variety of strategies to promote Iranian culture

across the area, particularly in nations with strong Shi'ite populations, such as Iraq (Husein, 2018).

2.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, Iran's religious and economical influence in Iraq have been discussed. From a religious perspective, despite the links between the Shiite religious leadership in both countries, it seems difficult for Tehran to export its Islamic ideology to Iraq as long as Iraqi Shiites rejects velayet-e faqih. Through Iran's assistance, Iraqi Shiites were placed in the centre of Iraqi political life after 2003, but the emergence of Najaf and Sistani prevented the expansion of Iranian religious influence in Iraq over the years. Vice versa, the absence of Sistani will lead Iran to expand its the Shiite network in Iraq. From an economic perspective, Iran uses its influence as leverage for the sake of protecting its political and military interests in Iraq. Iraq's dependence on Iran for energy poses a serious obstacle for any anti-Iran government in Baghdad seeking to pursue a sovereign and independent policy. Iraq's dependence on Iran for both energy and non-oil products has led to an increase in Iran's leverage inside Iraq.

Chapter III

POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF IRAN IN IRAQ

3.Introductory Remarks

Shiite political players fall into two groups, by and large: religious and secular. The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), whose members are still active, is the country's oldest secular organisation, and the Shiite community's most entrenched. On the religious side, the Islamic Dawa Party (IDP) is the oldest fundamentalist Islamic Shiite community. There was also a significant Shiite membership of the former state-run Baath party. These three parties are still entrenched in the Shiite societies, amid their division, and have the potential to reorganise and re-enter the political fray as serious rivals to the power in any new configurations. In addition to the three major political groups, the IDP, the ICP and the former Baath party, the Shiites are dominated by political clergy networks, the most powerful of which were Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, leader of the Islamic Revolution Supreme Council in Iraq, and Sadr Movement leader Moqtad al-Sadr (Kubba, 2004:145).

Instead of putting all of its eggs in one basket, Tehran has backed various Shiite parties and campaigns to guarantee that its interests are unharmed, no matter who comes to rule the Shiite-dominated Baghdad governments. In order to ensure a viable governing coalition, it has supported an alliance between pro-Iran Shiite parties and the main Kurdish parties. Iran-backed Shiite political parties played an important role in rewriting the new Iraqi constitution in 2005 and the newly formed political institutions of Iraq. It is claimed that Iran has attempted to manipulate the results of the parliamentary elections and meddled in political issues since 2005 by supporting and advising its chosen candidates (Eisenstadt & Michael, 2011:4)

Iran was the main supporter of PM Maliki, who implemented sectarian and authoritarian policies in Iraq, after the withdrawal of US troops from the country in 2011. The IRGC-QF leader Sulaimani insisted that Maliki stay in office for a third term while Islamic State took one-third of Iraq. After Washington's and the Iraqi Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Sistani's refusals of Maliki, another member of the IDP, Haidar al Abadi, replaced him. Abadi, who served as the Iraqi PM from 2014 to 2018, had a difficult time with Iran and Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite political parties. He claimed that Iran prevented him from running for a second term,

and he left office to be replaced by Iran-backed PM Adel Abdul Mahdi. Mahdi, who was supposed to be the compromise candidate for PM, served only one year due to anti-government protests. He was supported by Iran. Tehran was happy with the results of his works, which led Iran to increase its influence in Iraq. However, he was rejected by Sistani after bloody clashes between protestors and Iraqi Security Forces. After Mahdi's resignation, Iran and US tension came to a very high level, which led to the assassination of IRGC-QF leader Sulaimiani and PMF Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi Muhandis. Iran's political allies in Iraq sent a request to the Iraqi parliament to end US troops' presence in the country. They passed the resolution, which was supposed to end foreign troops' presence. Later on, Mahdi was replaced by US backed candidate Mustafa al Kadhimi, who was appointed by Haidar al Abadi as the head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. It is claimed that Iran accepted his nomination on the condition that some of the financial assets of Iran abroad would be released by other countries.

3.1 Iran's political allies in Iraq

The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) was established in Tehran on 17th November 1982. The formation of SCIRI was the first step taken by Iran to coordinate these exiled Iraqis in Iran after 1980. The leader of SCIRI was Muhammed Baqir al Hakim, and the party ideology was to embrace Khomeini's concept of the wilayat-e Faqih and help Iran to export the revolution to Iraq (Marr & Marashi, 2017:385). Al Hakim was a well known Iraqi Shiite cleric from the 1950s in Iraq. In the 1970s, he was imprisoned several times and emerged as a prominent Najafi cleric, making peace with the organisers of the February 1977 uprising. In the wake of this, he was convicted and received a life sentence. He was given amnesty in 1979, and managed to flee the country to Syria shortly after his patron, al Sadr, was executed. He went to Iran after a brief stay of a few months in Syria (Fallah, 2003:238).

Iran formed the armed wing of SCIRI – the Badr Brigade – in the same year. SCIRI was established to assist Iraqi militants, deportees, and refugees in Iran (Fallah, 2003:35). SCIRI's formation signaled an Iranian-encouraged shift in policy and tactics. The creation of an Islamic state was adopted by the Iraqi Islamic groups for the first time in their history as their immediate political objective and the only way to create an Islamic society (TWI:2018). SCIRI's bases were in Iran until the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, and later on they moved to Iraq. SCIRI joined the new Iraqi government and renamed itself the Islamic Supreme

Council of Iraq (ISCI), to give the impression that it had less support from Iran in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq (Nader, 2015:8). In August 2003, an Al Qaeda car bomb in Najaf killed the leader of ISCI, Muhammed al Hakim. After that, his brother Abdulaziz al Hakim led the party until his death in 2009. Later on, Ammar al Hakim, his nephew, led the party, and he left ISCI in 2017. ISCI won 30 seats out of a total of 275 in the first post-Saddam Iraqi elections in 2005. The ISCI votes decreased significantly in the 2010 elections to only eight seats. In the May 2014 elections the party won 29 seats, but after the departure of Al Hakim from the ISCI, the party held only three seats in the 2018 elections. Ammar al Hakim, the patriarch of the party, formed the Tayyar Hikma al Watani (The National Wisdom Movement) just before the election. The platform of this new party was focused on establishing a civil state, upholding nationalist positions in Iraq, and detaching itself from the pro-Iranian, friendly "old guard" of the ISCI, Badr, who was frequently accused of corruption. The party of Hakim won 19 seats and has since allied itself with Sadr's Camp (Symth, 2018). Currently Humam Hamoudi is leader of ISCI. ISCI is under the umbrella of the Fatah Alliance, which is viewed as the closest Iran-allied bloc in the Iraqi parliament.

The Badr Organisation: The Badr Organisation is the longest-running body with ties to Iran among Iraqi Shiite groups. It was formed as an armed wing of SCIRI, and their fighters sided with the Iranian army and IRGC in the Iran-Iraq War. On the front lines of that battle, the current leader of Badr, Hadi al Amiri, worked with Qassem Soleimani. Differences emerged within ISCI over time, and by 2010 ISCI and the Badr Organisation were operating as independent but allied political organisations. In the Iraqi government, the Badr organisation remains powerful. Former Prime Minister Haidar Abadi named Badr member Mohammed al Ghadban as Minister of the Interior, granting him authority over the police and intelligence services. Iran's first Iraqi proxy, Badr, played an important and leading role in the battle against IS. It claimed that Amiri joined the fight with about 15,000 fighters. Apart from political and military activities, the Badr Organisation has a religious education centre named The Islamic Centre, which is used to indoctrinate Khomeinist Velayet-i Faqih ideology among Iraqis. The centre is located in Baghdad and has branches in other Shiite towns (Nader, 2016:6-8). As part of the State of Law Coalition of Nouri Maliki, the Badr Organisation ran the 2014 elections, winning 22 seats in parliaments and control of the Interior Ministry. It assumed operational authority over the majority of PMF brigades in parallel with these formal forces, set up new militia units for Shiite ethnic minority groups in northern Iraq, and sent

fighters to Syria (Smyth, 2018). In the 2018 election, the Badr-led Fatah Alliance became the second largest party in the elections and secured 47 seats in parliament.

Muqtada al Sadr: He is leader of the Sadr Movement, and one of the strongest Iraqi nationalist Shiite politicians and religious leaders. Unlike many Iraqi Shiite politicians, Sadr, like many other of his family members, did not leave the country or escape from Saddam's regime repercussions. He did not go into exile in Iran like many other Shiites. Although he got assistance and support from Iran, he has very complicated relations with Tehran. He does not embrace Khomenist Islamic ideology, and his website explains that Sadr himself is a religious leader. He strongly rejected the US occupation of Iraq, just as the Sunnis did. After 2003, he formed Jaish al Mahdi (JAM) with the support of Iran and Lebanon Hezbollah. Although he tried to distance himself from Iran's influence, he moved to Qom and stayed there for many years (Eisenstadt, 2015). He increased his votes gradually and became the most important political figure in Iraq. The Sadr movement has launched mass anti-government protests in the capital of Iraq since 2015. The Sadr-led Sairoon won 54 seats in the last elections in 2018 and became the biggest party.

The Islamic Dawa Party (IDP): The Islamic Dawa Party's formative era stretched from 1958-59 to at least 1964, and opinions on the locations where the party was formed are contradictory. Some sources say that Dawa was founded in Najaf at the residence of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, at the place of Muhsin al-Hakim, at the house of an unnamed 'prominent mujtabut', or in Karbala. Another ambiguity is who exactly founded the party. There are differing arguments. The achievement was credited to Talib Rifa'i and Mahdi al-Hakim, although other leaders gave al-Sadr credit. Another reason for these contradictory accounts is that the IDP never held membership records or minutes of meetings; indeed, in the first two decades, it never published a declaration or political communiqué bearing its signature. This kind of organised intervention only began in the middle of 1979 (Fallah, 2003:98). The IDP, during the latter stages of its underground existence in Iraq, had the support of the Islamic Republic. Dawa entered the Iraqi political process after 2003, but the absence of an armed militia restricted its ability. In April 2006, the leader of the party, Nouri al-Maliki, was chosen as a compromise choice for Prime Minister by the more dominant ISCI and Sadrists (Mansour & Fallah, 2017:19). He had the full support of Iran in the 2010 elections and was nominated for a second term (Kenneth, 2011:8). Maliki ruled Iraq from 2010 to 2014, until the emergence of IS. He partially lost Iran's support in 2014, and following the 2014 elections he was replaced by another Dawa member, Haidar al Abadi, as

the new PM. Maliki shared a general link with the Shiite Islamist worldview of Tehran, but not its doctrine of clerical law (Eisenstadt, 2011:3). Maliki stepped down in 2014 after strong rejection of Sunnis, Kurds and some Shiite political figures and the Obama administration. Although he was the winner of 2014 elections, he insisted on a third term, but later on accepted being replaced by Abadi. The IDP joined the December 2005 elections under the United Iraqi Alliance, which brought all of the Iran-linked parties together in one front. The IDP had 13 seats in 2005 and increased that number to 89 seats in 2010 elections. The Maliki-led IDP became the first coalition in the 2014 elections, winning 92 seats while the IDP holds 25 seats in the current parliament.

The Asaib Ahl Haq (AAH): Qais Khazali is the leader of the party, and he was a student of Mohammed Sadeq al Sadr. The AAH was formed as a militia group in 2006, and then participated in the 2014 elections as part of the Al Sadiqun Bloc. The party won only one seat at that time. The AAH won 15 seats in the May 2018 elections. The AAH has Khomeinist ideology (Wyer, 2012:6). The AAH's leader Khazali openly stated that they are backed by Iran, and that they are proud of this support (Saadoun, 2018).

Kurdish Political Parties: Iran has long-standing links with the major Kurdish parties in Iraq: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Masoud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). During the Iraq-Iran War, Kurdish Peshmerga guerrillas fought with Iran against the Iraqi forces. Both parties held logistical and political headquarters in Tehran until the 1991 uprising. Tehran supported the PUK during its 1994 to 1998 fight against the KDP. Iran has very close relations with the PUK, but it has had complicated relations with the KDP recently. Tehran consolidated its strong relations with the PUK after the September 2017 Independence Referendum, in which the PUK co-opted with Iran-backed Shiite groups against the KDP (Eisntendt, Knights & Ahmed, 2011:6).

3.2 Political Influence of Iran in Iraq from 2003-2011

Iran has assisted various Shiite political parties which have been loyal to it in Iraq since 2003, such as the ISCI, Badr, Sadr, IDP, Special Groups, and Kurdish parties. Though it has supported various groups, Iran's actions over the past years show that pro-Iran political parties and their attempts to grab power through the political process have given priority to Iran. After the removal of Saddam's regime, three Shiite parties, SCIRI, IDP and Sadr's movement,

dominated the political system in Baghdad and seized power until 2010 (Felter & Fishman, 2008:26).

Following the fall of the Baath Regime and the mass presence of US troops in Iraq, Iran, instead of countering the US threat, politically cooperated with the US through Iraqi Shiite parties loyal to it. Iran thought that via democratic elections, it would place SCIRI and IDP into a newly formed government, and actually Tehran became successful by implementing this strategy. It is true that Iran officially rejected the US occupation of Iraq, but it accepted the opportunity to cooperate with Washington for the sake of placing its allies at the centre of the new political system of the country and seizing power in Baghdad. According to this strategy, even some Iran-linked parties reframed themselves in order to be viewed as less-dependent on Iran. The Badr Corps attempted to deemphasise its military nature by calling itself the Badr Organisation and openly focussing on social and political outreach. Even though SCIRI was a well-organised political machine, the Sadrist movement had numerous political advantages over its rival, including strong opposition to the US occupation in Iraq, a nationalist forum, and a reputation for being independent of Iran, which helped the party win popularity among Iraqis. Many Iraqis despised the time SCIRI and Dawa exiles spent outside of Iraq, yet others were captivated by Sadr's anti-American rhetoric or remained loyal to Sadr's family tradition. On 7th April 2003, while the US soldiers were on the outskirts of Baghdad, Kadhem al-Husseini al-Haeri, a top Iranian cleric with a direct connection to the IRGC, nominated al-Sadr as his deputy in Iraq. The burgeoning relationship of Al Haeri with al Sadr provided Iran with a way to control the most populist, nationalist and militant Shiite leader in Iraq. Al Haeri asked Iraqi Shiites to fill the power vacuum in Iraq's local authority one day after electing his representative, Moqtada al Sadr. al Sadr began to take control of key administration offices immediately, especially in the popular slum of Baghdad that came to be called Sadr City. al Sadr was invited to Tehran for the first time one month after he was chosen by Al Haeri (Felter & Fishman, 2008:30).

A car bomb struck a crowd in Najaf on August 29th 2003, killing more than 100 people, including SCIRI's long-time religious and political leader, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al Hakim. His removal meant that SCIRI was at least temporarily undirected. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamanei, declared three days of mourning, and blamed the attack on the US. It was revealed that the suicide bomber who killed al Hakim was Tawhid wa Jihad (Felter & Fishman, 2008:30).

By the spring of 2004, when al Sadr was waging a violent insurgency around Najaf and Karbala, Iran had reportedly given him up to 80 million dollars, and camps had been built up along the Iraq-Iran border to provide JAM members with basic military training. Maybe most notably, Iran had accomplished these goals while SCIRI and Badr retained their status as stability powers with the US. Both SCIRI and the IDP have been agents of peace in Iraq from the US viewpoint, at least in contrast to al Sadr. Both parties have cooperated with the US, despite their political ties to Iran, and have largely endorsed the US plan for Iraqi elections (Felter & Fishman, 2008:30).

Iran supported all Shiite political parties to participate in elections on one front in the January and December 2005 elections. As a result of Tehran's efforts, ISCI, the Badr Movement, the Dawa and Sadrist Movements, the Islamic Fadhila Group, and other small Iraqi Shiite groups, with varied amounts of Iranian support, joined the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a united Shiite list that campaigned in the parliamentary elections (Eisenstadt & Knights, 2011:30). After the January 30th 2005 General Assembly polls, the decision by SCIRI and the IDP to avoid violent conflict with the US paid off. Of the 275 members of the General Assembly, the two parties won large contingents, and Ibrahim al Jafaari, an IDP member, was sworn in as PM. Sadr's new political party, on the other hand, had only won 23 seats, while the party had some cabinet-level positions assured (Eisenstadt & Knights, 2011:36). Given early indications of Iranian lethal aid to Iraqi militias, the most significant changes in 2005 were on the political front. The draft Iraqi constitution was intended to be finalised by mid-August and submitted for a vote in October, following the January 2005 elections that placed SCIRI and Dawa in central government positions. The Unified Iraqi Alliance, originally a cooperation of SCIRI and Dawa, dominated the Constitutional drafting committee (Eisenstadt & Knights, 2011:40). The Constitution of Iraq was ratified on October 15th 2005. The Iraqi constitution drafting process was not motivated by Iran, but its aims were largely served by the result. A decentralised, federal Iraq in the future will be less capable of opposing Iran and easier to weaken from the inside. Just as significant, much of the interests of Iran in Iraq are in the south, home to the majority of the Shiite population of Iraq. Ultimately, Iran was given a new venue by the Iraqi constitution to control the parts of Iraq that it cherished most (Eisenstadt & Knights, 2011:41). After Ibrahim al Jafaari, another Dawa member, in April 2006, ISCI, the Sadr Movement and the IDP chose Nouri al Maliki as a compromise candidate for Prime Minister. Maliki visited Iran four times between 2006 and 2009 (Kenneth, 2011:8).

The leaders of SCIRI took a series of symbolic steps in May 2007 against the impression that it was related to Iran. ISCI renamed itself by dropping the word "revolution", connoting the Khomeinist rebellion and ideology. Instead of Khamenei, the party accepted Sistani as a religious guide (Felter & Fishman, 2011:47).

Iraqi Shiite parties were fractured due to ideological differences and self-interest. Tehran was aware of this split, and anticipated the negative effects of the split in the Iraqi elections. Thus, it urged the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) to recover and reform itself for the parliamentary elections in March 2010. Nevertheless, the IDP leader and PM Maliki declared his own alliance, named the State of Law Alliance (SLA). Other Shiites formed the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). The SLA won more votes than the INA. Iraqqiyah, a more liberal and nationalist and anti-Iran list, led by former PM Ayad Allawi, gained a plurality of seats in the March 7th 2010 national elections (91-325). Iran's post-election policy was focused on preventing the formation of a government by Allawi. In order to prevent Allawi, Iran invited all Shiite parties to meet in Tehran. The Iran-backed Shiite cleric Kadhim al-Haeri released a fatwa during the election campaign, pushing Sadr and his followers to support Iran's candidate Maliki for a second term. Al Haeri claimed that siding with the anti-Iran politician Allawi would put the Shiite political gains at risk (Mansour, 2017:6). The idea of a second Maliki Premiership was secretly presented by Tehran in August 2010, even though it had not been its preferred option before. Remarkably, this proposal was dismissed by Iran's long-standing ally ISCI, at one point suggesting that it might also back a bloc led by Iraqqiyah. Tehran convinced Sadr and ISCI to support Maliki for a second term. Maliki finally formed the new government, and he became PM for a second time. The Kurds – the KDP and the PUK – were also convinced to support Maliki in return for some promises made in relation to solving the problem of disputed areas between Erbil and Baghdad (Eisntandt, Knight & Ahmed, 2011:4). Iranian influence was seen as a crucial element in the success of Maliki against Allawi (PBS:2014). By supporting and advising its chosen candidates, Iran allegedly attempted to manipulate the results of the parliamentary elections and used its leverage to nominate the candidates for PM who were loyal to Iran. The IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani allegedly played a major role in the negotiations to establish the government in 2005. However, Iran unsuccessfully urged ISCI, Dawa and the Sadrist to run in a single bloc for the 2010 election (Eisenstadt, 2015:4).

3.3 Iran political influence in Iraq from 2011-2020

3.3.1 Iran's influence during PM Maliki's period (2010-2014)

In December 2011, US troops withdrew from and ended their military presence after eight years of occupation, which had begun in March 2003. They pulled out all forces according to the Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) between Baghdad and Washington, which was signed in 2008 (Eisenstadt, 2015:4). While US troops withdrew from Iraq, Syrian people revolted against Syria's Regime President Bashar al Assad in 2011 as a part of the Arab Spring protests. Following the US occupation of Iraq and until 2011, Iraqi and Syrian relations were at an all-time low. The Iraqi government accused Syria of working to undermine the stability of post-Saddam Iraq by providing easy access for Al Qaeda to enter Iraq and support the Sunni insurgency (Sakai & Maflee, 2020: 121). According to Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs, Hossain Amir Abdollahian, the IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Suleimani played an important role in convincing the Iraqi government of how important it was to protect Syria. After Suleimani's attempts, Baghdad shifted its policy towards Syria (Abdollahian, 2020:138). The Syrian uprising led to a shift in the relationship to the beginning of fresh rapprochement in Iraqi-Syrian relations. The former Iraqi PM Nouri al-Maliki changed his position to support the Syria regime, partly because of his sectarian regional views, as allegedly Assad was combating Sunni jihadists. The Iraqi government gave moral support and turned a blind eye towards Iraqi Shiite fighters going into Syria, as well as Iranian flights in Iraqi airspace that purportedly consisted of military equipment (Gulmohammed, 2021:144).

Maliki's Shiite-led government, from 2010 until 2014, changed the Iraqi Security Forces into Maliki's personal Shiite security guard, from 55 percent to 95 percent of the Iraq Security Forces. Iraqi Shiite empowerment has led to great Iranian influence, but it has also posed a strong and potentially long-lasting challenge to the interests of Iran (Nader, 2016:9). During this period, Sunnis were marginalised and oppressed by Maliki's sectarian and authoritarian policy. The first step involved a Sunni politician and the Iraqi Vice President Tareq al Hashimi, who was against Iran's meddling in Iraqi affairs, and his arrest warrant had been

issued by the Iraqi administration. He was linked to terrorism and forced to flee the country in 2011. Maliki requested from parliament a vote of no confidence in the Sunni politician Saleh al Mutlaq, who served as the PM's deputy. Both Sunni politicians were against Iran's influence in Iraq and against the decision to withdraw US forces from Iraq in 2011 (Reuters, 2011). Maliki detained the bodyguards of another senior Sunni figure, the former Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, again on terrorism charges in December 2012. The goal of the moves against al-Hashemi and al-Issawi was to weaken the leadership of the Sunnis and help strengthen Maliki's own hold on power (Al-Khoei, 2016). The arrests caused distress among the Sunni communities of Iraq, which felt directly under attack. In many Sunni-dominated towns, protestors gathered en masse and accused Maliki and the Iraqi government of marginalisation and discrimination. Protesters burned the Iranian flag opposing the backdrop of an increasingly violent and sectarian war in neighbouring Syria to denounce the power of Tehran (Al-Khoei, 2016). The US-backed Sunni forces, which were called Sahwa and were formed in 2008, and included 30 tribes and an estimated 95,000 fighters, were dissolved by Maliki's government in 2012. Instead, Maliki appointed Shiite leaders to key security posts across the predominantly Sunni areas (GPPI, 2017). Protests swelled across Iraq's Sunni areas in late 2012, fuelled by legitimate public rage. The security situation in Iraq worsened further in April 2013, following a series of separate clashes between Iraqi government forces and demonstrators, armed groups and jihadists, leaving hundreds dead (Lynch, 2014). IS, meanwhile, tried to take advantage of the political instability in Iraq and the Syrian war by instrumentalising the resentful Sunni community, finding a ground for its aims.

Apart from Maliki's sectarian policy and the marginalisation of Sunnis, he acted against US wills as well. The US Treasury Department designated Ali Musa Daqduq, a top Hezbollah commander responsible for many operations against Coalition Forces in Iraq, on January 20th 2007. Despite an official US request to deliver him to the US due to charges brought against him by a US military tribunal, Daqduq was released from Iraqi prison and returned to Lebanon in November 2012. Following the US withdrawal, Maliki opened Iraqi airspace to Iran for transporting logistic military needs to Syria, which was in the middle of a civil war in 2012 (PBS, 2014). These episodes seem to indicate that the government of Maliki was gradually falling under the influence of its Iranian patrons (Matthew, 2012).

3.3.2 The Rise of IS in Iraq

While IS was gaining popularity and political instability was deepening, Iraqis went to election in May 2014. Shortly after the elections, IS took control of the second biggest city of Mosul on 10th June 2014, and later on controlled one third of all Iraqi soil. While most of the Sunni areas were under IS occupation, Maliki was insisting on staying in office for a third time. The two-term Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and his coalition with the SLA performed well, winning 92 seats. The Shiite political parties who were against Maliki only won 60 seats. Maliki and his sectarian policy were refused by Kurds, Sunnis and Sadr, and they did not trust the promises he made and viewed him as the main source of instability in Iraq (Knight, 2014).

Grand Ayatollah Sistani, insisted on a national consensus, through his declarations and his deputies' speeches. He called for the nomination of a compromise candidate by Shiite political parties that he would be accepted not only by Shiites but by the Kurds and Sunnis as well. All political parties believed Sistani was referring to Maliki. Reports on the ground claimed that Sistani, through his office in Iran, had warned Iranians that he opposed Tehran's meddling in the political issues of Iraq (Mamouri, 2014). Interestingly, after Sistani's statements which were referring to Maliki, Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani visited Iraq with a delegation in mid-July 2014. It is claimed that Shamkhani was responsible in Iraqi politics for the Rouhani Administration. Although Soleimani strongly supported another Maliki term, from the Iran side, instead of Soleimani, this time Shamkhani had a role in the formation of the Baghdad government. The emergence of IS was pushing a wedge between the Obama administration and a large swathe of the political class in Iraq. As a condition for renewed American military support, President Obama pressed for the ousting of Prime Minister Maliki (NYT, 2019). When the Obama administration threw all its weight behind widespread calls for Maliki to step down in the summer of 2014, Iran was deeply suspicious, and although Washington did not press for any specific candidate to replace him, its rapid endorsement of Haidar Abadi's nomination nevertheless raised eyebrows in Tehran (Nadimi, 2014). Following the 2014 elections, Iran played a less influential role in the government formation process. At the urging of the US and, more significantly, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, his chosen candidate for Prime Minister, Nuri al Maliki, was replaced by Abadi. Admiral Ali Shamkhani, Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary, subsequently played a key role in the process of government formation (Morris, 2014).

3.3.3 Iran's influence in the era of US-backed PM Abadi

Abadi took office in September 2014, and after that he made his first trip to Iran and was welcomed by Iranian President Hasan Rouhani on 21st October 2014. During his visit, he said, "Choosing Iran as my first destination after taking office indicates the depth of ties." (Associated Press, 2014). It was clear that both the US and Iran supported Abadi. Iran's closest allies, the Badr Organisation, headed by Hadi al Amiri, had one of the most important ministries in the cabinet of Abadi, which was the Interior Ministry. A Badr member, Muhammed Ghadban, was appointed as Interior Minister. His appointment to this position helped Iran to sweep militias easily into the ISF (Kantzman, 2017:37).

It is claimed that Qassem Sulaimani, the kingmaker of Iran's Iraq policy, supported Maliki for a third term. However, because of Sistani's stance, the Kurds', Sunnis' and some Shiite political parties' rejection of his third term, the Obama administration's rejection of Maliki, and finally Shamkhani's key role and the emergence of IS, forced Sulaimani to stop supporting the ex-PM Maliki. Iran's and Abadi's relations got worse year by year due to Iran's increasing influence inside Iraq. Sistani urged Shiites to rise up and fight voluntarily after the IS took one third of Iraqi soil. The Iraqi Shiite militias formed the Popular Mobilisation Forces, consisting mostly of Iran-backed militias such as the Badr, the AAH and Ketaib Hezbollah, as a consequence of Sistani's call. The Iraqi army and the ISF's weaknesses led to an increase in the influence of the pro-Khomeinist Iraqi Shiite militias over the Abadi government. There was no option for Abadi but to rely on the paramilitary Shiite forces. After its formation, it is claimed that the number of PMF fighters reached 100,000, and on paper it received over 1 billion dollars from Iraq's state budget. According to a Reuters investigative report in 2015, US officers thought that the PMF had received funds from Iran as well (Reuters, 2015). Some members of a group of Qatari falcon hunters were abducted in the southern desert of Iraq in 2015. There were members of the royal family among the Qataris as well. The Qatari authorities, instead of calling on Baghdad for assistance, called on Iran and the pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite militias to release the hunters. The incident embarrassed Abadi's government, and indicated the weakness of the Iraqi central government against Iran's proxy militias inside the country. It is claimed that Ketaib Hezbollah was behind the abduction. Qatar sent 500 million euros to Baghdad for ransom in order to release the hunters. The Qataris were released very soon, but the money for ransom did not go to the Shiite militias, and instead went to the central bank of Iraq. The Iraqi government ordered the ransom money to be seized. In addition to seizing the ransom money, he supported an ambitious project to secure a highway from Baghdad to Amman, Jordan, which Iran opposed, for an American

company (Arango, 2017). During Maliki's tenure, Iranian leverage was such that Iran used Baghdad's airport without being subjected to restrictions or searches. The free-use protocol permitted Iranian military aid to be transferred to Baghdad to the Popular Mobilisation Forces and resumed flights to Damascus. A change took place in mid-August 2015, when al-Abadi ordered that Iranian planes be subjected to Iraqi laws. This was the result of the mild competition between Al-Abadi and the Iranian leverage (Gulmohammed, 2021:126).

3.3.4 Iran and Abadi's power conflict

Normally, according to Iraq's legal system, the Popular Mobilisation Forces, which mostly consist of Iraqi Shiite militias, are directly controlled and commanded by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Abadi was aware of Iranian influence and power inside the PMF. Thus, he tried to purge pro-Khamenei figures from the PMF. He appointed Faleh al-Fayadh to head the commission to do so, thus relegating Abu Mahdi Muhandis, a pro-Khamenei, to deputy head. Fayadh also enjoyed good relations with Iran and praised Suleimani and the Quds Force's role in Iraq. Abadi, despite this effort, could not ward off the impact of Iraqi Shiite leaders linked to Iran. Despite the PMF being under the control of Abadi, it is claimed that the Interior Ministry, which is controlled by the Iran-backed Badr Organisation, had the real power. Due to this Badr link, the influential pro-Khamenei actors in the Ministry of Interior carry more weight than the PMO. In addition, the dominance of the pro-Khamenei faction over the PMF means that Muhandis remained the most influential figure in the committee, despite Fayadh being its leader. Since the commission was largely dominated by the Muhandis and Ameri led Badr, they also emerged as the PMF coordinators of salary distribution. Abadi was unable to maintain leverage over the funding allocation (Mansour & Fallah, 2017:19). Therefore Abadi could not take the control of the PMF from the two Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite leaders, Muhandis and Ameri. In February, Abadi replaced Muhandis with the retired Iraqi general Muhsin al Kaabi in order to gain control of the PMF. Although Muhandis lost his official PMF job title, he remained a leading figure and had influence over resources (Mansour & Fallah, 2017:19). Although Abadi was trying to gain control of the PMF, he was keeping the power balance between Tehran and Washington. For instance, he joined the World Economic Forum at Davos in Switzerland in January 2015, where he said that Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi thanked Iran "without even asking for immediate payments" for its "prompt" weapons and ammunition deliveries. He reserved special praise for Qassem Soleimani, calling him one of Iraq's most powerful allies in the war against the Islamic State (Reuters, 2015).

3.3.5 May 2018 Assembly Elections

In December 2017, Abadi announced that the war with IS had ended and that all Iraqi soil had been liberated (BBC, 2017). Five months later, assembly elections were held in May 2018. Iraqi Shiite militia groups linked to Iran gained much more popularity after the victory against IS. Their military successes on the frontlines affected the election results.

Normally, Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups were not allowed to participate in any elections or politics. Technically, Abadi announced in Executive Order 91 in February 2016 that the PMF members could not engage in politics. However, over 500 militia members or militia-affiliated politicians, many with Iranian ties, registered to run for parliament (Garath & Mattison, 2018).

Contrary to the 2005 assembly elections, the Iraqi Shiites did not participate in the elections as one united front; instead, each party or coalition ran separately, as had happened in 2010 and 2014. Fatah, led by the Badr Organisation's Hadi Al Amiri, probably the oldest, largest, and most significant of Iran's ideologically, politically, and religiously subservient Iraqi Shiite parties, won 47 seats and became the second largest party in the election. The Fatah alliance consists mostly of groups modelled on the militia/party form that Hezbollah had used in Lebanon for a long time. The AAH, the fastest-rising party in a dominant alliance of Iranian-allied Iraqi parties, was among the winners in Iraq's May 12th parliamentary elections. The AAH secured 15, or almost 30 percent, of the alliance's overall seats, whilst there were 22 seats for the Badr, and two seats for the ISCI, which was once a major player in Shiite politics before the departure of its chief Ammar al Hakim (Smyth, 2018). The Sadr-led Sairoon Coalition held 54 seats and became the biggest party. The Nasr Alliance, led by Haidar al Abadi, retained a 42-member seat and became the third biggest party in the election. The former PM Nouri al Maliki's State of Law Alliance held 25 seats. Ammar al Hakim, one of ISCI's leading leaders who left the party in 2017 and launched his own less reliant Iranian National Wisdom Movement, won 19 seats. According to the May 2018 election results, among Iraqi Shiite political parties no one could reach the majority required to form a government, and the Shiite parties stayed fragmented rather than having a unified front. Sadr, who became the forerunner of the election, is viewed as an Iraqi nationalist, but at the same time has Iran's support and engagement. Before the elections, Sadr visited Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia, which is rarely seen among Iran-linked Iraqi Shiite politics. Sadr's tactics

and relations with other Gulf countries worried Iran. The former Iran Ambassador in Iraq and Quds Forces official Hassan Danaeifar, referring to Sadr's visit to Riyadh, explained that it was not clear yet whether Sadr had tried to decrease Iranian influence in Iraq and establish strong relations with the US and regional countries. According to him, Sadr's one or two trips cannot undermine Iranian influence or change the core principles of a movement (Entekhab, 2018). Danaeifar evaluated the 2018 elections in Iraq, and stated that the results were good for Iran. He highlighted that, compared to the 2014 election, the number of parliamentary seats won by pro-Iran Iraqi Shiite militias within the Fatah Alliance increased significantly in the 2018 election. He claimed that Iran had good relations with the Fatah Alliance and Maliki's SLA, and even that Sadr could join a coalition government (Majidiyar, 2018). In the aftermath of the sudden coalition agreement reached on 12th June between the Muqtada al-Sadr Sairoon Alliance and the pro-Iran Fatah Alliance, the allied parties seemed to be trying to minimise the reactions of the opposing parties, both within and outside of Iraq. The Fatah Alliance leader Karim al-Nuri denied on June 13th that his alliance faced US opposition, saying, "The new coalition is in line with the vision of Iran and the United States," in an official declaration aimed at convincing Washington that the new coalition would not follow a policy hostile to the US in Iraq, suggesting that the new government that would emerge from this coalition would do so. Since the Sairoon Alliance has 54 seats, Fatah Alliance 47 seats, Al-Wataniya Alliance 21 and the National Wisdom Movement 19, taking the total to 141 seats, this agreement has taken the coalition close to a majority capable of forming a government. A majority of 165 out of the 329 seats in parliament is required in order to form a government, meaning that the new coalition requires only 24 more seats to proceed. The new coalition has been seen as a win for Iran's policy in Iraq, as Iran will be able to maintain its control through the pro-Iran Fatah Alliance. This alliance is allied with the Sairoon Alliance, which shares the hostility of Iran against the US (Mamouri, 2018).

3.3.6 The power conflict of Iran and Abadi reached the peak

After an agreement with the pro-Iran Fatah Alliance, Sadr declared an alliance with Haidar al Abadi's Nasr Bloc, which is viewed as anti-Iran and close to Washington. During a June 23rd 2018 visit to Najaf, where he met with Sadr, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced an alliance between his al-Nasr Bloc and Sadr's Sairoon (Mamouri, 2018).

There had already been skirmishes between Abadi and the pro-Iran Iraqi Shiite political parties and paramilitary groups over the PMF for power control since 2015. When US President Donald Trump withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal in May 2018, he reimposed heavy sanctions on Iran in August 2018 (Ward, 2018). There were different implications for these US sanctions in Iraq. The Iran camp strongly opposed US sanctions, while Abadi took a different stance. Comparing other Shiite politicians, Abadi had a very clear stance over US sanctions on Iran, and he clearly stated in a press conference in August 2018 that Iraq would abide such sanctions for the sake of protecting Iraq's people interests (Al Jaffal, 2018).

In a statement on August 8th, the pro-Iran Iraqi Shiite militia AAH strongly rejected Abadi's stance or approach to US sanctions on Iran. The leader of the Fatah alliance, Hassan Salim, called on the Iraqi government to "repay Iran's favor", referring to Iran's assistance in expelling IS from Iraqi territory. In addition to AAH and Fatah, the IDP leader Maliki also criticised Abadi and said that Iraq should not abide by these sanctions (Mamouri, 2018). After Abadi's stance towards the US sanctions, criticisms came from inside Iran as well. The Iranian parliament member Mahmoud Sadeghi tweeted on August 9th 2018 reminding people of the Iraqi government's debt to Iran, which was around \$1.1 trillion, in reparations for the imposed war (Iran-Iraq War) under Article 6 of Resolution 598 (which ended the Iran-Iraq War). The Iranian government has postponed its demands for reparations for the imposed war. Given the limits imposed on Iraqis, Seyyed Hashem al-Mousavi, a spokesman for Kataib Hezbollah, accused Abadi of working with Iran's enemy (Al-Monitor, 2018).

On August 30th 2018, before Fayadh's term ended, Abadi fired the PMF chief Faleh al-Fayadh. Abadi decided to fire Fayadh because of his support for the Fatah Alliance, as a security official found this support to represent illegal political interference. On September 5th 2018, 11 pro-Iran PMU factions issued a statement opposing Abadi's attempt to form the largest bloc with the Sairoon Alliance headed by Muqtada al-Sadr. Iran's political allies in Iraq, clearly accused Abadi of working with the US and Saudi Arabia, and stated that they would not allow the formation of a government by these two countries (Hamdi, 2018). It is alleged that in Washington in 2018, the CIA, Saudi Arabian officials, the former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and current Iraqi PM Mustafa al Kadhimi debated the process of helping the candidacy of Abadi and battling any Iranian-backed candidates (Hearst, 2020).

A statement released by Sistani's office on September 10th, called for the appointment of a new Prime Minister who is willing and brave enough to run a nation afflicted by rampant corruption and a poor state structure. Sabah al-Saadi, a leader of the Sairoon Alliance, had previously declared the receipt of "an official communique from the Supreme Religious Authority rejecting the five candidates for the post of head of the next government". Saadi said that Sistani "refuses" to see Abadi, Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi al-Amiri, former head of the PMF, Faleh al-Fayadh, and Tarek Najm, a leader of the Sairoon Alliance, as the next Prime Minister (Mamouri, 2018).

3.3.7 Spread of anti Iran Protests in 2018

In the summer of 2018, due to not having enough electricity, heat or clean water for drinking, a wave of protests started in densely Shiite-populated Basra. On July 9th 2018, Abadi accused Iran of causing this shortage of electricity. On July 8th, the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity spokesman, Mohamed Fathi, announced that Iran had cut its supply of electricity to Iraq because of Baghdad's lack of funds. Iraq had been importing between 1,500 and 2,000 MW from Iran since 2005, in an effort to cover its domestic production deficit. Although the Iraqi government has yet to announce the value of the debt owed to Iran, an official at the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity, on condition of anonymity, disclosed to Al-Monitor that such debts amount to about \$1 billion. Adel Jerian, the Undersecretary of the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity, in a statement to Radio al-Mirbad on July 9th, referred to another reason behind the crisis. The debt that the ministry owes is not new, he said, and his ministry continues to pay its debt in installments. "The problem, however, arose because, following the new sanctions imposed on Iran, the debt repayment process was obstructed" after the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran, he said (Mamouri, 2018).

Protesters attacked PMF offices, setting fire to many government buildings including the Iranian consulate in Basra. Muhendis blamed Abadi's government for the crisis in Basra. He claimed that the government failed to answer the demands of the people. Muhendis' statement in September 2018 shed light on the deep division between the Iranian camp in Iraq and PM Abadi. Instead of Iran, Muhendis claimed that the US was the reason for instability in Basra. (Abu Zed, 2018). Muhendis also said that Washington told PMF officials, "If the mandate of the current Prime Minister is not renewed, we will burn Basra down." (Saadun, 2018).

The conflict between the US and Iran intensified in the oil rich port city of Basra in 2018. Pro-Iran Shiite militias threatened the US from time to time. Thus, Washington stated that they closed their consulate in Basra and withdrew their diplomats in September 2018. The decision to close the consulate came after the building was targeted by three mortars. The former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Soleimani's Qods Army of targeting the consulate. Pompeo claimed that Iran was behind the attacks in Basra (Hamdi, 2018).

The US Treasury expanded its attack on Hezbollah's financial network, punishing key members of Iraq's Lebanese militant party in November 2018. Under its Specially Named Global Terrorists Program, the Treasury blacklisted Shibl Muhsin' Ubayd Al-Zaydi, Yusuf Hashim, Adnan Hussein Kawtharani, and Muhammad 'Abd-Al-Hadi Farhat, who were claimed to have transferred money, acquired weapons and trained fighters for the group in Iraq. Among the four, Al-Zaydi was a central coordinator in Iraq, the Treasury said, between Hezbollah, Iran's blacklisted Revolutionary Guards, and their supporters. He was close to suspected Hezbollah financier Adham Tabaja, and had organised the smuggling of petroleum into Syria from Iran. According to the Treasury, he also supposedly sent Iraqi militias to Syria on behalf of IRGC-QF (AFP, 2018).

3.3.8 Iran-backed Mahdi took office

It is claimed that Sadr and the pro-Iran politician Ameri met in Lebanon in early September 2018 in order to form a government after the May elections. According to Al Monitor, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Soleimani also joined the meetings. After many rounds of talks between them, Sadr and Ameri agreed on Adel Abdul Mahdi as the Prime Ministerial candidate. The aim of the meeting in Lebanon was to prevent the US from ruling again. The Lebanese source who spoke to Al Monitor said that the key goal of the trio was to "prevent the United States from once again ruling Iraq" (Najmuddine, 2018).

It was a powerful Iranian general, Suleimani, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, who brokered the agreement that established Mahdi's government (Rubin, 2019). Later on, Abadi said that he believes Iran prevented him from being PM for a second time because he abided the US sanctions on Tehran. According to Abadi, Iran viewed him as a threat, and therefore supported another candidate (Al Arabiya, 2018).

The new Iraqi Shiite PM Mahdi was born in Baghdad, and before his departure from Iraq and exile in France, he was a Baath member. Later on, Mahdi joined the Iraq Communist Party,

and after the formation of the ISCI in Tehran, he became a member of this party. After the US occupation of Iraq, he came back and served as Finance Minister, Vice President and Oil Minister, and finally he was sworn in as the Iraqi PM on October 25th 2018 (Xinhua, 2018). Mahdi was accepted as the compromise candidate for the PM post, and was supported by Sadr, Ameri, and the two main Kurdish parties: the KDP and the PUK. He maintained good relations with other Iraqi Shiite politicians as well (Al-Jazeera, 2019). Before Mahdi's nomination for the role of PM, the Iran-backed Sunni politician Muhammed al Halbusi was elected as speaker of the Iraqi parliament on 15th September 2018 (Al-Jazeera, 2018). He was the candidate of the National Axis Alliance, the main Sunni bloc. This Sunni coalition is part of the Bina Alliance, which includes the Fatah and the State of Law Coalition of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, all considered to be allies of Iran. Two other prominent Sunni speaker candidates were defeated by Halbusi, winning 169 votes compared to 86 for former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obaidi, who is a member of the Abadi's Nasr Coalition. After becoming speaker of the parliament, Halbusi's speeches were about support for Iran. He condemned the US sanctions on Tehran, and called on his Iranian counterpart, Ali Larijani, to visit Baghdad (Mamouri, 2018).

After Mahdi took office, the PMF chief Faleh al-Fayadh returned to his duties after being fired by Abadi (Abu Zeed, 2018). Abadi's decision to suspend Fayadh from his post as president of the National Security Council and head of the PMF has been annulled by an Iraqi administrative court. Returning Fayadh to his post as head of the PMF and the National Security Council helped Iran maintain its interests in Iraq (Al-Monitor, 2018). In order to capture more funds, PMF officials have used their power over the new PM Mahdi. The Iraqi Parliament allocated a \$2.16 billion budget (a fifth higher than the budget in 2018) to the PMF (Nidawi, 2019).

On September 10th 2019, Muqtada al-Sadr appeared in a surprise video. In an assembly commemorating the third Shiite Imam, Hussein Ibn Ali, Sadr can be seen sitting between Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani. After the controversial declaration by Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis that the PMF was forming an air force unit, Sadr left Iraq at the beginning of Muharram. He tweeted, "Farewell my country," when he left Iraq. He said it was the end of the Iraqi state, in reaction to the announcement by Muhandis. Sadr's senior leader of the Sairoon Alliance, Sabal al-Saidi, said that Sadr had been doing a tough job dealing with the formation of a PMF air force, and had already managed to escape such a dangerous move. It

is claimed that Sadr was trying to persuade Iranians to replace PM Mahdi with a stronger candidate. Iranians were happy with Mahdi because he came to power with direct support of Tehran. Most of Baghdad's decisions during Mahdi's era were all in favor of Iran (Al-Monitor, 2019).

3.3.9 Anti-Iran protests and Mahdi's resignation in 2019

Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, the Deputy Commander of Iraq's Counterterrorism Bureau, was fired by the Prime Minister, stirring anger and resentment among Iraqis. The Iraqi government claimed that Saadi visited foreign countries' embassies frequently, which is not legal. Therefore, Mahdi transferred him to the Ministry of Defence. However, according to reports on the ground, there were other factors behind this transfer, which was directly related to Iran and the Iran-backed PMF, such as Saadi's widespread popularity that exceeded that of all leaders of the military and PMF. Another factor was that some Iraqis wanted Saadi to replace Abdul Mahdi as Prime Minister (Saadoun, 2019). On 2nd October 2019, the Iraqi youth organised mass protests through social media against the ruling elite, poverty, hegemony, and the influence of Iran. Normally, the Sadr movement or other opposition groups would organise, marches but this time the protests were self-generated. Although Prime Minister Mahdi condemned the demonstrators, Sadr and the Iraqi Shiite politician Ammar al-Hakim showed solidarity with the protesters' demands. Both blamed Mahdi's government for their failure to meet those demands. Sadr and Hakim were a strong and critical part of Mahdi's coalition government, but they were forming a strong opposition against Iran-backed Mahdi and other Iranian-allied Shiite parties. Several demonstrators held up pictures of Saadi during the marches. Saadi's dismissal created discontent in several political parties, including the Hakim-led National Wisdom Movement and the Sadrist Movement, and among Sunnis it raised concerns about Iranian interference in his dismissal, as he was independent of Iranian proxies in Iraq, whether in the Iraqi army or the PMF. After demonstrations, in a TV interview with the Dajlah channel, the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, said that if the US were to threaten Iran, Iran would attack the US in Iraq (Rudaw, 2019). This was seen by Iraqis as direct Iranian involvement in Iraqi matters. On the eve of intensifying conflict between the Iranian camp and anti-Iranian protestors and politicians, Sistani warned the IRGC-QF Commander Soleimani about his country's interference in Iraq's internal issues. According to Al Monitor, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's son Mohammad Reza al-Sistani warned

Soleimani in a meeting that if Iran were to continue to act with Iraq as it had done, Iraq's people would stand up (Al-Monitor, 2019). Protestors set the Iranian Najaf Consulate on fire on 27th November 2019. Demonstrators chanted slogans against Iran's influence in Iraq, such as "Victory to Iraq" and "Iran out" (DW, 2019). On November 28th 2019, Iran called on Iraq to take decisive action against the "aggressors" following an arson attack by protesters at its consulate in the holy city of Najaf, in a neighbouring country. Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Abbas Mousavi viewed protesters who attacked the Najaf consulate as agents, and demanded urgent and active action from Iraq's government. While there were heavy clashes between protesters and Iraqi Shiite militias and security forces, Sistani called on the Iraqi Parliament to review their options with regards to a new PM candidate. On November 29th 2019, Sistani's call for the removal of Iran-backed Mahdi and his government was accepted (Al-Jazeera, 2019). One day later, Mahdi submitted his resignation to the parliament. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), more than 600 protesters were killed during the protests (Amnesty, 2020).

3.3.10 IRGC- QF General Soleimani's assassination

The IRGC-QF Commander and one of the key policy makers of Iran, Qassem Soleimani, and the PMF Deputy Commander, Abu Mahdi Muhandis, were killed by a US drone attack on 3rd January 2020. Before assassination there were high tensions between Iran and the US over the soil of Iraq. The US accused the Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups of targeting US facilities in Iraq. In late December, a rocket attack in Kirkuk province caused the death of an American contractor. In response to that attack, US air forces struck Kataib Hezbollah military points in Iraq and Syria. On Dec 31st 2019, the tensions reached a new high level after the US Embassy in Baghdad was stormed by pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups. US President Donald Trump threatened Iran on Twitter, saying that those who took part in the siege of the embassy "will pay a big price" (Reuters, 2020). After Trump's threat, a US airstrike in January 2020 killed Sulaimani and Muhandis on their way to Baghdad International Airport. On January 8th, Iran responded by firing a set of ballistic missiles at US military bases in Erbil and Enbar (VOA, 2020). After the assassinations of Sulaimani and Muhandis, Iraq's parliament passed a bill calling on the government to end all foreign troops' presence in Iraq on 5th January 2020. The request was made by the pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite political bloc Fatah, led by Hadi Ameri. Ameri's request was supported by other Iraqi Shiite parties, but Kurds and Sunni lawmakers did not join the quorum. It is claimed that there were

not enough lawmakers in parliament for the quorum (France 24, 2020). US Defence Secretary Mark Esper told reporters on 7th January, following Iraq's parliament resolution, that there was no decision to leave Iraq (Reuters, 2020). On 9th January, Prime Minister Mahdi said that he had requested that Pompeo send a commission to Baghdad to prepare for the US troops' withdrawals. Following Mahdi's statement, Pompeo stressed that they were going to continue their mission in Iraq (Wong & Specia, 2020). It should be noted that Iraqi protesters who had launched an anti-Iran campaign since October 2019, celebrated Solaiman's death on the streets of Baghdad (France 24, 2020).

3.3.11 U.S backed Kazimi took office

Based on the support and recommendations of Sadr-headed Sairoon and Ameri-led Fatah blocs, the Iraqi President Barham Salih named Mohammed Tawfik Allawi as Prime Minister in February 2020. Kurds, Sunnis and some Shiite parties opposed Allawi's cabinet. They claimed that Allawi did not ask for their ideas about the cabinet. In an interview broadcast on al-Sharqiya TV, Sadr said that his candidate Allawi's cabinet had already ended (Al-Monitor, 2020).

After Allawi's failure to pass his cabinet in the Iraqi parliament, Iraq's President Salih appointed Adnan al Zurfi, former governor of Najaf, to be the next Prime Minister on 17th March 2020. Zurfi was the head of Abadi's "Nasr" bloc in parliament. Abadi was already viewed as a US ally in Iraq (The National News, 2020). After Zurfi's nomination, Esmail Ghaani, the head of the IRGC-QF and successor to the slain Iranian general Qassim Suleimani, made his first public visit to Iraq on 1st April 2020. According to media outlets it is claimed that the meeting was about uniting all fragmented Iraqi Shiite political parties. Ghaani suggested in the meetings that Iran and the IRGC do not want al-Zurfi to be the next Prime Minister (AP, 2020). Zurfi failed to get enough support from political parties, and resigned on 9th April. On the same day of Zurfi's resignation, the head of Iraq's National Intelligence Service Mustafa al-Kadhimi was nominated by Barham Salih (DW, 2020). The top leader of the pro-Iranian Kataib Hezbollah militia, Abu Ali al-Askari, strongly rejected the candidacy of Kadhimi, and stated that the decision was a "declaration of war on the Iraqi people". Kadhimi was blamed by pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite militias for Soleimani's assassination. Askari claimed that Kadhimi was involved in the assassination, and gave information to the US as the head of Iraq's intelligence Service. Iraqi Shiite Al-Kadhimi was an opposition journalist in exile during the Baath Regime. He was appointed Iraq's

Intelligence Chief by Abadi in 2016. Iran's Iraqi political allies describe Kadhimi as a US ally. Although Iraqi Shiite militias rejected his candidacy, he received approval for his cabinet from the Iraqi Parliament on 7th May 2020. Kadhimi is considered a pragmatist, since he has strong relations with the US, Saudi Arabia and Iran (Reuters, 2020).

After Kadhimi took office, he reinstated Abdul Wahab al Saadi, who was fired from his post by ex-PM Mahdi due to various factors related to Iran and the PMF. On 10th May 2020, Kadhimi said in a press conference, "We decided to return our brother and hero Abdul Wahab al-Saadi to the counter terrorism forces and promote him to the post of the president of the Counter-Terrorism Forces." (Rudaw, 2020).

According to a Middle East Eye special report, which is based on some Iraqi officials, Tehran agreed conditionally on Kadhimi's designation for Prime Minister. The report declares that Tehran decided to back Kadhimi in exchange for the unfreezing of some of its sanctioned properties in European countries. The report claims that the sudden U-turn had been clarified by a deal between Iran and the US. According to the official who was aware of the secret agreement, the US managed to appoint Kadhimi as PM, and Iran was able to get its assets (Hearst, 2020). After Kazimi took office, Esmail Ghaani, the head of the IRGC-QF, made his second visit to Iraq on June 4th 2020. Previously, IRGC-QF commanders had normally entered Iraq without visas. Ghaani obtained a visa from the Iraq Foreign Minister before his visit to Iraq. This happened due to the "insistence" of al-Kadhimi that all international military and political officials arrive in Iraq as part of formal delegations (Al-Arabia, 2020).

3.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, one of Iran's most important influential tools, "political influence", has been discussed. Iran's political strategy in Iraq is to unite Iraqi Shiites to form governments in Baghdad and, as a part of its national defense, prevent the Baghdad government from being a hostile capital. Iran was successful in uniting most of the Iraqi Shiite political groups in the 2005 general elections. This achievement gave more leverage to Tehran in order to control its neighbour. Iran-backed political parties played a great role in rewriting the Iraqi constitution, which worked in favour of Iran. However, Iran became unsuccessful in its efforts to unite all Shiite political parties to run in the elections together after 2010. The Shiite parties fragmented, and deep conflict between them emerged. At that point, Iran became a broker and arbitrator among the Shiite political parties, and tried to nominate Prime Ministers close to it. Following the defeat of IS in Iraq, the political influence of Iran in Iraq increased. Iran's

meddling in Iraqi internal affairs after 2018 caused the rise of anti-Iran sentiments, especially among Iraqi Shiites. Iraqi nationalism sentiments re-emerged among Iraqis, who viewed Iran's role negatively. Since 2018, Iranian political influence has faced challenges such as Kazimi's government, Al-Sadr, Sistani having similar objectives, and the continuation of the US military presence as a threat to Iran's national security.

Chapter IV

THE MILITARY INFLUENCE OF IRAN IN IRAQ

4. General Background

4.1 Iran's Revolution and Iraqi's exile in Iran

On 1st February 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini returned victoriously to Tehran, the capital of Iran, as the head of a successful revolution. The revolution that occurred in Tehran had political influence in the region. Iraq was one of the countries directly influenced politically by the Iranian Revolution (Marr & Al-Marasahi, 2017:343). Shiites in Iraq were largely divided into two sections when the Iranian Islamic Revolution occurred, which were led by Shiite cleric Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr and Ayatollah Muhammed Baqir al Hakim respectively. Before the Iraq-Iran War, which occurred between 1980 and 1988, the Shiite Islamist movement in Iraq was led by these two prominent clerics, and most of their followers supported the Islamic revolution in Iran. Iraqi President Saddam Hussain and the Baath Party were seriously concerned by the support of Shiite Islamist movements in Iraq for Khomeini's revolution, due to the possibility of a Khomeinist-style uprising that could also take place among its population. Therefore, the Baath Party began to suppress and crush Iraqi Shiites in an attempt to prevent such an Islamic revolution, and assassinated Ayatollah Baqir al Sadr in 1980. After that, Ayatollah al Hakim fled to Iran (Felter & Fishman, 2008:19).

After Sadr's execution and the suppression campaign against the Iraqi Shiites by the Baath Party in 1980, Iraq deported several Iraqis, who were of so called "Iranian origins", to Iran, and many Iraqi Shiites fled to Iran as well. It is alleged that the number of Iraqis who fled to Iran was around one million by the end of Iraq-Iran War (Marr & Al-Marashi, 2017,387).

When the war between Iraq and Iran started, al Hakim's supporters began to organise in Iraq and Iran. Iran started politically to organise Iraqi exiled Shiites and the military against the Baath Party. Their departure from Iraq gave the opportunity and ability to Iran to create a power dynamic inside Iraq. Layers of this dynamic were founded by the IRGC, which was responsible for other Shiites in the region including Iraq as well.

4.2 The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The IRGC was established as an ideological guardian of the Iranian revolution. The IRGC's responsibility is to protect Iran against any threats both inside or outside and it has links to non-state armed groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The IRGC serves directly as Iran's Supreme Leader, and has increased its capability of conventional war skills since the Iran-Iraq War. According to the Institute for Strategic Studies, the IRGC, which is now a regular, institutionalised army parallel to Iran's national army (Artesh), has about 125,000 troops under its command (Council of Foreign Relations, 2019). In April 2019, the US President Donald Trump designated the IRGC as a terrorist organisation.

4.2.1 IRGC's External Activities

The Iran-Iraq War was the first occasion on which the IRGC had to deploy outside of Iran, and following that, it started to support non-state armed groups in the region. The Quds Force (QF), which is responsible for the IRGC's external activities, had improved its relations with Shiite paramilitary armed groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Yemen and Palestine territories (Council of Foreign Relations, 2019).

The IRGC-QF was responsible for relations with the Iraqi Shiites living in Iran or Iraq in 1980, and it still remains the only security entity which continues this function. In this context, the IRGC-QF created a deep network with the Iraqi Shiites in an effort for them to rise up and help remove the Baath Party in Iraq between 1980 and 2003 (Uzun, 2018:179). The IRGC-QF had an opportunity in which it recruited and trained thousands of Iraqi refugees who had fled from the Iraqi Baath Party before the Iraq-Iran War. The Iraqi Shiites, with the help of the IRGC-QF, formed a political party named SCIRI and a military wing of the party called the Badr Brigade in 1982 (Felter & Fishman, 2008:19). Iran, through the formation of Badr, founded the first layer of its power dynamic outside Iraq.

4.2.2 IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani

Qassem Suleimani was born in March 1957 in the Kerman Province of Iran. He was Iran's top military commander in the region and in Iraq. He was the only person responsible for Iran's Iraq policy until his assassination (Congress Research Service, 2020). Having joined the IRGC at the very beginning of its foundation in 1979, Suleimani, Iran's most influential military commander in the Middle East, was IRGC-QF Commander from 1998 until the US assassinated him in January 2020 in Iraq's capital Baghdad (Congress Research Service,

2020). Suleimani had been directly responsible for Iran's foreign policy in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon since 1998, and he developed a very strong deep network with Shiite paramilitary groups in these countries. He was viewed by Iranians as a hero because of his success in expanding and exerting Iranian influence in Iraq and other several countries through the IRGC-QF. He was afforded publicity by the Iranian regime within the country as an able strategist who fought Iran's enemies on the front lines of regional conflicts. The Suleimani-led IRGC-QF was very active in the training, arming and funding of Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups since the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, and this made him become popular among Iraqi officials and the US government after 2003 (Council of Foreign Relations, 2019). The US General in Iraq, David Petraeus, received a message from Suleimani through the former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. The text message was saying that Soleimani himself was controlling Iran's Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan foreign policy (Filkins, 2013). The QF was accused in 2007 by the US President George W. Bush of providing roadside bombs to Iraqi Shiite militants to kill US forces. Suleimani's IRGC-QF was also accused by the Trump administration of killing 608 US troops in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 (Council of Foreign Relations, 2019).

4.3 Iran's first military proxy: The Badr Brigade

Iraqi refugees in Iran, supported by the IRGC-QF, firstly created Iran's Iraqi military proxy, named the Badr Brigade or Badr Organisation, in 1982. Badr, a military wing of SCIRI, was seeking to spread Iran's revolution to Iraq (Counter Extremism, 2020). Badr was mostly commanded by Hadi Farhan Abdullah al Ameri, known as Hadi Al-Ameri. According to one of the QF's founders and commanders, Major General Mohammed Ali Rahmani, the IRGC-QF assisted various armed groups such as the Badr Brigade in order to carry out operations inside Iraqi territories while Saddam was still in power (Rezai, 2018:114).

Hadi al Ameri is still the leader of the organisation. Born in the east of Iraq's Diyala province in 1954, Ameri married an Iranian woman and holds Iranian citizenship too (Karami, 2014). Amiri led Badr during the Iran-Iraq war, joined the IRGC, and conducted attacks inside Iraq. Badr's militias sided with Iranian soldiers against the Iraqi army for eight years. During this period of time, Badr grew into a strong militia group and used guerrilla war tactics against the Iraqi army. When the war between the two countries ended in 1988, militias of Badr could cross the Iraq border with the help of the IRGC-QF in 1991 to support the Shiite uprising in Basra. However, the Iraqi army, which had withdrawn its forces from Kuwait, easily crushed

the Shiite uprising, and the Iran-backed Badr became unsuccessful. Based in IRGC-QF's Ramadan Headquarters in Iran, Badr was active with its extensive and strong hidden network inside Iraq (Felter & Fishman, 2008:21). Four axes inside Iraq were formed by the Badr Corps in 1999 to organise attacks against Saddam's regime and the Iraq-backed Iranian opposition called Mujahideen Khalq Organisation (MKO), which was based in Iraq. The axes which were formed by Badr were in the north, central, south and capital of Iraq. Before the US occupation of Iraq and the toppling of the Saddam regime, it was estimated that there were about 10,000 to 15,000 Badr militias trained and armed by the IRGC-QF in Iran (Felter & Fishman, 2008:22).

According to the Saddam regime's intelligence reports, Iran gave the Badr Corps around 20 million dollars for their training, arming and conducting attacks inside Iraq per year up until 2001 (Felter & Fishman, 2008:23). Before the US occupation of Iraq and possible US attack on Iraq, Khamenei demanded the rebuilding and strength of the Badr Brigade in 2002. For this, the IRGC-QF provided 26 million dollars to the Badr Brigade (Rezai, 2018:116). After the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Badr Brigade, which had been based in Iran for 20 years and collaborated with the IRGC, returned to Iraq.

4.4 Iran's military strategy in the post-Saddam era

Iran viewed the US military presence in Iraq as a national security threat, as it feared that Iran could become the next US target in the region after Iraq. In a speech on Friday April 11th 2003, Khamenei said that the fall of Saddam was a gift from God. This is because Iran had fought for eight years to defeat Saddam, but the US did it within three weeks (Seliktar & Rezai, 2020:131). Therefore, Iran saw the US occupation of Iraq as both a threat and an opportunity. The opportunity of the occupation was that Iran could expand its regional power and become more of an influence over Baghdad, which was a hostile capital at one time. Following the removal of Saddam, Iran's policy in Iraq was to force the US-led Coalition Forces (CF) out of the country as soon as possible, because Iran was concerned that the CF would attack it in the future from the bases that the CF had created in Iraq. Instead of attacking Al Qaeda, which was also accepted as a national threat, Iran used its trained military proxy to attack the CF, in order to prevent any attack against itself, and in an attempt to prevent the CF from achieving its objectives in Iraq (Felter & Fishman, 2008:56). Before 2003 and the US occupation, Iran's military activities in Iraq were generally based on the Badr Corps, and its cadres were hidden underground. During this period, Iran's military strategy

was organised by Iraqi Shiites outside and inside, to undermine Saddam's Baath Regime (Eisenstadt & Knight, 2011:8). Iran had a golden opportunity, owing to the fall of the Saddam regime and the disbandment of the Iraqi army, to strengthen its influence over Iraq. Iran carried on arming, training and supporting Shiite militias and insurgents inside Iraq in order to deepen its impact within the country. Several Iraqis who had been underground anti-regime activists in Iraq during the 1970s and exiled to Iran during the 1980s became important Shiite political figures or commanders of Iran-backed armed groups in the post-2003 Iraq in the subsequent decade (Ahmed, Eisenstadt & Knight, 2011:8).

4.4.1 Deployment of the Badr militias after 20 years exile in Iran

Iran's first step to undermine US presence and to shape security and political development in Iraq through its hybrid-warfare strategy was the deployment of Badr militias, whose numbers were around 15,000, from Iran to Iraq. Badr militias, which had been trained and deployed in Iran for 20 years, penetrated Iraq from PUK-held areas in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq towards the Diyala provinces. Badr's political wing, SCIRI, joined the new Iraqi government and renamed itself as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), to give the impression that it had less support for Iran on the eve of the US occupation of Iraq (Nader, 2015:8).

As a part of its new policy in Iraq and integration into the Iraqi government, ISCI changed its name to the Badr Organisation in 2003. It asserted that ISCI was asked by US officials to disband the Badr Organisation. However, instead of disbanding Badr, ISCI renamed the group as the "Badr Organisation of Reconstruction and Development" in an attempt to seem less militant (Stanford, 2019:2). While ISCI took part in the Iraqi government and Badr's cadres obtained positions in the Iraqi army, the Iran-backed Badr integrated into the disbanded and reformed Iraqi army, police and security entities. Following the integration of Badr into the Iraqi security system, new Shiite proxy groups were organised by Iran to engage in violent activities in order to damage the CF in Iraq (Nader, 2015:9).

Sadr Movement: Having complicated relations with Iran, and being considered too independent-minded by the Iranian officials, Muqtada al-Sadr, who was in Iraq alongside his followers under Saddam's Baath Regime up until 2003, opposed the Badr leaders who had lived in exile since the 1980s (Nader, 2015:9). Along with Sunnis, Sadr was the only Iraqi Shiite camp that stood against the US occupation of Iraq. However, Sadr, in order to fill the security and political gap and force the US to get out of Iraq, formed the Jaish al Mahdi (the

Mahdi Army). The JAM militant group was established by Sadr with the help of Lebanon's Hezbollah to fight the CF in 2003. The JAM was provided with arms and given training by the IRGC-QF up until 2004, and it also engaged in violent activities such as theft, weapons trafficking, and extortion, in addition to Iran's help. Sadr's JAM, within a short time, consisted of around 15,000 fighters and was heavily involved in the sectarian war that broke out in 2006. The JAM was blamed by Sunnis for the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis in the neighbourhoods of Baghdad (Nader, 2015: 9). Sadr openly acknowledged their relationship with the Iran-backed Lebanon Hezbollah in 2007. He said that they had relations with Lebanon Hezbollah, exchanging ideas and debating the Shiites' situation in both countries. He also indicated that they were benefitting from Hezbollah's military tactics. Many weapons of the JAM in Sadr city, Basra and Amara, including Iranian made rockets, mortars and Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs), were seized by the CF. It is asserted that the main reason why Sadr's JAM selected the Hezbollah training instead of that of the IRGC-QF was the former's Arabic knowledge. Thousands of Badr and JAM militias were trained and armed by the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah following the US occupation of Iraq (Corderman & Jose, 2008:26).

Iran forms Special Groups from the JAM

It appears that Iran, due to various different reasons, was not sufficiently satisfied with either Badr or Sadr's JAM. For example, the Badr Organisation was adopted into the political system and Iraqi security entities. Therefore, it was not reliable as a pure military force to attack the CF in an effort to endanger US goals in Iraq, while Sadrists were also too independent and unmanageable to control. Accordingly, Iran decided to form new militia groups, and split from Sadr's JAM, taking direct control over them in 2006 (Nader, 2015:7). Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), or Hezbollah Brigade, AAH and the Sadrist's movements's Promised Day Brigade (PDB) were proxies which were formed in 2006 from the JAM.

Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH): KH is an Iraqi Shiite armed group which is directly backed by Iran. There is a contradiction about the date of formation of KH. It is claimed that KH was established in 2007, but some accounts say it was after just one year of the US occupation of Iraq, in 2004. The group was established by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed in a US air strike on 3rd January in 2020 in Baghdad. As one of the founders of the Badr Organisation in 1982, Muhandis worked closely with the IRGC-QF and Lebanon Hezbollah until the 1990s. Muhandis was a close advisor of Qassem Soleimani on Iran's military policy in Iraq. It is asserted that his family is still in Iran (Stanford, 2019:2). Muhandis opposed the idea of

cooperation with the US following the fall of Saddam, and also split from the Badr Organisation, according to different sources. It is also asserted that he refused to work with US forces under the Badr Organisation and resigned from the organisation in November 2002 (Eisenstadt, Knight & Ahmed, 2011:23).

The US sees KH as a “direct action” of the IRGC-QF in Iraq. Intelligence sources indicate that at the time of its formation, KH had around 3,000 fighters. Although the number of KH troops makes it appear to be a small paramilitary group, they are considered to be Iran’s most sensitive weaponry inside the country. The organisation seems to be involved solely in militant activities (Nader, 2015:11). From 2007 to 2011, KH used all of its effort to fight against the US troops in Iraq. Due to its violent activities and attacks on the US, Washington designated KH as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation in 2009 (Taleblu, 2018:7). Ali Abudi, the Hezbollah Brigade Representative in Iran, said in an interview to the Iranian Fars News Agency that KH has a branch in Qom city in Iran, and they believe in that Khomeinist Velayet-e Faqih is the right path for an Islamist country (Fars News, 2018).

Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH): AAH is one of the Iraqi Shiite militant groups directly controlled by Iran, and it split from Sadr’s JAM in 2006. It is alleged that Ali Musa Daqduq, a Lebanese Hezbollah operative, is responsible for training AAH’s fighters. Qais al Khazali, a student of Sadr’s father Mohammed Sadeq al Sadr, is the commander and leader of AAH. AAH, like KH, has a Khomeinist ideology (Wyer, 2012:6).

The CF detained the the leader of AHH Khazali and Daqduq in March 2007, but in December 2009, Khazali’s release was organised by the AAH in exchange for Peter Moore, a British computer consultant who had been taken hostage by the AAH with his four bodyguards in May 2007 (Wyer, 2012:6). As of its establishment, AAH has relied on Iranian funding, training and logistical support in return for the organisation acting as an Iranian proxy in Iraq . Shortly after its formation, AHH’s fighters took part in fighting next to Lebanese Hezbollah in the Israel-Lebanon War, in 2006. AHH was under Qasem Suleimani’s personal control, and has had close relations with Hezbollah since it was founded (Stanford, 2018). According to Iraqi local media, Abu Mustapha al Sheibani, IRGC-QF’s arms smuggler and logistician, provided AAH with lethal weapons between 2006 and 2007. Ismail Hafiz al Lami (Abdu Durra), a former Shi’a death-squad leader, had come back to Iraq from Iran in order to take part in the AAH militia in 2010 (Wyer, 2012:13).

The AAH alleged that they conducted more than 6,000 attacks on US forces from its formation in 2006 until the withdrawal of the CF from Iraq. Based on Iraqi intelligence officials' reports, AAH took 2 million dollars a month from Iran until 2011 (Wyer, 2012:13). The money coming from the Iranian government to AAH was transferred through the IRGC-QF. AAH's fighters were given training by the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah. Before being deployed in Iraq, AAH fighters are often sent to either Iran or to a Hezbollah training camp in Lebanon for a two-week training course (Eisenstadt, Knights & Ahmed, 2011:9).

Promised Day Brigade (PDB)

A new militant group named PDB was created in 2008 after the split of AAH from JAM. The PDB acted as Sadr's armed wing, instead of JAM (Eisenstadt, Knights & Ahmed, 2011:9). An intense competition has taken place between the AAH and Sadrists with regard to financial support, territory and legitimacy since the organisations split. Having fled a crackdown of the former Iraq Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and the Badrists, Sadr lived in Iran between 2008 and 2011 (Wyer, 2012:23).

When Sadr returned to Iraq in January 2011, he also excited the rising tensions by continuing to speak out against the AAH and other splinter militants following his return. Sadr had come back to Iran because of the rise in the number of death threats of AAH during that month. The clear enmity between AAH and the Sadrists points out Sadr's weakened state, and the evolving impact of AAH and their Iranian directors (Wyer, 2012:23). Muqtada al Sadr now ran the Peace Brigade, a militant organisation that appeared for the first time in June 2014, following the fall of Mosul to IS (Nader, 2016:8).

4.4.2 Iran's role in training of Iraqi Shiite militias

Iraqi Shiite militants were coordinated and trained by the IRGC-QF in Iran and Lebanon. The trainees were from densely Shiite populated Iraqi cities such as Najaf, Nasiriya, Kut, Amara, Basra, Diyala, and areas of Baghdad such as Sadr City (Felter & Fishman, 2008:56). According to a former general in the IRGC, Haj Reza, four camps were used inside Iran, in Ahvaz, Elam, Qom and Tehran, for the training of Iraqi Shiite fighters (Felter & Fishman, 2008:56). General Reza asserted that Iran at first provided JAM-style militants in 2003 with basic training, but after 2007 the high-level training began and then the Iranian-run training courses became increasingly sophisticated (Felter & Fishman, 2008:62). Besides the IRGC-QF, Iraqi Shiites were also actively trained by Lebanese Hezbollah in its camp in Lebanon

from the 1980s onwards, and Lebanese Hezbollah developed links with the Iraqi militant groups when Hezbollah personnel worked with the Islamic Dawa Party in order to attack the US embassy in Kuwait. Ali Daqduq, who was the coordinator of Lebanese Hezbollah for Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups after 2003, was allegedly paid up to 3 million dollars per month by the IRGC-QF to cover his operations in Iraq. However, some Shiite fighters were only trained in a Lebanese Hezbollah camp in Lebanon without getting any training in Iraq (Felter & Fishman, 2008:67).

4.4.3 Iranian Lethal Aid to Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups

Iran provided weapons and lethal aid to Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups after 2003 in order to target the CF on Iraqi soil. Iran considers the US existence in Iraq a national threat, and consequently Tehran's programme to support Iraqi militants is a result of realpolitik rather than its Islamist ideology (Felter & Fishman, 2008:73). US intelligence reports have indicated that the most remarkable signs of Iran's military aid to Iraqi Shiite militias is the highly lethal Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs). According to reports, EFP incidents have increased significantly in Iraq since they were first observed in 2004. In addition to EFPs, Iran provided Iraqi Shiite armed groups with rounded copper and steel Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Baath Regime intelligence service documents explain that the armed groups have used such kinds of lethal explosive materials inside Iraq since 2001. Iran gave IEDs to Badr Corps, who were launching different attacks on Saddam within Iraq before 2003. Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani was the most important EFP smuggler from Iran to Badr members since the 1990s. EFPs were the main weapon which Iran provided to its proxies after 2004 (Felter & Fishman, 2008:78).

According to Baath Regime documents which were seized by the US in 2003, Iran sent arms to Badr militias who were based in Baghdad and different provinces of Iraq on 11th July 2001. The shipment of Iranian arms was under the responsibility of Sheibani's network. The network frequently transferred the weapons from Iran to Badr and Sadr's JAM militias in different periods of time. The network team was trained in Lebanon, Baghdad's Sadr city, and Iran (Felter & Fishman, 2008:38).

In December 2006, US forces raided the home of Badr Corps Commander Hadi Ameri in Baghdad, and two senior IRGC-QF officers linked to assaults on American forces were detained. In January 2007, five additional Qod Force officers posing as diplomats were

detained in Erbil. Mahmoud Farhadi was the most powerful Iranian who was captured by US forces in Iraq. According to Baath Regime intelligence documents which were captured in 2003, Farhadi was identified as the director of a Qods Force camp on the Iran-Iraq border (Eisenstadt, Knights & Ahmed, 2011:49). On July 12th 2009, the US released detained Iranians, who were accused of transferring weapons to Iraqi Shiite militias, and returned them to Iran (CBS, 2009).

4.5 Iran's military strategy after 2011 in Iraq

Following the eight-year US invasion of Iraq, as part of the agreement between Washington and Baghdad, the Status of Forces Agreement, or Strategic Security Agreement, the US withdrew its troops from Iraq in December 2011. The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq changed the balance of power in favour of Iran, which shaped Iraq militarily and politically with the help of its proxies and political allied parties. The US invasion of Iraq, which lasted from 2003 until 2011, created room and an opportunity for Iran easily to influence and shape a new Iraq through the allied Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups which swept into the new Iraqi government. It should be noted that, according to the US President's Special Envoy for Iran Brian Hook, the IRGC-QF was responsible for killing 608 US troops in Iraq from 2003 through to 2011 (Associated Press, 2019). As part of the 2011 Arab Spring, Iraq's neighbour Syria witnessed firstly demonstrations and later on protests which turned into a long-continued war. For Tehran, Syria is important not just as a country but also as a route to support Lebanese Hezbollah being able to work with Palestinian militants as well. Therefore, Iran, which increased its military influence in Iraq after the fall of Saddam and the withdrawal of the US, benefited from Iraqi Shiite militias supporting the Assad regime in Syria's war, and this enabled it to secure a logistics route from Iran through Iraq-Syria and on to Lebanon.

4.5.1 Deployment of Iraqi paramilitary forces in Syria

After the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the mass protests which broke out in Syria, Iraqi Shiite militias, trained and armed by Iran, transferred to Syria in order to crack the anti-Assad uprising in early 2012. According to different studies, the number of Iraqi Shiite fighters in Syria was around 2,000 by 2013. Iraqi Shiite militias which were deployed to Syria by Iran consisted of five main groups, directly under Soleimani's control. These were: Qais al Khazali-led AAH, Ketaib Hezbollah (KH), Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada (KSS), Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (Lafa), and Kataib Imam al Ali (KIA). Reports indicated the presence of fighters

from the Ameri-led Badr Brigade and the Sadr-led Promised Day Brigade as well. Tehran played a key role in the formation and preservation of Iraqi Shiite militias in Syria (Knights, 2013:27). It is claimed that AAH and KH fighters were sent to Lebanon first in the autumn of 2011 and were then transferred to Syria to help the Assad regime. Iraqi Shiite fighters trained in Lebanon on how to move from insurgent tactics to the street fight in Syria. Iraqi paramilitary groups' numbers started to increase significantly in spring 2012, while their presence gradually became more significant. Fighters entered Syria from two directions: either by air from Baghdad to Damascus, or via the ground road from Iraq to Damascus. Their role was to protect Sayyeda Zainab's shrine in the capital of Syria, but Iraqi fighters deployed strategic compounds in the capital, such as the airport and protected residential areas which were being used by the Syrian regime's elite (Knights, 2013:28). By October 2015, the Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militia groups' presence became stronger in their support for the Assad regime. They actively participated in the civil war in Syria. In late 2014, new Iraqi Shiite groups were formed by Iran for Syria, and they were deployed to other parts of Syria, such as operational areas from the capital to Idlib (Smyth, 2015:2).

After the formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) due to the fall of Mosul into the hands of IS in 2014, all Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups, including the ones in Syria, joined the PMF. After the defeat of IS in Syria and Iraq, Iraqi Shiite militia groups were deployed to the other side of Iraq's Syria border. They are currently controlling the east side of the Euphrates River, south of Deir al Zor until al Bukamal. Iran heavily depends on Iraqi Shiite military groups for control of the Iraq-Syria border and towns close to these areas. Depending on the ethnicity of its recruits, the wages and delivery mechanisms involved vary. Iraqi fighters in Syria, for example, could earn about \$400 a month from the PMF, with the payment made by al-Mastercards. Other nationalities mostly withdrew their salaries from the banks in Iraq. According to reports on the ground, 100 foreign Shiite families settled in Syria's Mayadin town in 2018, and Iraqi Shia families settled in al-Bukamal as well. It is claimed that Iran is settling Iraqi Shiite families close to the Iraq-Syria border, mostly in densely Sunni-populated areas, in order to change the demography of the region (Al-Rifai, 2019).

On June 17th 2018, it is asserted that Iraqi Shiite fighters were targeted by an Israeli air strike in the east part of Syria and in the border area. The Syrian regime and Iraqi militias blamed the US for the unknown attack, but US officials claimed that Israel was behind the attack. On June 18th, the PMF directly accused the US of having carried out the deadly attack.

According to a US official, who spoke to Al-Hurra in June 2018, Israel was behind the attack, and Israel's aim was to block the road between Tehran and Beirut that the Iranians wanted to open (Abu Zeed, 2018).

It has been claimed that a strong presence of Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militias still exists. Iraqi paramilitary groups' main task is securing the Iranian logistics route from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon. However, it is claimed that those groups were involved in drug dealing as well. In the western part of Iraq, across the border from Syria's Deir al-Zour area, the road from Qaim to Rutba is dominated by the PMF, allegedly with a strong presence of Kata'ib Hezbollah (Abu Zeed, 2018).

For the Iraqi Shiite militias, controlling the Iraq-Syria border is an important matter due to its importance to the financial income and survival of the groups. It is unknown whether Iran continues to pay Iraqi Shiite fighters salaries or not, but as long as Iran remains under heavy US economic sanctions, matters involving control of the borders will remain crucial for financial reasons. It is worth noting that Iraqi fighters' presence in Syria violates Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution, and has been carried out without the permission of the Iraqi Parliament.

4.5.2 Iraqi Shiites groups deployed to Syria

Harakat Hezbollah Al-Nujaba (Nujaba): Nujaba was established in 2013 by AAH and KH as a joint organisation. Nujaba's main task was to send militants to Syria to fight alongside the Assad Regime. Akram al Kabi, the leader of Nujaba, has been one of the key leaders of AAH since its formation in 2006, and before that he was one of the top-ranking military commanders within the JAM (Stanford, 2018). The US Treasury Department, because of the threat to the stability of Iraq, put him on its list of terrorists in 2008 (US Treasury Statement, 2008). According to Reuters investigative reports, Al Kabi accepts that Iran and their movement are allies (Reuter Arabic). The main task of Nujaba is to create a logistics road for Tehran from Iraq to Syria and on to Lebanon. The Zainaba Shrine was protected by Nujaba in the South of Damascus in 2013 (Reuters, 2014). Nujaba fighters are deployed in Damascus, Aleppo and Idlib. Nujaba is the first Iraqi Shiite militia group to declare formally its participation in the conflict in the Aleppo region, and it was an early supplier of fighters to Syria. One of the Nujaba Commanders, Alaa al-Musawi, was killed in Aleppo in late July 2015 (Smyth, 2015). In an interview, Nujaba Spokesperson Hashim Musawi said that they are not taking any support from Iraq, the US, or Arab states except for Iran, and the movement lost around 500 men both in Syria and Iraq (Smyth, 2015).

Saraya Al-Khorasani Brigade (SK): SK was announced in 2013 in order to counter IS and other Jihadist groups in Syria. These armed groups operated in Syria at the beginning, but after the emergence of IS in Iraq, its militias returned to Iraq. SK, which is said to have been formed by the QF directly, was given funding, training and arms by Iran (O’Driscoll, 2017:23). According to the SK General Secretary Ali al-Yasiri, the armed group was formed by the IRGC-QF in 1995. Yasiri claimed that the founder of SK is Iranian Commander Hamid Tuqawi, who was killed in Iraq in 2014 by IS (Rudolf, 2018:23).

Kata’ib Sayyid Shuhada (KSS): KSS operates both in Iraq and in Syria. It is claimed that KSS was established in May 2013, but there are no clear records of the armed group. However, some sources claim that KH and the Badr Organisation formed KSS to send fighters to Syria. KH, the Badr Organisation and the IRGC are still KSS’s close allies, and it takes a large part of its funding from them. KSS appeared in Syria in May 2013, and its forces were deployed around the Zainaba Shrine in the south of Damascus (Stanford, 2016).

Liwa Abu Fadl Al-Abbas (LAFA): This armed group was formed and led by an Iraqi Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Qasim al-Tai, who was a follower of Sadr. Tai split away from Sadr and embraced the Iranian concept of velayet-e faqih. LAFA, like many other armed groups, was deployed around the Sayyeda Zainaba shrine in the south of Damascus. LAFA, which has close links to different Iraqi security forces, was one of the first armed groups deployed to Syria in 2013 (Smyth, 2013). LAFA, which organises the collection of Iraqi Shiite fighters, is supported by the IRGC-QF. Although LAFA has a small size, it had a strategic impact on Syria’s war course (Knights, 2013).

Kataib Al-Imam Ali (KIA): KIA was formed by Shebl al Zaidi just after the fall of Mosul in 2014. KIA’s leader Zaidi was an important figure in Sadr’s Jaish al Mahdi. During the US occupation of Iraq, he was detained and later released in 2010 by the Iraqi government. Zaidi was pictured with Qasem Soleimani in August 2014. The group’s fighters were deployed to the Sayyeda Zainab Shrine (Levitt & Smyth, 2015).

Badr Organization: Badr, led by Hadi Ameri, who had had close links with Iran since the 1980s, deployed two units to Syria. Following Badr’s deployment in Syria, Tehran provided heavy military equipment such as T-72 tanks and rocket launchers to the Badr units (Knights, 2019).

4.5.3 Iran’s Reaction Towards Emergence of IS in Iraq

The rise of IS, which is a Sunni fundamentalist group and has targeted Shiites in the Middle East, Iraq and Syria, was a big threat to Iran. IS is known for its cruelty against Shiites, possibly more so than any other Sunni jihadist groups. While Iran leads Shiites all around the world, it considers Sunni jihadist groups to be an obstacle in the Middle East and a direct threat to its revolution ideology and influence in the region. Consequently, having conducted attacks inside Iran, IS was Iran's biggest enemy in the region. When IS captured one-third of Iraq and almost reached the Iran-Iraq border, it also became a direct threat to Iran itself and Iran's interests in Iraq (Nader, 2015:1). After Saddam was ousted in 2003, the Iraqi central government, led by Shiites, started to ally with Iran. In addition to that, the two holiest Shiite sites in Najaf and Karbala were near IS-controlled areas in Iraq. Considering the above-mentioned facts, Iran mobilised loyal Iraqi Shiite armed groups and played a major role in the anti-IS front in Iraq (Nader, 2015:3).

4.5.3.1 Iran was the first country to send aid to Iraq

When Mosul fell and IS took control of one-third of Iraqi territories, Iran sent weapons and senior advisers within two days. When IS started to attack cities and took control of Sunni majority cities, the Iraqi government was waiting for direct support from two of its allies, Washington and Tehran. Although the US Forces had been withdrawn from Iraq since 2011, there was a risk of Baghdad falling into IS hands, where there was a US Embassy and other diplomatic missions had occurred in the summer of 2014. The first country to take action against IS in Iraq and save Baghdad and Erbil from falling into IS's hands was Iran. Iraq's former national security adviser Mowafak Rubaiye indicated in an interview that the IRGC-QF was the first country to come to Iraq's aid, and it was just two days after IS's emergence within the country (Nader, 2015:4).

The US didn't take any immediate action to save Baghdad and Erbil from IS, and unlike Iran, the Obama administration wanted to remove PM Nouri al Maliki, with whom they didn't have good relations, and form a new Iraqi government. The head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service, General Qassem Atta, stated in an interview that they officially wanted training and weapons from the US, which was an excuse for the US not giving help, as they wanted to wait until the new government. Atta pointed out that they did not have any other choice except Iran (Daraghi, Solomon, Bozorgmehr & Dyer, 2014:1-2).

Two days after the crisis, the IRGC-QF Commander Soleimani arrived in Baghdad with a group of military advisors to save Baghdad and Erbil. He made a visit to the former president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), Masoud Barzani, who warmly thanked Tehran for its military support, though he is known for his longtime scepticism over Iranian influence (Daraghi, Solomon, Bozorgmehr & Dyer, 2014:1-2). Helping the Iraqi government mobilise Shiites to protect the country and supporting Shiite regular forces were Mr. Soleimani's most significant moves. Furthermore, Iran happened to have caused the reemergence of the Shiite militias, which had been trained by Iran and fought US forces in the post-Saddam era. The former Iraqi PM Abadi, who was seen as anti-Iran, had before strongly accused Tehran of turning Iraq into a battle zone. However, after becoming PM and having a rare meeting with Sistani, Abadi went to Tehran and made his first foreign visits as Prime Minister. During his first visit to Iran as Iraqi PM, Haidar Abadi was told that "Iraq's security is Iran's security" (Daraghi, Solomon, Bozorgmehr & Dyer, 2014:7).

4.5.4 The formation of the PMF

On June 13th 2014, following the fall of Mosul into the hands of IS, Sistani issued a fatwa for the formation of the PMF, and for them to join the security forces in fighting IS. Subsequently, Iraqi Shiites created the Popular Mobilisation Organisation or Forces (PMO-PMF). An Iraqi Shiite, who had been in exile in Iran, and had been an active member of Badr from its foundation in 1982 until 2003 and was later the founder of KH, Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, became the PMF's key leader. As an adviser to Sulaimani, Muhandis's duties involved coordination between the Iranian government and Iraqi Shiite militias. The PMF, known also as al-Hash al-Shaabi in Arabic, served these sub-state forces to regroup under its umbrella (Mansour, 2017). Although the PMF's size is not totally certain, the group comprises more than 60,000 fighters. According to some estimations, its number of fighters ranges between 60,000 and 140,000. Furthermore, a PMF spokesman said in 2016 that the organisation has approximately 142,000 fighters (Fallah & Mansour, 2017).

4.5.4.1 The PMF and the pro-Khamenei Faction

The Iraqi Parliament officially accepted 110,000 fighters regarding budget-related requirements. The groups that make up the PMF have three distinct major parts, which are pro-Khamenei, pro-Sistani, and pro-Sadr (Mansour, 2017). Those that maintain deep ties with Iran are the most powerful groups in the PMF. Having been supported by Iran as reliable

military and political allies, they take advantage of many more Iranian supplies and funding compared to other groups within the PMF. The pro-Khamenei group has relatively small paramilitaries created by Iran, and they function as Tehran's proxies. These groups' leaders are openly proud of this alliance, showing religious allegiance to Khamenei rather than to Sistani of Najaf (Mansour, 2017). For example, among many others, SH, KH, and Kata'ib Abu Fadhl al-Abbas are part of these groups. They are actually known as arms belonging to Iran's IRGC. They serve Iranian interests in Syria, defending Iran's border areas. These factions also protect Iran's logistics corridor, which helps Iran to extend its influence in the region. These groups serve as a kind of border guard, a sort of Iranian insurance policy, against threats on its immediate border (Mansour, 2017). The pro-Khamenei factions inside the PMF's military resources all come from Tehran, and their cash and political legitimacy come from Baghdad. Iran has a coordinator role among the PMF leadership. However PMF leaders and particularly Muhandis have been criticised many times by Sistani. Sadr also called on the PMF to be dissolved following the defeat of IS (Mansour, 2017).

4.5.5 The Defeat of IS and The Growth of Iran-backed Iraqi Militias

Former Iraqi PM Haidar al Abadi announced at the end of 2017 that IS had been defeated in Iraq. There were three main military bodies in the war against IS in Iraq. The US backed-Iraqi Security Forces, Peshmerga, and the Iran-backed PMF.

Peshmerga Forces, as a result of the emergence of IS, were able to control disputed areas which were being used to control the area by the Iraqi Army. The emergence of IS led Erbil to expand its military influence in Kirkuk until October 2017. The Iraqi Army, with great military support from US-led coalition forces, was able to restructure itself and retake Mosul and other major cities from IS within three years. Apart from the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Army, Iran-backed Shiite Militias under the PMF umbrella were able to increase their military capabilities. They appeared in Sunni areas where they could not exist in the pre-IS period. As a result of the battle in Syria and the fight against IS in Iraq, the Iran-backed Shiite militias experienced military transformation. First, more Iran-backed armed groups were created, and each became bigger in size than in the pre-2011 period. They were legitimised and paid by the Baghdad government under the PMF Commission (Knights, 2019). For instance, while KH had 400 active fighters in Iraq in 2011, after the defeat of IS in 2017, the number of fighters reached up to 7,500. KH had 2,500 fighters deployed in Syria, adding up to a total of 10,000

fighters (Knights, 2019:2). Similarly AAH, which had been a tiny Sadrist splinter militia with 3,000 members in 2011, had around 10,000 fighters after the defeat of IS in Iraq. Kata'ib Imam Ali also became stronger like the other armed groups. It grew from a tiny Sadrist splinter group to an 8,000-strong PMF mega-brigade with deployments across Iraq. Kata'ib Jund al Imam had 5,000 fighters, Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada had 3,000, and the Brigade Saray al Khurasani also had 3,000. The small Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba group now boasted more than 1,500 fighters. The Badr Brigade had around 20,000 fighters before 2011, but after the defeat of IS they had 63,000 registered personnel. The IRGC and Lebanon Hezbollah trained and advised the Iraqi Shiite militias which had expanded in number after the defeat of IS, adopted medium and heavy weapons, and gained significant battlefield experience in Iraq and Syria (Knights, 2019:10). Besides having stronger military allies in Iraq after the defeat of IS in 2017, Tehran had access and almost full control of densely Sunni populated provinces and disputed regions between Baghdad and Erbil. Therefore, the rise of IS gave an opportunity to Iran to have more control not only in Shiite areas but also in Sunni and some Kurdish regions as well. Iranian-backed armed groups opened military headquarters in the areas in which they did not have any military presence previously, such as Mosul and Kirkuk.

4.5.6 Iran's role in forcing Kurds out of Kirkuk

After the fall of Mosul into the hands of IS and the collapse of the Iraqi Army, Peshmerga Forces started to take control of these areas, which were called disputed areas, including Kirkuk. The former IKR President Masoud Barzani was always sceptical about Iran's influence in Iraq. However, Masoud Barzani collaborated with the IRGC-QF when the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) capital Arbil faced serious assault from IS in September 2014. The IRGC Commander of the Guards Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh told Iran TV that Suleimani had played a major role in preventing the IS from approaching Arbil. Hajizadeh claimed that without Iran's help, IS would have taken Erbil (Rezaei, 2018:132). Although Barzani was thankful to Iran for their military support against IS, it is claimed that he opposed Iran's logistics pipeline passing through IKR territory (Rezaei, 2018:132).

Iran viewed the Barzani administration's presence in northern Iraq as a threat to its logistics pipeline, and wanted to eliminate the Kurdish presence in Kirkuk and other disputed areas.

When the KRG held its Independence Referendum on September 25th 2017, Iran used this as a pretext to force PM Abadi to take action against the Kurds in Iraq. Suleimani urged PM Abadi to respond forcefully. After issuing an ultimatum to the KRG, on October 16th, three weeks after the referendum, Iraqi forces, helped by the PMF, invaded the disputed area of Kirkuk (Rezaei, 2018:134). Masoud Barzani claimed that Iran and Lebanon Hezbollah played a major role in the operation against the Peshmerga in Kirkuk and other disputed areas in 2017. According to Barzani, Iraqi Shiite militias alongside the IRGC and Hezbollah militias launched a massive operation against the Kurds. IRGC-QF Kirkuk Commander Iqbal Pour orchestrated the operation. He underlined that after the massive operation and withdrawal of the Peshmerga from disputed areas, Iranian and Hezbollah officials even participated in Baghdad-Erbil technical military meetings in 2017 (Barzani, 2020:114). Besides Iran and Lebanon Hezbollah providing assistance to the PMF, it is claimed that Suleimani coordinated the withdrawal of the PUK's Peshmerga fighters. Since its foundation, the PUK had enjoyed good relations with the QF and was quite eager to prevent Barzani's independence project (Rezaei, 2018:135). After the Independence Referendum, the Kurds lost all disputed territories and withdrew their forces from the places they had fully controlled after the emergence of IS in June 2014. The territories from which Peshmerga withdrew were filled by either the Iraqi army or the PMF, which had close links with Iran (Husein, 2019:349).

4.5.6.1 Iran's military threat against the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

To deal with threats coming from the IKR's borders, Iran had four command and control systems. The northwestern sector was handled by the IRGC's Hamzeh Sayyed al-Shohada headquarters in Urmia, while the Najaf Ashraf headquarters in Kermanshah managed the western sector. Together, four corps are controlled, including the Special Provincial Corps of Beit al-Muqadda in Kurdistan; each corps has a division of two brigades. Iran, along with various intelligence services, tasked the IRGC headquarters and their Basij affiliates with creating an urban control and containment system in the Kurdish areas that would be second only to that seen in Tehran province. With its own Northwest and West Regional Command Headquarters, also located in Urmia and Kermanshah, the national army (Artesh) complemented these efforts. Artesh had different units on the Iraqi Kurdistan border, and those units were oriented toward any foreign threats (Farzin, 2017).

Apart from heavy military deployment on the IKR's border, Iran's military presence is strong in Kirkuk, Ninowa and Diyala provinces, which are the disputed areas between Erbil and

Baghdad. Following ISF and PMF operations against the Kurds on October 16th 2017, Iranian military influence increased significantly in these three provinces. For instance, the PMF Northern Axis, led by a Shiite Turkmen Abu Ridha Yilmaz al Najjar, had a strong presence in Kirkuk and Saladin province. Najjar was loyal to Abu Mahdi al Muhandis (Knights, 2019). Besides Yilmaz, another pro-Iran Shiite Turkmen Mohammed Mahdi al Bayati was also an important figure in Kirkuk. Badr also had significant influence in Kirkuk as well. Iran's first direct support was for Amiri's Badr in the province. The Turkmen Force, which is named the PMF 16th Brigade, and which depended on Badr but used to be controlled by Muhandis, now operated in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu. Following the strong existence of Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite groups in Kirkuk, this led Iran to increase its military influence in the region. For instance, IRGC-QF officials used Tal Ashtah airfield in Kirkuk as a headquarters for directing operations against the IKR. IRGC Kirkuk Commander Ali Iqbalpour met with Kurdish and Iraqi leaders to handover Kirkuk to federal forces in Tal Ashtah on October 16th 2017 (Knights, 2019:3). The Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran (KDP-I), which is a Kurdish opposition party based in the IKR, came under missile attack on 8th September 2018. The next day, the IRGC claimed responsibility, alleging that it had fired seven missiles at the KDP-I headquarters in Iraqi Kurdistan on the outskirts of Koysinjak. Fateh-110 missiles, with a range of 300 kilometers, were used by Iran in the attack. Tehran claimed that the missiles were launched from inside Iran in the province of Urmia, which is located in the west (Wahab, 2018). On the other hand, there were rumours that Iran's missile attack on KDP-I had been launched from Tal Ashtah airfield in Kirkuk, where it was used as a basement by pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite militias (Knights, 2019). There were already some reports from on the ground that Iran had transferred some ballistic missiles to Iraq in order to launch wide ranging attacks on their targets (Reuters, 2018). Iran had not launched missiles from Iran to Iraq since 2001, when it fired 44 and 77 Scud missiles at camps of the opposition group MKO. The KDP-I headquarters in Koysinjak was hit by Iran with Katyusha rockets in 1996. Iran's missile operation clearly indicated precise targeting, acute timing and accurate intelligence, which was a message to Erbil and Iran's opposition camp (Wahab, 2018).

After the KDP-I headquarters were hit by Iran in Arbil province, the IKR faced another military threat from pro-Iran Iraqi militias, which were located in Ninawa-Mosul province. On September 30th 2020, six rockets were launched from where the 30th Brigade of the PMF was stationed in Ninawa at Erbil International Airport, at which the US CF were deployed. The KRG's Directorate General of Counter Terrorism accused the 30th Brigade, which was

related to the pro-Iran Badr Organisation, of being responsible for the airport attack, but the PMF unit refuted the accusation (Rudaw, 2020). KDP official and former Iraqi Finance and Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said that the rocket attack on the airport in Erbil was organised by “the same group who are attacking the US embassy in Baghdad and its convoys” (DW, 2020).

4.5.7 Iran’s military policy after the post-IS period in Iraq

On March 8th 2018, Iraqi PM Abadi issued a decree about including all armed Shiite groups in the country’s security establishments. According to the decree, fighters would be given the same rights, ranks and salaries as officials of the Iraqi army under the Ministry of Defense. The decree of the PMF’s inclusion in Iraqi armed forces consolidated Iran’s influence inside the Iraqi military (Husein, 2019:350).

After the defeat of IS and the weakened Kurdish and Sunni positions in Iraq, Iran’s increasing military influence in Iraq became a threat to US troops inside the country. Iraqi Shiite leaders openly expressed the opinion that Iran’s IRGC-QF advisors existed in Iraq, and that this was done at their request. US relations with Iraq became more problematic due to the existence of Iranian commanders who threatened to attack US troops in Iraq. Abadi, in 2016, during a conference named “The World with Iraq to defeat DAESH”, stated that Iranian military advisers were present in Iraq due to Baghdad’s official request (Husein, 2019:350). Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the former Iraqi Foreign Minister, stressed in a press conference that Soleimani was supporting and advising Iraq in fighting IS at the request of the Iraqi government (Husein, 2019:349).

4.5.7.1 The Iranian missiles transferred to Iraq

In August 2018, Reuters published a report and claimed that, according to sources from Iran, Iraq and US officials, the Tehran administration had transferred ballistic missiles to Iraq. The officials claimed that Iran had started to send short-range missiles, which numbered around 10, to Iraq from early 2018, and had helped Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups to build their own missiles. According to a report, there are three factories making missiles in Iraq, operated by Iran. These factories developing missiles are located in al-Zafaraniyah, east of Baghdad, in Jurf al Sakhar, north of Karbala, and in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran trained Shiite militias on how to use the missiles (Reuters, 2018). It is worth noting that the Iranian missile transfer to Iraq was

not about defeating IS, because by the end of 2017 IS had lost almost all of its territories in Iraq. One month after the release of this report, the IRGC-QF attacked the KDP-I headquarters in Erbil province. However, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qasimi refused all claims about transferring ballistic missiles to Iraq. According to Al-Monitor's report, the history of producing short-range missiles in Iraq goes back to July 2014. It is claimed that KH and Badr were responsible for producing missiles, and that their factories were divided into three categories (Al-Monitor, 2018).

On May 14th 2019, two Saudi oil pumping stations were attacked by explosive drones. It is claimed that IRGC-QF was behind the attack, and that the explosive drones had been launched from Jurf al-Sakr, the KH base on the outskirts of Baghdad. When the incident happened, Mahdi's Iran-backed government acted as if nothing had happened, and all rumours were refuted (Knights, 2020). After the long-range explosive drone attack on Saudi Arabia by Iraq, concerns within Iraqi, US and Israeli intelligence were raised. According to Iraqi Shiite experts at the Washington Institute for Near and East Policy, Iran was supplying long-range rockets to KH, Badr and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nuajaba. These pro-Iran Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups used secured warehouses or bases in Diyala, Salahaddin, Baghdad, Karbala and Wasid provinces. Iranian missiles were imported through Diyala inside empty oil tankers (Orion & Knights, 2019). After the attack on the Saudi Arabian oil facilities, Israel conducted a series of air strikes on pro-Iran Iraqi Shiite groups' bases inside Iraq (Rubin & Bergman, 2019).

On December 4th 2019, US officials revealed that Iran had sent long-range missiles to Iraq in order to threaten regional countries and US interests in Iraq. The threat was increasing, American officials said, with these new ballistic missiles being secretly moved in. Iranian-backed militias had effectively seized control of a number of Iraqi highways, bridges, and transport facilities, easing the ability of Tehran to sneak missiles into the country, officials said. An arsenal of missiles outside its borders gave an advantage to the Iranian government, military and paramilitary in any standoff with the US and its regional allies. The range of short-range missiles is just over 600 km, which means that one launched from the outskirts of Baghdad could reach Jerusalem (Barnes & Schmitt). It is asserted that the IRGC-QF Commander of the Southern Iraqi Axis Brigadier General Ahmad Forouzandeh was coordinating the transfer of Iranian missiles to Iraq. In Iraq, Hamad Mohsen Mujabir (Abu Imam al Daraji) who is also PMF director of intelligence in Basra, was responsible for Iranian missiles being brought to Iraq (Knight, 2020).

4.5.7.2 The Iraqi Shiite fighter's role in the crackdown the anti-Iran protests

Iran's military influence increased significantly after the defeat of IS in late 2017. Then, pro-Iran Iraqi militia groups related to the PMF participated in the May 2018 elections. Political parties allied to Iran enjoyed victory in the elections, but they could not form a government without other Iraqi Shiite camps such as Sadr, al Hakim, or Allawi. However, the IRGC-QF leader Qassim Sulaimani, acting as a broker, convinced all Shiite parties to agree on Adel Abdul Mahdi, who was accepted as an independent candidate for the role of Prime Minister, although he was a close friend of Iran. Iran, after the military victory in 2017, gained political influence in Iraq through Mahdi's nomination. While Iran's influence in Iraq increased and reached a zenith point from late 2018 till the end of 2019, anti-Iran sentiments had also emerged.

On October 2nd 2019, youth protests were organised on social media to protest against corruption, demanding political reform and putting an end to Iran's increasing influence in the country (Al-Monitor, 2019). After the spread of demonstrations across densely Shiite populated Baghdad and in the south of Iraq, Iran's paramilitary groups launched a bloody attack against the protestors. KH, which is directly related to Iran, organised a crackdown on the uprising. Apart from KH, Badr, AAH, Nujaba and Kataib Sayyid Shuda also took part in suppressing the protests (Knight, 2020). One of the KH commanders, Abu Zainab al Lami, the head of the Central Security Division of PMF, with the help of two assistants, detained the protestors. Abu Imam Al Bahali, the head of the PMF Intelligence Directorate, with the help of IRGC-QF cyber-intelligence officials, collected lists of the names of civil activists and journalists who had played a leading role in the protests. KH took Baghdad's province, Badr was responsible for provinces in Basra, and AAH focused on Maysan and Dhi Qar. Iran and its allies' anticipation when handling the issue easily went wrong, and heavy clashes erupted between Sadr's followers, the protestors, and the tribal forces with them. Due to their involvement in the killing of protestors, the US imposed new sanctions on AAH's leader Qais Khazali and his brother Laith al Khazali. Sadr's criticism of Iran's allies increased. Eventually, as a result of the protests, the Iran-backed PM Mahdi resigned in November 2019 (Knights, 2020).

4.5.8 The Road to Sulaimani and Muhendis's assassination

After the victory against IS in Iraq, Tehran increased its efforts to undermine US political and military policy, with the help of its Iraqi Shiite allies in the country. Receiving support from Iran, Iraq Shiite paramilitary groups such as KH, AAH, Nujaba, Harakat Hezbollah and Badr began clearly demanding the withdrawal of US-led coalition soldiers from Iraq, using violent ways to reach their aims. For example, The Badr Organisation asked the American forces to completely withdraw from the country. The spokesman of the organisation, Karim Al-Nouri, said that after coordination between both sides, military troops should fully withdraw from Iraq. Nouri warned that if military troops continued to remain in Iraq, it would cause internal division in the country. After the formation of the new government in Iraq, in October 2018 the Iraqi government undoubtedly rejected US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's demand for the Iranian-backed paramilitary units, which had joined Iraqi forces in the fight against ISIS, to be disbanded. Tillerson stated that while the fight against IS was coming to a close, Iranian militias in Iraq should return to their country and Iraq should regain control. As an answer to Tillerson, the new PM Abadi pointed out that those forces were Iraqi and not Iranian (Husein, 2019:349).

Since Iran thinks that improving geographical connectivity has a significant importance for its wider policy, Iraq is also seen as an important geopolitical part in this matter, as it provides Iran with a road starting from its own borders and going through Iraq and Syria, until it reaches Lebanon, where Hezbollah exists, neighbouring the Golan Heights. As of the spring of 2017, there has been evidence that Iranians have made efforts to construct such a route to ensure the trafficking of militiamen transportations on the ground and military supplies to Syria and Lebanon using Iraqi land. This could also be considered as an alternative or a part of the air transportation route between Tehran and Damascus. In order to make sure of this route's safety, Iran has been using its proxies, such as Hezbollah, and has been trying not to use its own military forces to secure this road, letting local Shi'ite groups take on the responsibility to do so. It is considered that maintaining this land connection could be a part of Iran's larger and longer plan named the "Shi'ite Crescent". Jordan's King Abdullah is the one who introduced this term, warning the West of an emerging Iran-led "Shi'a Crescent", reaching across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Furthermore, following the first years of the civil war in Syria, Iranian leaders are said to have made extreme efforts to circulate their influence in the region using the "Shiite Crescent" concept (Husein, 2019:349).

After the defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria, US President Donald Trump visited the US military base located in west Iraq in December 2018 (White House Statement, 2018). At that time,

according to the Pentagon, the US had 5,000 troops in different military bases in Iraq (Associated Press, 2018). During his visit to Al Anbar Province, the US President stated that, apart from fighting against IS, they wanted to monitor Iranians' movements as well (BBC, 2018). Trump's clear statement on the monitoring of Iran's activities in Iraq has been accepted as the starting point of the conflict going on between the countries in Iraqi territories. A bill draft was prepared by the Iran-backed political parties in the parliament to expel the US troops from Iraq (Sowell, 2019). After pressure from the Shiite militias on the Iraqi government, Joey Hood, charge d'affaires at the US embassy in Baghdad, stated in February 2019 that US forces would leave the country if the government asked them to. However, the bill draft has not yet been submitted to parliament, and the US forces have not withdrawn from the country.

Following Trump's statement made in Anbar with regards to the monitoring of Iran causing increased tensions between the US and Iran in Iraq, in 2019 Israel launched several air strikes on PMF depots in Iraq, starting from July and going on until August (New York Times, 2019). According to a US Middle Eastern intelligence official, Israel launched bombs targeting Iran's close ally the PMF's four military bases. It is also alleged that depots were used as centres to deploy weapons from Iran to Syria. Abu Mahdi Muhandis, the former PMF deputy chief and Iran's first man in Iraq, blamed "American and Israel aircraft" for reiterative attacks on their depots (New York Times, 2019). On the other hand, although the Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu stated that "Iran does not have immunity anywhere and they will act where it is necessary", Israel did not accept responsibility for the attacks carried out against the PMF depots (New York Times, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the Israeli attacks on PMF depots made way for more deepened conflicts between the US and Iran in Iraq. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pointed out a clear and strong message during his visit to Baghdad on May 7th 2019, saying that any attack against their troops by pro-Iranian militias in Iraq would be considered to be an Iranian attack. He underlined that they would not hesitate to attack Iranian interests in Iraq (Husein, 2019:350). It was indicated by the press reports and US officials in early December 2019 that Iran had provided missiles to the Iraqi Shiite militias in Iraq. Coinciding with this information, in mid-December, a series of indirect fire attacks were targeted at the Iraqi military facilities hosting the US forces (Congressional Research Service, 2020). On December 27th 2019, a US contractor was killed and four US service members and two Iraqi service members were wounded, when a military base was targeted by a rocket attack near Kirkuk in northern Iraq. After two days, retaliatory airstrikes were

launched by the US against Kata'ib Hezbollah bases in Iraq and Syria. KH leader Muhandis stated that they would show a very strong response against the US forces in Iraq (Congressional Research Service, 2020).

After the US airstrike against KH bases in Iraq and Syria, KH supporters and pro-Iran Iraqi militias surrounded and raided the US Embassy in Baghdad on December 31st 2019. The militiamen withdrew from the Embassy when their leaders announced that they had been granted promises by the acting PM Abdul Mahdi on the "serious work" regarding a vote in the parliament in order to expel the US forces from the country that had been a long-held aim pursued by Iran and its Iraqi allies (Congressional Research Service, 2020). In the wake of the US Embassy attack in Baghdad, US President Trump showed a very tough reaction, threatening the militias who had attacked the Embassy and saying that "they will pay a very big price". On January 3rd 2020, the IRGC-QF Commander Suleimani and the KH leader Muhandis were killed by a US military armed drone attack just as Suleimani was leaving Baghdad International Airport. Suleimani was the most significant Iranian military commander in Iraq and the Middle East. After the attack, the US Department of Defense accepted responsibility for the strike and stated that the killing of Suleimani was "decisive defensive action to protect US troops in Iraq, and the order was given by the President" (US State Department's Statement, 2020). According to the statement, Suleimani and his Quds Force were accused of killing many US soldiers. It is pointed out that Suleimani had been the coordinator of the attacks carried out against the US bases in Iraq in the last months of 2019, such as the Kirkuk base attack on 27th December, and the US Embassy attack on 31st December. The strike was described as "aiming to deter Iranian future attack plans".

After Suleimani's death, Iran's Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei appointed Esmail Ghaani as the new commander of the IRGC-QF, on the same day that the former commander was killed (Radio Farda, 2020). Compared to Suleimani, the new IRGC-QF leader Ghaani lacks charisma, familiarity to Iraqis, and Arabic knowledge, and has more experience in Iran's eastern part rather than the Middle East (Knights, 2020). Although Ghaani was appointed very swiftly to Suleimani's post, it appears that it has been very hard for Tehran to replace the position vacated by Muhandis, who was the top military Iran-allied commander in Iraq. Prior to his death, Muhandis had controlled the PMF's critical affairs and special weapons departments. It is alleged that Muhandis was dealing with a budget that was above 2.1 billion dollars. Having the support of Suleimani, he played a leading key role in Iran expanding its influence in Iraq (Knights, 2020).

4.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, Iran's military strategies and how its influence has increased have been gradually analysed. At the beginning of the US occupation of Iraq, Iran did not confront the CF, but it supported, trained and funded paramilitary groups in order to undermine the US's Iraq policy, in order to prevent them from achieving their goals. Iran formed strong Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups, which helped it to secure a logistics route from Iran to Lebanon. Those groups were not only used in Iraq, but were deployed to Syria by Iran in order to assist the Assad regime. The emergence of IS in Iraq led Iran to increase its military influence significantly. Tehran-linked militia groups became important and were the strongest units inside the PMF. They controlled the finances, administration and intelligence of the PMF. Following the military achievement against IS, they increased their position politically as well. Although Tehran-backed militia groups became stronger after the defeat of IS, Iran's strategy to force the US to withdraw its troops failed. Iran used paramilitary groups to conduct attacks against US interests in Iraq. As a consequence, Iran lost its top military commander Sulaimani.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I tried to explain how Iran exerted different influences in Iraq in order to keep Baghdad under its control and maintain it to be the first most influential foreign power in the country. There are thesis, research papers and short analysis pieces about Iran's role in Iraq. However, the time duration of these studies is very limited and most of them end before 2020. This thesis made a comprehensive evaluation about Iran's role in Iraq from different aspects like religious, economy, political and military until 2020. According to the thesis findings, Iran's leverage and influencer tools in Iraq have different functions, but they act in line with a single purpose. If we look at it from the perspective of religion, the fact that 60-65 percent of Iraq's population is Shiite was a big opportunity for Iran's co-sectarian government. From a religious perspective, Iran and Iraq share common beliefs, but the majority of Iraqi Shiites reject Iranian Islamic ideology. Thus, if we add Sistani's factor to this perspective, we see that Iran has little chance to overcome or extend its influence in Iraq only by relying on Shiism or religious relations. From the very beginning, Iran seeks to set up the Velayat-e Faqih system in Iraq and replace Sistani who is not in favor of Iraq by another Shiite cleric who will have strong relations with Iraq. As far as Sistani is alive, it seems difficult for Iran to be in the center of Najaf but it has already established a strong religious network among Iraqi Shiites, and has made lots of strategic investments in Najaf.

From a political perspective, Iran for the sake of protecting its own country's interests, from time to time reached agreement with the U.S or tolerated U.S backed Prime Ministers from 2011 until 2020. For instance Iran cooperated with the Obama administration for fighting against Islamic State in 2014. Iran allowed Tehran backed PM Nouri Maliki to step down and be replaced by a U.S backed candidate. In return, the U.S gave military support to Iraqi Security Forces and partially Iraqi Shiite militias. After Donald Trump became president and withdrew the Iran nuclear agreement, the cooperation between Tehran and Washington mostly came to an end. In return, Iran used its political influencer tool and nominated its candidate for PM. As a consequence, political influence gave opportunities to Iran in order to bargain with the U.S about ending sanctions and eliminating common enemies like IS. It looks like for the short term, Tehran can co-opt with the U.S which still has a strong military presence in Iraq. However, Iran views the U.S military presence in Iraq for a long period as a national threat that could hurt its interests and lead to reduced Iranian influence inside Iraq. Therefore, since the defeat of IS, Iran and Iran backed political parties have attempted to end the U.S military presence in Iraq through Iraqi parliament. But Iran was not successful enough

to expel the U.S troops by using its political influence in Iraq. Thus, Iranian political influence did not perform well to comply with Tehran's long period strategy. Besides that, Iran failed to unify all Iraqi Shiites under one united political umbrella and run in the elections since 2010. Despite failing to unite Shiites, Iran backed Iraqi political parties and figures are still strong to have an impact on decisions which come out in Baghdad.

From a military perspective, Iran has succeeded in developing an army of some 200,000 non-Persian Shiite fighters across the Middle East. These fighters may look dispersed and containable individually, but in fact they are very well organized under the command of the IRGC-Qods Force. IRGC-QF has direct links to many Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups which can work or fight for Iran interests in Iraq. Iraqi Shiite militias which are formed, trained and funded by Iran, performed well to protect Tehran's regional interest in the region. After the withdrawal of U.S forces from Iraq in 2011, Iran, to protect its national security and eliminate threats toward its allies in Baghdad and Damascus, heavily depended on Iraqi armed groups. First, Iraqi Shiite militias are deployed to Syria in order to assist the Assad Regime. Later on they were re-deployed in Iraq to save Baghdad from IS. In both cases, IRGC-QF was able to mobilize the Iraqi Shiites. Iran benefited a lot from its military influence in Iraq. This paved the way to have a major impact on other influencer tools such as political ones. From 2011-2020, by using its military influence Iran reached these goals; Iran sent Iraqi fighters to Syria to protect its one the most important regional ally-Bashar Assad- in Damascus. Iraqi Shiite fought for Iranian regional interests in Syria and still have a military presence in the east of Syria. Iran backed Iraqi Shiite fighters stood against IS and protected Baghdad to not fall into the hands of IS in 2014. They were re-organized, heavily armed and financed by Iran until they joined the PMF. Today, they are legitimized and paid by Baghdad and trained and armed by Tehran. Presence of the PMF as a strong military establishment in Iraq will serve Iran's interests as long as Iran holds control over the PMF. One of other military achievements for Iran was that Iraqi Shiite militias controlled some Sunni and Kurdish areas such as in Kirkuk, Salahaddin, Diyala, Mosul and Anbar where they did not exist before the emergence of IS. After the defeat of IS and withdrawal of Kurdish Forces Peshmerga from some areas, Iraqi Shiite fighters seized the opportunity of expanding their influence in Iraq. This strong military presence has secured Iran's logistical pipeline to Syria and Lebanon in Iraq. In addition, Iran uses Iraqi soil to attack or threaten gulf countries like Saudi Arabia. The aim of using Iraq's soil is not to confront with Saudi Arabia or the U.S directly. Finally, The IRGC-QF has strong military capabilities in Iraq through military influence.

Since Iraq is an important country for Iran's national security, Tehran has been trying to take Baghdad under control by using "influencer tools" for many years. Despite many challenges such as the U.S military presence in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries engagement with Baghdad government in order to reduce Iranian influence, an anti-Iran Iraqi prime minister, alignment of Sunni and Kurdish major parties with Iraqi Shiite nationalist parties or political figures, Iran will seek to increase its influence inside Iraq through religious, economy, political and military influencer tools.

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