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Competition and Interaction between Iran and Turkey in Iraq and Its Impact on the Balance of Power in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Developments in Iraq after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003 turned the country into one of the most important arenas for the redistribution of power in the Middle East and created the conditions for simultaneous competition and interaction between Iran and Turkey. Influenced by geopolitical imperatives, security considerations, economic interests, and historical ties, these two actors have pursued multidimensional strategies in response to Iraq's newly emerging political structure. Within this framework, the present study was conducted with the aim of examining competition and interaction between Iran and Turkey in Iraq and analyzing their impact on the balance of power in the Middle East. Iran, viewing Iraq as part of its surrounding security environment, has sought to contain potential threats and enhance its strategic depth in West Asia by strengthening the stability of Baghdad's political structure, expanding security cooperation, and developing relations with Shiite actors and some Kurdish groups. By contrast, Turkey, with a focus on managing threats related to the Kurdish issue, expanding economic influence, establishing trade networks, and engaging with Sunni and Turkmen communities, has adopted a balancing strategy toward Iraq's domestic and regional developments. The interaction between these two countries in Iraq has a multilevel nature and is reproduced at governmental, party-based, ethno-religious, economic, and security levels. This has caused the pattern of Iran–Turkey relations to move away from direct confrontation and toward a form of managed competition and strategic fluidity. The consequences of this pattern have extended beyond Iraq's borders and have affected the formation of the balance of power in the Middle East, the configuration of regional alliances, and the pattern of influence exercised by extra-regional actors. Accordingly, the study of post-2003 Iraq has become a basis for analyzing the changing nature of power, competition, and cooperation in the contemporary Middle East.

Keywords: *Iran; Turkey; Iraq; balance of power; regional security; geopolitics.*

Introduction

The geopolitical developments of the Middle East over the past two decades, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, have led to the emergence of a new order in the regional balance of power and to the prominence of Iraq as one of the main axes of power realignment. After these developments, Iraq became one of the most important arenas of competition and interaction among regional powers and provided an opportunity for surrounding actors to redefine their influence and expand their sphere of power. In this context, the Islamic Republic



of Iran and the Republic of Turkey, as two major non-Arab regional powers with deep historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties with Iraq, have been affected by these developments more than other actors and have simultaneously influenced the course of Iraq's transformations. While these two countries share certain interests in areas such as emphasizing the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity, controlling border insecurity, and confronting some common threats, they have entered into a complex and multilevel competition in other arenas and have sought to enhance their position in the regional power structure. After the fall of the Baath regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran, by relying on religious, political, and social ties with a significant portion of Iraq's political forces, moved toward expanding its strategic depth and strengthening its networks of influence at various political and security levels. By contrast, Turkey, which has been concerned about the consequences of the collapse of Iraq's former political structure for the Kurdish issue and the security of its southern borders, has pursued a different pattern of agency by focusing on the Kurdistan Region, developing economic relations, maintaining a presence in the Iraqi market, and managing border security threats. Thus, two distinct trajectories have emerged in foreign policy: a trajectory that, in the case of Iran, has been based more on a security-oriented, network-based, and subnational approach, and a trajectory that, in the case of Turkey, has been grounded in a geoeconomic approach, border security considerations, and the use of economic and soft-power instruments. This difference in approaches and instruments has turned the relations between the two countries in Iraq into a combination of competition, interaction, and tactical cooperation and has prevented the formation of undisputed hegemony by either of them in this arena. The necessity of this study stems from the fact that Iran's and Turkey's policies in Iraq are not limited merely to the level of bilateral relations between these two countries and Baghdad, but directly and indirectly affect the balance of power across the entire Middle East. Iran's growing influence in Baghdad and southern Iraq has generated sensitivity and reactions from other regional actors, including Turkey and some Arab countries. Conversely, Turkey's expanding economic and security presence in northern Iraq and in Kurdish- and Sunni-inhabited areas has raised serious concerns in Iran regarding the consequences of this process for its sphere of influence and national security. This situation has led to the emergence of a pattern of fluid regional balance in the Middle East; a pattern in which no power can consolidate absolute hegemony, and relations, alliances, and rivalries are constantly redefined and repositioned. In this context, by focusing on the period from 2003 to 2019, this study seeks to comparatively examine the foreign policies of Iran and Turkey in Iraq, explain the various dimensions of competition, cooperation, overlap, and conflict of interests between the two countries, and analyze the impact of these policies on the realignment of the balance of power in the Middle East. Accordingly, it attempts to examine the objectives, instruments, methods of influence, types of interaction with Iraq's domestic actors, and regional consequences of the two countries' actions in order to clarify the different dimensions of this competition and interaction. The main research question is: What characteristics and patterns did the foreign policies of Iran and Turkey in Iraq have between 2003 and 2019, and how did these policies affect the regional balance of power in the Middle East?

Iran's Strategic Objectives and Interests in Iraq

The strategic objectives and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq can be understood in close connection with the geopolitical transformations of the Middle East, national security considerations, and the historical-religious ties between the two countries. For Iran, Iraq is not merely a neighbor; rather, it constitutes a "proximate security environment," whose instability or the presence of hostile governments in Baghdad can pose a direct threat to Iran's

security. The experience of the eight-year war revealed this reality (1, 2). Accordingly, one of Iran's central objectives has been to support the formation and continuation of a stable, inclusive, and non-hostile government in Iraq and to prevent the return of anti-Iranian forces, an objective pursued through extensive interaction with political currents, especially Shiite parties (3). At a broader level, Iraq holds a special position as a vital link in Iran's strategic depth and in the geopolitical connection of the Iran–Syria–Lebanon axis, which is referred to in political literature as the “axis of resistance” (4, 5). Alongside the security and geopolitical dimensions, religious, cultural, and economic components also form an important part of Iran's strategic objectives in Iraq. The Shiite majority in Iraq and the presence of the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala have created a form of transnational religious and cultural connection between the two societies, a connection Iran employs as an instrument of soft power by strengthening religious and cultural relations and collective rituals such as the Arbæen pilgrimage (6, 7). At the same time, Iraq is one of Iran's most important export markets and a major partner in the energy sector. Exports of gas and electricity, industrial goods, and technical-engineering services to Iraq, in addition to generating economic benefits, have helped stabilize political and social ties between the two countries (8, 9). Iran's role in countering common threats, especially ISIS, through advisory and military assistance represents another dimension of this strategy, which has both strengthened regional security and increased Iran's political and security influence in Iraq (10, 11).

Ensuring the Security of Iran's Western Borders

The security of Iran's western borders is one of the most fundamental elements in the foreign policy strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran toward Iraq. The 1,450-kilometer border between the two countries, extending from the mountainous regions of the north to the southern plains, has always been exposed to Iraq's security developments. The experience of the eight-year war between the two countries and its consequences demonstrated that political instability in Iraq or the existence of a hostile government in Baghdad could rapidly threaten Iran's security. Therefore, after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iran sought to support the formation of a stable and non-hostile political structure in Iraq in order to prevent that country from becoming a source of threat against its national security (3). Iraq's geopolitical position in the Arab world and its adjacency to sensitive Iranian provinces such as Khuzestan and Ilam have meant that any instability in Iraq can have direct security and social consequences for Iran's borders (1). The threats posed by armed and extremist groups that have exploited Iraq's security vacuums in recent years have been another source of concern for Iran. The weakness of Iraq's security structure in the years after the fall of the Baath regime created conditions for the activity of some armed groups in border areas and affected the security of western Iran. In response to this situation, Iran sought to establish a degree of security control in border areas through close security cooperation with the Iraqi government and interaction with the country's political and social actors (4). The rise of ISIS in 2014 doubled the importance of these security considerations, because the expansion of this group to areas near Iran's borders was perceived as a serious threat. Iran's advisory and intelligence support for the Iraqi government and popular forces in the fight against ISIS was carried out with the aim of creating a security belt along its western borders (10). Arab analysts also believe that Iran's policy in Iraq has largely been designed to prevent the spread of security threats toward its western borders (11).

Expanding Strategic Depth in the Region

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the transformation of Iraq's power structure, conditions emerged that enabled Iran to strengthen its presence and influence in that country and, consequently, in the Middle East region. The dissolution of the Baath government, which had previously been one of Iran's serious geopolitical rivals, paved the way for the expansion of Iran's political and security relations with various Iraqi actors. The new Iraq, with a political structure based on the participation of different ethnic and religious groups, represented an opportunity for Iran to expand its strategic depth westward and to enjoy a stronger position in the face of regional and international pressures (1). From a geopolitical perspective, Iraq also plays an important role in shaping power equations because of its central location in the Middle East and its borders with influential regional countries. For this reason, by developing political, security, and economic relations with Iraq, Iran has sought to consolidate its position in one of the main axes of Middle Eastern geopolitics (3). A significant part of Iran's expansion of strategic depth relates to its extensive interaction with Iraq's political and religious currents. After 2003, Iraqi Shiite groups gained a prominent role in the country's political structure, and the historical and ideological relations of some of these groups with Iran enabled broader cooperation (6). Alongside political ties, security cooperation was also important in strengthening Iran's strategic depth. The emergence of ISIS enabled Iran to play a significant role in stabilizing Iraq's security situation by providing advisory and security assistance to the Iraqi government (10). In addition, Iraq is considered a key link in Iran's geopolitical connection with Syria and Lebanon, a connection that some analysts regard as an important axis in the increase of Iran's regional power (5). Arab researchers also emphasize that Iran seeks to strengthen its influence in Iraq and expand its strategic depth by using political, economic, and cultural instruments (9).

Strengthening Relations with Iraq's Political and Religious Groups

After the transformation of Iraq's political structure in 2003, Iran sought to expand its relations with the country's political and religious groups so that it could play an effective role in shaping Iraq's new political order. Iraq's plural social structure and the role of Shiite, Kurdish, and Sunni groups in the country's political processes made interaction with domestic actors especially important for Iran. The historical background and ideological relations between some Iraqi Shiite groups and Iran also created a context in which Tehran could use these relations in the new period to strengthen its influence (12). Many of these groups, including the Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, had close relations with Iran before 2003, and this historical background continued after the formation of the new Iraqi government (13). Iran's interaction with Iraqi political groups has not remained limited to Shiite currents, and Tehran has sought to establish a broad network of relations with various parties, including some Kurdish groups. This approach has enabled Iran to play an indirect but effective role in processes such as government formation, elections, and parliamentary negotiations (14). Alongside political relations, religious ties have also been an important instrument for strengthening Iran's influence in Iraq. The two major Shiite centers of Najaf and Qom have created deep religious ties between the two countries, and the extensive presence of Iranian pilgrims in Iraq's holy cities has also helped strengthen social relations (15). In addition, Iran's cooperation with Iraq's political and military groups during the fight against ISIS not only strengthened security relations but also consolidated Iran's position as one of the key actors in Iraq's security equations (16).

Developing Economic and Trade Cooperation

The development of economic and trade relations with Iraq is one of the key components of Iran's regional strategy. After the fall of Saddam's government, Iraq's economy, due to its extensive need for goods, services, and infrastructure reconstruction, created a significant opportunity for Iran. Geographic proximity, the needs of the Iraqi market, and Iran's industrial capacities turned Baghdad into one of Tehran's most important export markets (14). Iran has sought to strengthen its economic presence in Iraq through exports of industrial goods, food products, construction materials, and technical and engineering services. Some analysts believe that the development of economic relations is part of Iran's strategy to create interdependence and reduce the effects of external pressures (16). Energy cooperation between the two countries also plays an important role in deepening economic relations. In recent years, Iran has supplied a significant portion of Iraq's electricity and gas needs, and this energy dependence has created a basis for the development of stable relations between the two countries (17). In addition, Iranian companies have participated actively in Iraq's reconstruction projects and have played an important role in building infrastructure such as roads, power plants, and industrial facilities (12). The economic relations of the two countries are also highly important in the field of religious tourism; the presence of millions of Iranian pilgrims in Iraq, in addition to strengthening social relations, has contributed to the economic prosperity of the country's religious cities (14). Overall, these economic interactions have not only strengthened ties between the two countries but have also enhanced Iran's position in the region's geopolitical equations (13).

Turkey's Strategic Objectives and Interests in Iraq

Turkey's strategic objectives and interests in Iraq can be analyzed within the framework of the geopolitical transformations of the Middle East and the changes in the post-2003 political system. Iraq is of particular importance to Turkey because it is directly adjacent to Turkey in geographical, ethnic, and energy terms, and its developments have a direct impact on Turkey's national security. The presence of Kurdish groups, the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and political developments in the Kurdistan Region have led Ankara to adopt an active and multidimensional approach toward Iraq. Turkey has sought to use a combination of security, economic, and diplomatic instruments to maintain an effective and durable role in Iraqi developments and to prevent the emergence of security threats along its southern borders (18, 19). Alongside security considerations, economic and energy interests also occupy an important place in Turkey's strategy in Iraq. Over the past two decades, Iraq has become one of Turkey's most important export markets, and Turkish companies have been extensively active in sectors such as construction, energy, and services. In addition, Turkey has sought to participate in Iraq's oil and gas projects, especially in the north of the country, and to consolidate its position as an energy transit route through pipelines connected to the port of Ceyhan (20, 21). These economic and energy collaborations have enabled Turkey to increase its political influence in Iraq as well and to play a more active role in regional competition (18, 22).

Containing Security Threats and the Kurdish Issue

One of the most important axes of Turkey's strategic interests in Iraq is the containment of security threats arising from the activities of Kurdish groups, especially the PKK. From the perspective of Turkish policymakers, the presence of PKK bases in the mountainous regions of northern Iraq constitutes a serious threat to Turkey's national security, and this issue has led Ankara since the 1980s to adopt an active, sometimes interventionist policy based

on a limited security presence in Iraq. Turkey's concern is not limited to PKK military activities; rather, the increased level of autonomy of the Kurdistan Region after 2003 has also raised concerns about its impact on Kurdish demands inside Turkey (18, 19). Developments in the 2010s led Turkey to adjust its approach to some extent and to turn to political and economic cooperation with the Kurdistan Region as a way of better managing security threats. By strengthening economic relations and interacting with the leaders of the Region, Ankara sought, alongside security measures, to expand its influence in northern Iraq and create conditions for better control of the PKK. Preemptive military operations, security cooperation with Baghdad, and interaction with Erbil are part of this strategy (20, 22, 23). In addition, some analysts believe that Turkey also seeks to prevent the formation of threatening political arrangements by creating a balance in its relations with various Iraqi actors (24).

Expanding Economic and Trade Influence in Iraq

The expansion of economic and trade influence is one of the main pillars of Turkey's policy in Iraq. After the fall of Saddam's regime and Iraq's extensive need for reconstruction, Turkish companies entered the Iraqi market in various fields, including construction, energy, transportation, and services, and took on a significant share of infrastructure projects. This process turned Iraq into one of Turkey's most important export destinations and one of the main areas of investment for Turkish companies. Some researchers regard this trend as part of Turkey's broader strategy to expand its economic influence in the Middle East (18, 20). Alongside construction and commodity trade, energy cooperation has played an important role in deepening the economic relations between the two countries. The oil pipelines transferring Iraqi oil to Turkey's Ceyhan have strengthened Ankara's geopolitical position in the energy sphere, and Turkey has sought through this channel to play an active role in the regional energy market. Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan Region have also paved the way for the expansion of economic influence in northern Iraq, and Turkish companies have had a notable presence in the region's development projects (18, 19). From the perspective of some analysts, the economy has become an instrument for increasing Turkey's geopolitical influence in Iraq, and economic interactions directly contribute to regional competition (23, 24).

Access to Iraq's Energy Resources

Access to Iraq's energy resources forms an important part of Turkey's regional strategy. Because of its high dependence on energy imports and limited domestic resources, Turkey has always sought to strengthen its energy security by diversifying its sources of energy supply. Iraq, with its vast oil and gas reserves and geographic proximity, is a strategic option for Turkey's energy supply. After 2003 and Iraq's structural changes, new opportunities emerged for energy cooperation between the two countries, and infrastructure such as the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline regained importance (21, 25). Within the framework of its effort to become a regional energy hub, Turkey has focused on developing energy transmission lines, cooperating with Baghdad, and especially engaging in energy cooperation with the Kurdistan Region. The export of the Region's oil through Ceyhan and the presence of Turkish companies in energy projects in northern Iraq reflect the depth of energy relations between the two sides. Despite periodic tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, Turkey has sought to maintain its relations with both sides so that its energy interests are not harmed (26, 27). Turkish analysts emphasize that energy cooperation with Iraq can reduce Turkey's dependence on other sources and strengthen its geopolitical position. The participation of Turkish companies in various energy projects also indicates the importance of Iraq's energy market for Turkey (28-30).

The Role of Iraq's Domestic Actors in Iran–Turkey Competition

Regional competition between Iran and Turkey in Iraq cannot be explained merely through the official interactions of governments with one another; rather, a significant part of it takes shape at the level of domestic actors and within Iraq's complex political and social structure. Ethnic, religious, and political diversity in this country has created a space in which regional powers can expand their spheres of influence through parties, religious groups, tribes, and militia forces. In such an environment, each of these domestic actors has become a channel for transmitting influence and pursuing the interests of regional powers, and this has made post-2003 Iraq a scene of multilayered and intertwined competition between domestic and external actors. Therefore, any attempt to understand Iran–Turkey competition in Iraq without considering this level of agency would present an incomplete and reductionist image of the country's political reality (31). In this context, Shiite parties, Sunni groups, the Kurdistan Region, tribes, and militia forces such as the Popular Mobilization Forces each play a direct role in shaping Iraq's relations with its neighbors and constitute the main channels of conflict and convergence between Iranian and Turkish interests. Iran mainly enters the arena of competition through religious and political ties with Shiite groups and some Kurdish actors, whereas Turkey relies more on historical, ethnic, and religious relations with Sunni and Turkmen communities, as well as economic and energy cooperation with the Kurdistan Region. As a result, post-2003 Iraq has become a space in which the foreign policies of Iran and Turkey are exercised and institutionalized not only at the level of states but also, to a large extent, through a network of relations with these domestic actors (31, 32).

The Role of Shiite Groups

The developments in Iraq after 2003 led to a realignment of the power structure, and in this process Shiite groups became central actors in the new political system. The fall of the Baath regime and the holding of successive elections created the ground for the extensive entry of Shiite parties and currents into the government, parliament, and security institutions, and these groups gradually assumed responsibility for guiding many of Iraq's domestic and foreign policies. Under such conditions, regional powers, especially Iran and Turkey, attempted to consolidate and deepen their positions in Baghdad's equations through direct interaction with these actors. For this reason, Shiite groups became one of the main centers of geopolitical competition in Iraq, and many researchers believe that understanding the pattern of Iran–Turkey competition is impossible without understanding the place and political weight of these groups (7, 33). Shiite parties such as the Dawa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Sadrist movement, and the Badr Organization have not only played key roles in shaping governments and parliamentary coalitions but have also influenced Iraq's foreign policy orientations. A significant portion of these currents have deep historical, religious, and political ties with Iran, and this network of relations has enabled Tehran to exert meaningful influence within Iraq's political and security structure. These ties have been strengthened through the seminaries of Najaf and Qom, clerical relations, and religious networks, leading some Shiite groups to view Iran's regional policies positively. At the same time, Shiite currents are not homogeneous; some adopt a more nationalist and independent approach toward Tehran, and this intra-group diversity has made the competition among regional actors for their support more complex (28, 34).

The Role of Sunni Groups

In Iraq's new political order, which after 2003 was formed on the basis of elections and a form of power-sharing based on demographic weight, Sunni groups that had played a dominant role in the power structure under the Baath regime faced a noticeable reduction in their share and influence. This shift in the internal balance led many Sunni elites and leaders to seek regional supporters in order to strengthen their position within the new political structure. In this framework, competition between Iran and Turkey has also taken place to a significant extent through interaction with these Sunni actors and has manifested especially in provinces such as Anbar, Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and parts of Kirkuk and Diyala. From the perspective of a number of researchers, post-2003 Iraq has become a field of proxy competition among regional powers, in which Sunni groups, because of their geopolitical and political position, constitute one of the main axes of competition (35). Turkey, relying on historical, cultural, and religious ties, has actively expanded its relations with Sunni political parties, tribal leaders, and local elites in Sunni-inhabited areas and regards this interaction as an instrument for deepening its influence and balancing Iran's influence. By contrast, although Iran's main focus has been on Shiite groups, in recent years it has sought to enter into dialogue with some moderate Sunni leaders and currents in order both to prevent the escalation of sectarian tensions and to preserve Iraq's stability, which is vital to its regional interests. The tribal structure of Sunni areas, the prominent role of tribal sheikhs in local decision-making, and these areas' experience of the rise and fall of ISIS have doubled the importance of Sunni actors in domestic and regional equations. In this context, both Iran and Turkey seek to consolidate and strengthen their influence in these areas through political, economic, and security support for Sunni leaders (28, 34, 36).

The Role of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The fall of the Baath regime and the drafting of Iraq's new constitution in 2005 created the necessary legal and political basis for consolidating the semi-independent structure of the Kurdistan Region and turned this political-geographical unit into one of the most important domestic and regional actors. The Region's possession of independent political, security, and economic institutions has made it an influential actor in determining Baghdad's orientations and, at the same time, in Iraq's relations with its neighbors (28). Because of its adjacency to the borders of Iran and Turkey, its energy resources, and its role in trade and transit routes, this region has acquired a strategic position in the competition between these two countries in Iraq. For this reason, Iran–Turkey competition in Iraq has become closely tied to the developments and orientations of the Kurdistan Region, and this region has become an important arena for measuring the influence and maneuvering power of both countries (33). Within the framework of its regional policy, Turkey has established extensive relations with Erbil in the fields of energy, trade, and investment and has effectively become one of the Kurdistan Region's main economic partners. The development of oil pipelines from the Region to the port of Ceyhan and the growing dependence of the Region's oil exports on Turkish infrastructure have turned Ankara into a key actor in the Region's economic relations. This economic cooperation, in addition to financial benefits, is geopolitically important for Turkey because it both strengthens Ankara's influence in northern Iraq and serves as a lever in competition with Iran. By contrast, Iran, relying on common borders, longstanding relations with Kurdish parties, and extensive trade and energy exchanges, has sought to preserve and deepen its presence in the Region and to manage its relations with Baghdad and Erbil simultaneously through a balancing approach. Events such as the 2017 independence referendum showed that the

Kurdistan Region is an arena in which both competition and temporary convergence of Iranian and Turkish interests can be observed simultaneously (28, 34).

The Role of the Iraqi Turkmen Front

After 2003, the Turkmens of Iraq sought to organize politically and establish representative bodies in order to move out of political marginality and consolidate their position in the new structure, the most important of which is the Iraqi Turkmen Front. This front, recognized as the main political institution representing the Turkmens, has sought to raise the identity, linguistic, and political demands of this community at the national level and to defend their rights against ethnic and religious rivalries. The role of this front has become especially prominent in sensitive northern areas such as Kirkuk, where the interests of Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmens intersect and where oil resources are concentrated, turning it into one of the important actors in local and national power equations. The geopolitical position of Turkmen-inhabited areas, which are located at important communication nodes between northern and central Iraq, has further increased the strategic importance of this front (18, 37). Turkey, relying on ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties, has regarded Iraq's Turkmens as part of its historical sphere of influence and considers support for them both an identity-based responsibility and a geopolitical instrument for expanding influence in northern Iraq. This approach has been manifested in close relations with the Iraqi Turkmen Front, political and cultural support for Turkmen demands, and efforts to play a role in disputes such as the status of the city of Kirkuk. By contrast, Iran, especially among Shiite Turkmens in cities such as Tal Afar, has created networks of religious and political relations and seeks through them to consolidate its presence in Turkmen-inhabited areas and prevent Turkey from monopolizing influence. Thus, the Turkmen community stands at the intersection of competition between two regional powers, and the Iraqi Turkmen Front, beyond being a domestic actor, has become an influential element in balancing between Iran and Turkey in northern Iraq (37, 38).

The Impact of Iran–Turkey Competition in Iraq on the Balance of Power in the Middle East

Iran–Turkey competition in Iraq has taken shape within the context of the country's multiethnic and multireligious political structure and has led both countries to expand their influence by relying on Shiite parties, Sunni currents, Kurdish parties, and ethnic minorities. Through historical and ideological relations with Shiite parties and some Kurdish groups, Iran has created a broad sphere of influence in Iraq's political, security, and economic arenas (39). By contrast, Turkey has sought to create a form of balance against Iran's power by strengthening its relations with Sunni currents, Arab tribes, the Kurdistan Region, and the Turkmens. This multilayered competition has made Iraq one of the most important scenes of geopolitical confrontation between the two countries (40). In this context, the Kurdistan Region and the Turkmens also play an effective role in completing this competition because of their geopolitical position, oil resources, and connections with both countries (41). The simultaneous interaction of Turkey and Iran with various domestic Iraqi actors has led to the formation of a complex balance at the regional level, a balance that not only affects state-building in Iraq but also has direct repercussions for the power order in the Middle East. As a result, Iraq has become a setting for the formation of a relative balance between Iran and Turkey, the consequence of which is the emergence of new patterns of competition and cooperation in the region (39).

Impact on the Regional Order

Because of their demographic weight and historical role in Iraqi politics, Shiite parties are regarded as Iran's most important channel of influence in this country. The deep historical and political relations of these parties with Tehran have enabled Iran to play a decisive role in Iraq at political, security, and economic levels and thereby strengthen its regional position (14). By contrast, Turkey, taking advantage of Sunni groups' dissatisfaction with Iraq's new structure, has sought to strengthen its position in Sunni-inhabited areas and has attempted to create a balance against Iran's influence through political and economic interaction (40). Alongside Shiites and Sunnis, the Kurdistan Region is also one of the important factors shaping the regional order. Turkey has increased its influence in northern Iraq by expanding economic and energy cooperation with Erbil, while Iran, relying on its historical relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and shared borders, remains one of the key actors in the Region (14, 41). The position of the Turkmens in important cities such as Kirkuk and Tal Afar has also led both countries to compete for influence over this group. This situation shows that Iraq's domestic groups, through their relations with neighboring states, play an important role in shaping the regional order of the Middle East (40).

Impact on Relations among Regional Powers

Iraq's ethnic and religious diversity has turned it into one of the most important arenas of regional competition, and the interaction of domestic actors with external powers plays a fundamental role in shaping regional relations. Iran, relying on Shiite parties and longstanding political relations with these currents, has been able to establish effective influence in Baghdad, and this issue has affected the perception of many regional powers, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, regarding Iran's role (14). By contrast, Turkey, by focusing on Sunni currents and using historical and cultural relations, seeks to strengthen its presence in Iraq and prevent the increase of Iranian influence (40). The Kurdistan Region also plays a dual role in regional relations. Turkey's extensive trade and energy relations with Erbil on the one hand, and Iran's political ties with Kurdish parties on the other, have made the Kurdish issue one of the points of contact and simultaneous competition between Iran and Turkey (14, 41). In addition, because of their sensitive geographical position, the Turkmens have become one of the competitive instruments of the two countries. Taken together, these factors show that Iraq is a point of connection among political, security, and identity-based rivalries among regional powers, and changes in this country can affect broader regional relations (40).

Impact on the Interaction of Extra-Regional and Global Actors

The deep connection between Iraqi Shiite parties and Iran has made these groups' interaction with Tehran part of a broader competition between Iran and the United States. The United States, which after 2003 sought to engineer Iraq's political structure, has attempted to prevent the expansion of Iran's influence; however, the weight of Shiite parties in Iraqi politics has meant that this competition has been managed largely through domestic actors (42). In the Sunni sphere as well, Turkey's, Arab countries', and the United States' interaction with Sunni leaders in an effort to balance Iran has turned Iraq into a point of connection between regional and global rivalries (43). The Kurdistan Region is also one of the important centers of interaction among regional and extra-regional actors. Ankara's economic relations with Erbil, the security and economic cooperation of the United States and Europe with the Region, and Iran's efforts to preserve influence among Kurdish parties have turned the Region into a scene of

intertwined regional and global interests (26). In addition, the participation of the Popular Mobilization Forces, the Peshmerga, and Sunni groups in the fight against ISIS, and the support of global powers for these forces, made Iraq an important center in global security interactions (43). Thus, Iraq's domestic actors play a fundamental role in connecting Iran–Turkey competition with broader developments in the international system (42).

Political Dimensions of Iran–Turkey Competition in Iraq

The political competition between Iran and Turkey in Iraq entered a structural and multilayered phase after 2003, because the collapse of the Baathist authoritarian order and the formation of an identity-based coalition political system created a context in which regional actors could directly affect Iraq's state-building process. From Iran's perspective, Iraq is regarded not only as strategic depth but also as a security shield against regional threats, and the experience of the eight-year war highlighted the importance of Baghdad's stability for Iran's national security (44). By contrast, Turkey sees Iraq as part of its vital geopolitical environment, where controlling developments, especially in relation to the Kurdish issue and the security of its southern borders, plays a decisive role in Ankara's domestic stability (45). This difference in security perceptions has turned the political competition between the two countries into a combination of tactical cooperation and strategic confrontation. At the practical level, Iran, through political and institutional ties with Iraqi Shiite parties and security actors, has been able to create durable influence in Baghdad's decision-making structure, an influence that gained greater legitimacy after the rise of ISIS and Iran's active role in supporting the Iraqi government (46). By contrast, Turkey, by focusing on relations with Sunni parties and the Kurdistan Region, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party, has sought to create a form of political balance against axes close to Iran (18). As a result, Iraqi politics has become a field in which Tehran and Ankara compete to shape the architecture of political power without entering into direct confrontation.

Geopolitical Competition

The geopolitical competition between Iran and Turkey in Iraq after 2003 has taken shape within the context of a fundamental transformation in the regional power structure, a transformation that turned Iraq into one of the main centers of power redistribution in the Middle East. Iraq's geographical position, ethnic-religious diversity, and energy resources have turned this country into a point of intersection for the interests of Tehran and Ankara. Iran views Iraq as its strategic depth and security shield and regards its stability as a necessary condition for national security (44), while Turkey sees Iraq as a geopolitical node between Anatolia, the Levant, and the Persian Gulf and considers control over developments in its north an inseparable part of its national security (45). This difference in geopolitical perception has led to continuous competition over influence in Baghdad and northern Iraq. Iran, relying on Shiite political and security networks, has sought to prevent the formation of hostile governments (47), while Turkey, by developing economic relations and maintaining a limited but continuous military presence in northern Iraq, has expanded the scope of its geopolitical influence (45). The Kurdish issue, border control, and the reduction of the U.S. presence have intensified this competition and turned Iraq into a scene of indirect balancing between two regional powers (48).

Political Competition within Iraq's Power Structure

Iran–Turkey competition in Iraq has increasingly become institutionalized within the country's political power structure and has become one of the determining factors in the process of state-building and power distribution.

Iraq's post-Baath political system, which is based on ethnic-religious coalitions, has enabled foreign actors to exert influence through support for domestic parties and elites (49). Iran, by focusing on institutional influence through Shiite parties, parliament, and security institutions, has been able to consolidate its presence at the heart of the power structure (50). By contrast, Turkey has adopted a more indirect approach and has sought to influence the process of government formation and parliamentary coalitions by affecting the balance among Sunnis and Kurds (51). Competition over support for prime ministers, participation in parliament, and influence in informal power networks has turned Iraq's political structure into an arena of political balancing, a balance that prevents the monopolization of power by either country and contributes to the continuation of fragile coalition governments (52).

Economic and Energy Competition

Economy and energy are among the most important dimensions of Iran–Turkey competition in Iraq. Through extensive exports of gas, electricity, and consumer goods, Iran has been able to institutionalize its economic influence in Iraq's vital infrastructure, to the extent that the continuity of many of Baghdad's economic decisions depends on the continuation of these forms of cooperation (50). For Iran, these economic ties are not merely commercial; rather, they are part of a strategy to convert economic influence into strategic depth (53). By contrast, Turkey has created a different form of economic influence by focusing on northern Iraq's energy and controlling the export routes of the Kurdistan Region's oil. Turkey's role in transferring oil through Ceyhan has given Ankara significant bargaining power in Erbil–Baghdad relations (51). The competition between the two countries over the Iraqi market, transit projects, and energy corridors shows that the economy has become a political instrument for redefining regional influence (52).

Security Competition in Northern Iraq

Northern Iraq has become one of the most sensitive centers of security competition between Iran and Turkey, a region where security, politics, and geopolitics are fully intertwined. Turkey, under the justification of fighting the PKK, has expanded its military presence deep inside Iraqi territory and uses military operations as an instrument to consolidate political influence (54). This approach has enabled Ankara to highlight its role as a decisive security actor in northern Iraq (55). By contrast, Iran has pursued a different strategy and, instead of an extensive military presence, has relied on local-security networks, intelligence relations, and cooperation with forces close to the central government (56). The competition between the two countries in the Kurdistan Region, Kirkuk, and Baghdad–Erbil relations has turned northern Iraq's security into an arena of regional competition, a competition that has intensified with the reduction of the U.S. presence and is highly likely to continue in the short term (57).

Conclusion

Competition and interaction between Iran and Turkey in Iraq after 2003 show that this country has become one of the most important arenas for the intersection of interests and the redefinition of regional strategies by the two actors. Iran, by emphasizing the security of its surrounding environment, strengthening the political role of aligned groups, maintaining security cooperation with Baghdad, and creating economic and social ties, has sought to consolidate influence and prevent the reproduction of strategic threats. By contrast, Turkey, by focusing on managing Kurdish developments, expanding economic networks, interacting with Sunni and Turkmen communities, and maintaining an active presence in northern Iraq, has sought to create a form of balancing against the new

consequences of Iraq's political order. Differences in geopolitical perceptions, security priorities, and the socio-political bases of both countries have given this competition a multilayered and plural nature. The consequences of this pattern have extended beyond Iraq's borders and have a decisive role in shaping the balance of power in the Middle East. The competitive interaction between Iran and Turkey, while preventing the emergence of direct confrontation between the two countries, has produced a pattern of "managed competition" in which economic, political, security, and social-influence instruments are used simultaneously. This situation not only affects Iraq's internal dynamics but also influences the configuration of regional alliances, the actions of extra-regional powers, and broader trends of geopolitical transformation in the Middle East. Therefore, the study of post-2003 Iraq has a central place in analyzing changes in power and security in the contemporary Middle East.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

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