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Examining the Scenario of Iraq's Fragmentation and Its Implications for the Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic Republic of Iran can be regarded as the most influential regional actor in Iraq. In the post-Saddam era, Iran has provided substantial support for stability and security in Iraq and for the continuity of the country's political process. Iran has consistently and firmly defended Iraq's territorial integrity and national unity. The clearest manifestation of Iran's position on this issue emerged in response to the independence referendum held in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In this context, officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, while issuing various warnings, adopted a firm stance against the independence referendum and implemented several restrictive measures to exert pressure on the Kurdish authorities. The reduction of exports to the Kurdistan Region, the closure of borders, and support for Baghdad in exerting political and military pressure on Kurdish separatist movements were particularly noteworthy in this regard. In fact, Iran has various reasons for supporting a unified Iraq and opposing extensive federalism, confederalism, and the fragmentation of Iraq. The implications of extensive federalism or confederalism, and especially the fragmentation of Iraq, for Iran's territorial integrity and national cohesion are significant, particularly because the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq could directly affect centrifugal and separatist tendencies among Iranian Kurds. Furthermore, the Iraqi government has established favorable relations with Iran and has created important opportunities for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The potential effects of Iraq's fragmentation and the associated insecurity on regional stability, including Iran's national security, have prompted Tehran to oppose centrifugal processes and separatist tendencies in Iraq. Therefore, Iran is one of the principal supporters of a unified Iraq and plays an important role in preventing the advancement of Kurdish independence.

Keywords: *Scenario, Fragmentation of Iraq, Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

Introduction

Secessionism, in the fields of political science and international law, refers to claims advanced by groups seeking separation from an existing state and the establishment of an independent state. Theorists generally emphasize two principal perspectives: the "choice theory," which regards secession as a general right, and the "just-cause theory," which considers secession permissible only as a remedy for major injustices. Iraq, as one of the most challenging countries in Southwest Asia, has consistently played a pivotal role in regional developments because of its geopolitical position. Iraq's significance is such that Henry Kissinger is often quoted as stating that "the Arabs cannot make war without Egypt and cannot make peace without Iraq." The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall

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of Saddam Hussein confronted the country with political, ethnic, and sectarian crises, among which the emergence of ISIS was particularly significant. ISIS, as a terrorist organization characterized by radical ideology, exposed Iraq to extensive security crises and created a serious threat to regional security and to Iran. The scenario of Iraq's partition, which has attracted the attention of certain regional and extra-regional actors, directly threatens Iran's security. Such a scenario would not only undermine Iraq's territorial integrity but would also pose serious challenges to the Iran-led regional resistance axis. Accordingly, Iran opposes any partition of Iraq and emphasizes the preservation of the country's stability and territorial integrity. Given Iraq's role in regional security and its connection with Iran's national interests, examining different scenarios for Iraq's future—including continued instability, partition, or the strengthening of central authority—and analyzing their implications for the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran constitute a vital necessity. Against this background, the present study seeks to examine the scenario of Iraq's partition and its consequences for Iran's security. The Middle East, because of geopolitical tensions and competition among regional and extra-regional powers, has consistently been one of the world's most unstable regions. Political and security instability in this region, in addition to threatening regional peace, has had extensive implications for international security. Iraq, particularly since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, has been among the most unstable countries in the region and has continuously been exposed to domestic crises and foreign intervention (1).

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, undertaken under the stated justification of countering weapons of mass destruction, not only transformed the country's political system but also created conditions conducive to extensive ethnic, sectarian, and political conflict (2). The emergence of ISIS as one of the most violent terrorist organizations in the region constituted a turning point in the Iraqi crisis, confronting the country with serious security, humanitarian, and territorial threats (3).

ISIS's control over extensive parts of Iraq and the expansion of violence associated with it not only destabilized Iraq internally but also generated serious risks for regional security, particularly the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this context, the scenario of Iraq's partition emerged as one of the most significant geopolitical challenges because of the intensification of ethnic and sectarian cleavages, the inefficiency of the central state structure, and intervention by extra-regional actors. Such a scenario could have extensive and adverse consequences for Iran's national security (4).

From Iran's perspective, the partition of Iraq would mean weakening the resistance axis, reducing Iranian influence in the region, and increasing security threats along Iran's western borders. This is particularly significant because Iraq plays a key geopolitical role in strengthening the resistance axis vis-à-vis Israel and in supporting Syria and Hezbollah (2). Despite the existence of multiple factors conducive to partition, factors such as intervention by the Islamic Republic of Iran, efforts to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, and attempts to promote convergence among different ethnic and sectarian groups have thus far impeded the realization of this scenario. In particular, Iran's advisory presence and support for the Iraqi central government in its confrontation with ISIS played a decisive role in preventing the country's partition (5). Examining possible future scenarios for Iraq, including partition, continued instability, or the strengthening of central authority, and analyzing the implications of each scenario for Iran's security are indispensable because of Iraq's geopolitical and strategic importance to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The present study therefore seeks to examine these scenarios in detail and assess their implications for Iran's national security. This research adopts a descriptive-analytical design with a futures-studies approach and employs the theoretical framework of the "security complex" to analyze the issue. The principal objective is to analyze the

impact of the scenario of Iraq's partition during 2003–2022 on the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Data were collected from library and Internet sources and analyzed qualitatively. The method is based on historical documents, library studies, and interviews with specialists in the field. The temporal scope of the study extends from 2003 to 2022, while its spatial scope is Iraq. The study examines the motivations and roles of domestic, regional, and international actors in the Iraqi crisis, changes in regional alignments, and their effects on Iran's security. The roles of actors such as the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, China, and the European Union are also analyzed. The research sources include books, articles, and reputable databases in political science and international relations.

Regarding the impact of developments in Iraq on regional security, particularly Iran's security, numerous studies have been conducted in the form of theses, books, articles, and research projects, some of which are discussed below. Collectively, these studies can provide useful guidance for the present research. Each of the cited works has approached the subject through different research methods. Drawing on these sources, the present study examines the scenario of Iraq's partition and its impact on the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Touti and Bolhasani (2015), in their article entitled "Iraq's New Political and Security Structure and Its Impact on the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran," examined the implications of Iraq's new political and security structure for Iran's national security. By asking how the new political and security structure of Iraq affects the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the study concluded that Iraq's new structure directly affects Iran's national security in both political and security dimensions (6).

Navashki and Ahmadian (2016), in their study "Factors in the Rise of ISIS in Iraq," examined the factors contributing to the rise of ISIS. Their findings indicated that state failure contributed to the empowerment of ISIS in three major respects. First, a failed state provides a safe and favorable haven for terrorists, attracting individuals from different parts of the world, and the available evidence supports this proposition. Second, state failure facilitates foreign intervention, as other states support different groups within the failed state in pursuit of their own interests. This was clearly evident in Iraq, where Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and other countries supported various actors in pursuit of their interests, while the weakness of the Iraqi government limited its capacity to address the problem. The third factor was the decline in political legitimacy (7).

Safavi and Khaksar (2018), in their study "Analyzing the Impact of ISIS on Political and Security Equations in the Middle East," concluded that the first and most important consequence of the emergence of ISIS in West Asia was the weakening of the resistance front vis-à-vis Israel. This development can be examined from two perspectives. First, the proliferation of terrorist groups in the Middle East compelled groups aligned with the resistance axis to devote a substantial part of their capacities to combating them. Second, the emergence of ISIS intensified Sunni–Shi'a divisions and internal conflicts within the Islamic world, developments that ultimately benefited Israel. Another consequence of ISIS was the increase in Islamophobia worldwide. Furthermore, the ISIS crisis had negative effects on the region's economy and development. Consequently, the financial resources of West Asian countries were depleted, and their progress in economic and industrial development was impeded. Overall, ISIS generated security and economic harms for virtually all actors in the Middle East, challenged the existing relative order, deepened the roots of regional mistrust, and seriously undermined prospects for peace among regional actors (8).

Khosravi and Khasbani Yazdani (2019), in their article "The Future of Iraq and Its Scenarios (2010–2020)," examined Iraq's future with emphasis on the prevailing political and security conditions. The study's subsidiary objectives included assessing the influence of domestic, regional, and extra-regional actors on developments in

Iraq, forecasting Iraq's territorial future, and evaluating the feasibility of Iraq's partition. By constructing probable scenarios regarding the partition or continued territorial integrity of Iraq in the subsequent decade, the authors identified three possible futures: (1) the partition of Iraq, (2) civil war in Iraq, and (3) equitable and democratic power-sharing. The authors ultimately concluded that, on the basis of these scenarios, Iraq's partition would not be feasible during the following decade (9).

Ghasemi (2021), in his book *Geography and Regional Identity: An Analysis of a United or Partitioned Iraq and Its Role in Regional and Iranian Security*, argues that Iraq's geopolitical position at the heart of the Arab-Asian regional environment has consistently attracted the attention of extra-regional powers and has made the partition of Iraq one of the major geopolitical projects considered by such actors. The author seeks to examine and analyze the regional implications of Iraq's partition and to explain its regional and international consequences (10).

Examination of Iraq's Political, Economic, and Social Conditions After Saddam: Future Scenarios for Iraq

From the perspective of levels of analysis, national security can be divided into two interrelated components: "internal security" and "external security," each of which concerns a category of endogenous or cross-border threats. Within this framework, internal security concerns the protection of the governing structure against protest-related challenges and crises of legitimacy arising from domestic groups and is deeply associated with structural threats, identity cleavages, and chronic weaknesses in state-building. In the literature on security studies, national and internal security can be conceptualized from two perspectives. Under the negative approach, security is defined as the "absence of danger, threat, aggression, and physical coercion," whereas under the positive approach, security goes beyond the mere absence of threats and encompasses the realization of confidence, tranquility, public satisfaction, and structural stability within society (11). Police and intelligence institutions play a key role in internal security; however, in non-democratic systems, they may themselves threaten individual and social security (12). In its broad sense, national security refers to a condition in which a political unit is protected from external threats and retains the capacity to safeguard its vital interests and values (13). In theoretical literature, this concept has developed through two distinct approaches: a negative discourse emphasizing threat elimination, deterrence, and physical protection, and a positive discourse emphasizing the generation of synergistic opportunities, sustainable development, and enhancement of the welfare and living capacities of society (11). The origins of the modern conceptualization of national security largely date to the Second World War and the years following 1945. Among the pioneering formulations in this field is Walter Lippmann's definition of national security as a country's ability to preserve its fundamental values without being forced to sacrifice them in the event of war (14). A synthesis of the views of international relations scholars indicates that national security rests upon four fundamental pillars: protecting the lives and security of citizens, safeguarding territorial integrity, preserving political independence, and maintaining the effectiveness of the country's economic and institutional structures. Together, these pillars explain and justify the existential rationale and functional legitimacy of the state within the international system (15).

Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, security and intelligence institutions, including SAVAK, were strengthened to confront internal and external threats. SAVAK was established with the support of the United States and Israel, and because of its extensive dependence on foreign powers, an autonomous national security doctrine did not fully develop (6). According to Hossein Fardoust, Britain and the United States formulated the principles of Iran's national security in accordance with their own interests and expanded their influence through institutions such as the Special Intelligence Bureau (16). These definitions demonstrate that internal, regional, and international security are directly

connected to national security and its objectives and emphasize the survival of states and the preservation of their vital interests.

Iraq, with an area of more than 438,000 square kilometers and a population exceeding 40 million, is located at the geopolitical heart of the Middle East and possesses a highly diverse demographic structure. Its ethnic composition consists primarily of Arabs, who constitute approximately 75–80% of the population; Kurds, who account for approximately 15–20%; and minorities such as Turkmen and Assyrians, who together constitute approximately 5%. In religious terms, Shi'a Muslims comprise approximately 60–65% of the population, Sunni Muslims approximately 30–35%, while smaller Christian and Sabian communities also form part of the country's religious composition (17). This territory, with its ancient Mesopotamian civilization and historical experience under various caliphates and empires, has consistently played a central role in regional dynamics. Nevertheless, the collapse of the Ba'athist regime following the U.S. invasion in 2003 confronted Iraq with an acute crisis of institutional state collapse. The dissolution of the army and bureaucratic institutions, intensification of identity cleavages, and exploitation of sectarian divisions by Salafi-jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda further aggravated this crisis. In addition to extensive damage to infrastructure and essential services, structural unemployment at certain points during the crisis exceeded 50%, generating extensive socioeconomic hardship. Only with the gradual establishment of relatively democratic structures, successive electoral processes, and efforts toward political and security reform did the country begin to move toward relative stability (18).

Future Scenarios for Iraq

Following the collapse of the Ba'athist regime, Iraq confronted multiple challenges, including terrorism, extremism, Kurdish separatism, and weaknesses in economic and security governance. Iraq's Constitution is founded on federalism and democracy; however, in practice, internal centrifugal tendencies, inefficiency within the political system, and increasing public dissatisfaction have created considerable uncertainty concerning the future of this system. Moreover, the influence of domestic, regional, and international factors on Iraq's political developments has made forecasting the future of its political system difficult (19). Iraq's Shi'a community is regarded as one of the principal forces supporting the preservation of a unified Iraq, owing to its predominance within the structures of power and geopolitical advantages that enable it to influence internal political processes (20). The economic importance of southern Iraq likewise contributes to maintaining territorial cohesion (21). By contrast, the Kurds display stronger separatist tendencies because of their distinctive historical and cultural identity, although economic constraints and military challenges make full independence difficult to achieve (20). Sunni Arabs, because of their economic dependence on Baghdad and their Arab identity, also have incentives to preserve a unified Iraq, although the establishment of Sunni federal regions may constitute an intermediate solution (20). At the international level, major powers such as the United States and European states have expressed concern regarding Iraq's partition and have provided various forms of support to the central government (19). The two principal uncertainties shaping Iraq's future are the authority of the central government and the intensity of ethnic-sectarian conflict, which could produce different scenarios, including federalism, a cohesive Iraq, or partition (22). Ultimately, possible scenarios include federalism accompanied by intensified conflicts, a cohesive Iraq characterized by reduced conflict, and the partition of Iraq into several entities (23).

Examining the Scenario of Iraq's Partition and Its Implications for the Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Examination of the Scenario of Iraq's Partition

In Iraq's 2014 elections, Western assessments anticipated political fragmentation and tension and expected the previous sectarian-based model, rooted in the regional order associated with the Sykes–Picot Agreement between Britain and France, to continue providing the basis for the formation of a new Iraqi government. Contrary to the expectations of Western governments and Israel, however, the elections were completed with broad Iraqi participation and demonstrated that the majority of Iraqi society, notwithstanding Kurdish and Sunni claims for political advantages, was capable of independently assuming the leading position within the political structure. This development contributed to perceptions of a declining political weight of Sunni groups and heightened concerns among Western states in the region, followed by the movement of ISIS from Syria into Iraq and the creation of instability through a political-security crisis that could ultimately disrupt Iraq's territorial integrity (24). On the other hand, Hermidas Bavand regarded the partition of Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003 as entirely plausible and argued that such a possible partition might benefit Iran because it would weaken Iraq as a historically antagonistic state. He maintained that following Iraq's partition, Shi'a communities in southern Iraq might establish an independent government that would not necessarily enjoy favorable relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, because Iraqi Shi'a could prioritize their Arab identity over religious and ideological motivations (25). Moreover, in light of statements by U.S. officials supporting the establishment of a secular government in Iraq, it appears that the United States would not accept the creation of a religious government aligned with Iran, and any attempt by the Islamic Republic to pursue such an objective could lead to direct confrontation with the United States (26). An examination of probable models for Iraq's future government, together with existing political realities and regional conditions, suggests that the establishment of a weak federal government has at times been viewed as consistent with U.S. policy, thereby increasing concerns about Iraq's possible partition. Moreover, because the nation-state-building process in the Middle East has historically remained incomplete, Iraq is no exception. Throughout several decades of its modern history, the state assumed responsibility for the project of nation-building. Following the U.S. invasion, the collapse of the regime in 2003, and the end of several decades of authoritarian rule based on Arab nationalist ideals, the emergence of diverse political currents and their influence on Iraq's future and political structure became one of the most significant postwar issues (20). One of the political realities acknowledged by Iraqi domestic groups, neighboring states, and extra-regional powers is that, under a genuinely democratic system, Iraq's Shi'a majority would possess substantial electoral and political influence. It is therefore unsurprising that states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel, as well as certain Sunni and Ba'athist groups, have approached such a scenario with reservations or opposition (27).

National Security in the Islamic Republic of Iran

National Interests and Objectives

The national interests and objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran are defined within a principlist discourse influenced by Islamic principles and the Islamic Revolution. Particularly in foreign policy, this discourse pursues national objectives by emphasizing the establishment of a just global order and reform of the structure of international organizations in accordance with Islamic principles and the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. During

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration, Iranian foreign policy emphasized reforming and transforming the international system in pursuit of what it regarded as a desirable Islamic order.

National Security Vision

The national security vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran encompasses the creation of a scientific and dynamic environment for research on security issues, addressing the concerns of the armed forces, and analyzing regional and international developments in the security domain. This approach is intended to strengthen specialized knowledge and enhance appropriate decision-making in the formulation of security policies.

Existing Political-Security Outlook

With regard to political-security developments, particularly in Iraq, the independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region constituted a significant event. The referendum received support from Israel while encountering opposition from neighboring states, including Iran and Turkey. Opposition to the referendum and pressure exerted by the Iraqi central government and neighboring countries intensified regional tensions and raised concerns that Iraq could enter a new phase of ethnic conflict and civil war. These developments unfolded while the threat posed by ISIS terrorism had not been fully eliminated. Overall, these dynamics demonstrate the complexity of the internal and external challenges confronting the Islamic Republic of Iran and illustrate how regional political and security factors influence Iranian policy.

The Establishment of a Kurdish State and Iran's National Security Interests

Historical experience indicates that ethnic separatist tendencies in Iran, particularly in Kurdistan, have generally intensified under two conditions: first, when the central government has been weak, and second, when foreign powers have penetrated ethnic regions. These two conditions have been evident in Iraq, whereas Iran and, to some extent, Turkey have maintained sufficient domestic and regional state capacity to constrain foreign influence within their sovereign territories. Iran, as a multiethnic nation, includes various ethnic groups such as Kurds, Lurs, Kurmanji-speaking communities, and Azerbaijanis. This ethnic and cultural diversity has been recognized as an important source of Iran's national strength and cohesion, while "Iranian national identity" has historically played an important role in maintaining unity among these groups (21). At the same time, the presence of Iranian-related ethnic and cultural communities across neighboring states has strengthened Iran's geostrategic position, although challenges such as foreign intervention and concerns over ethnic separatism persist (5). In contemporary Iranian history, separatist movements among ethnic communities, particularly Azerbaijanis and Kurds, were at various times encouraged by foreign powers such as Russia and Britain; nevertheless, they did not consistently constitute an existential threat to Iran's national security. In the post-revolutionary period, two principal factors have contributed to the emergence of such movements: inadequate state performance in addressing the basic needs of ethnic communities and exploitation by foreign actors, particularly Israeli, U.S., and Saudi security services, of social, economic, political, and cultural vulnerabilities in Iran's border regions (5).

Direct and Spillover Effects of the Establishment of a Kurdish State

Following a referendum and confrontation with the Iraqi central government, a security crisis could rapidly intensify and armed conflict could spread across northeastern Iraq. Such conflict could then extend to other parts of Iraq and, by increasing pressures on ethnic communities in neighboring states, stimulate separatist tendencies in those countries (23). Iraq's partition could also intensify competition over energy resources and transit routes and create conditions for intervention by regionally ambitious states, particularly Turkey, in northern Iraq. ISIS could likewise re-emerge as a threat to Iraqi security (28). The United States and Russia maintain significant interests in Iraq. Although the United States has officially supported Iraq's territorial integrity, Israeli support for Iraqi partition has sometimes been interpreted as reflecting divergent or complementary approaches between Washington and Tel Aviv (23). Russia's position has likewise been interpreted by some observers as indirectly accommodating certain territorial changes, although Moscow has generally avoided explicit support for Iraq's partition. European states generally oppose Iraq's disintegration, while their extensive relations with Iraqi Kurdish actors complicate their positions (28). China also emphasizes the preservation of Iraq's unity. Ultimately, Iraq's partition and a new wave of conflicts across the region could generate more anarchic conditions, weaken regional security, and potentially facilitate Israeli strategic objectives associated with reshaping the regional order and expanding influence (23).

Approaches and Strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran Toward the Crisis of Iraq's Partition

1. Stability and security in the national and regional environment constitute the most essential requirements for the national security, survival, and development of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
2. The most immediate security challenge facing the region and the international community is the condition of insecurity and disorder generated by terrorism and separatism.
3. Barzani-led separatism, under any circumstances, could contribute to the consolidation and expansion of regional insecurity and disorder.
4. Iran could theoretically derive distinctive security, economic, and political benefits from the partition of Iraq, but only if it were to disregard some of its established principles in foreign relations.
5. The continuation of separatist and terrorist crises may reinforce projects associated with a "New Middle East." The United States and Israel may derive strategic benefits from such developments, whereas existing regional states may bear substantial costs.
6. The positions of major global powers, together with the overall positions of other international and regional states, suggest a form of balance between support for and opposition to processes of ethnic separatism.
7. Unlike the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, a process of political fragmentation in West Asia, should it continue, may not remain confined to this region. From this perspective, mobilizing the support of all other interested states around a common approach to containing separatism constitutes both a necessity and an opportunity.

Envisaged Scenarios

The partition of Iraq and the establishment of a Kurdish state, despite domestic and international opposition, could produce several different scenarios. The first scenario, involving the unobstructed establishment of a Kurdish

state, appears unlikely because of numerous political and security constraints. The second scenario, involving immediate and complete control by the Iraqi central government, likewise appears improbable. Under the third scenario, the probability of civil war in Iraq and confrontation between national forces and Kurdish separatists would increase, and such a conflict could evolve into a regional or even international crisis. Under this scenario, intervention by regional and international actors such as Turkey and Israel would be possible, further increasing the complexity of the conflict (23). Given ongoing developments, Iran has its own particular interests and challenges regarding the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity, and these dynamics could generate both threats and opportunities for the long-term security and interests of the Islamic Republic (28). Iraq's partition and foreign intervention could negatively affect regional security and Iran's interests; however, if a territorial reconfiguration were to emerge through an internal agreement without external interference, some observers might consider that it could produce certain benefits for Iran (23). The primary objective, however, should be to prevent the expansion of warfare and ensure peace and stability in the region.

Diplomatic, Operational, and Executive Agendas

Iraq's policies for confronting domestic crises and separatist threats require patience, precision, and broad-based cooperation. Initial priorities include strengthening the participation of more democratically oriented Kurdish currents in the governance of the Kurdistan Region and maintaining the highest possible level of engagement with both Kurdish political institutions and Kurdish society (23). The Iraqi central government should also avoid precipitous military confrontation with Peshmerga forces while simultaneously pursuing international efforts to condemn unilateral separatist actions (28). Arms embargoes and restrictions on the transfer of weapons to the Kurdistan Region, together with regional meetings aimed at preventing partition, may also be considered within the policy agenda (23). Iran, as one of the key regional actors, regards Iraq's national sovereignty and territorial integrity as fundamental principles of its foreign policy and opposes expansionist projects in Iraq (28). At the same time, Iraq requires leaders with trans-ethnic and trans-sectarian perspectives, such as Ayatollah Sistani, who can contribute to preserving national unity; the absence of broadly legitimate leadership of this kind in the post-2003 political order has contributed to numerous difficulties (23). Ultimately, given the role of ISIS and Western influence, these crises have become increasingly complex components of regional political and security strategies (28).

The Plan for Iraq's Partition and Its Impact on Iran's National Security

Iraq's reliance on popular mobilization forces in its confrontation with ISIS reflected weaknesses within the regular armed forces and demonstrated the need to strengthen military capabilities. The fall of Ramadi represented a threat not only to Iraq but also to neighboring countries and had implications for broader regional developments (9).

ISIS employs unconventional tactics that impede rapid military success by anti-ISIS coalitions, thereby reinforcing the perceived need for a more coherent strategy. At the same time, the United States, through legislative initiatives concerning military assistance to Iraq, has sought to influence broader regional policies in ways that critics have argued could facilitate decentralization, weaken the central government, or contribute to partition. Proposals in the United States concerning differentiated military assistance to Iraqi groups generated negative reactions inside and outside Iraq and were interpreted by some as attempts to pressure the Iraqi government and keep the issue of political decentralization on the public agenda. Such policies could create regional security challenges, particularly

for Iran, and potentially weaken the Iran-led resistance strategy (23). Iraq's partition could produce significant geographical and security changes in the Middle East and generate threats to Iran's national security (28).

Discussion

Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, some analyses suggested that Washington would refrain from military intervention because of concerns that the removal of Saddam Hussein could strengthen Iran's regional position. Nevertheless, following the beginning of the Iraq War, Iran rapidly adapted its policies to emerging geopolitical changes and new strategic challenges. During this period, debate arose over whether U.S. policy was intended to generate a broader domino effect of political transformation across the region. Although competing interpretations existed regarding U.S. objectives, including democratization, restructuring of the Iraqi political system, and possible territorial fragmentation, U.S. policy was also criticized for insufficient understanding of the region's complex ethnic and sectarian structures. The ISIS crisis in Iraq, which constituted an immediate threat to Iran's national security, simultaneously created an opportunity for Iran to advance its regional policies and strengthen its international diplomatic position. In this crisis, Iran pursued three important objectives: first, preserving Iraq's territorial integrity; second, confronting Sunni extremist organizations; and third, enhancing Iran's regional role. In this process, Iran demonstrated its ability to act as a coalition-building actor in Iraq while also defining its foreign-policy red lines more clearly. Developments in Iraq demonstrated that Kurdish efforts toward independence faced significant domestic and regional constraints. Through its role in repairing relations between Baghdad and Erbil, Iran contributed to preventing Iraq's partition and constraining Kurdish independence initiatives. Iran also strengthened its international diplomatic position by framing the confrontation with ISIS terrorism as a global security challenge. This development created opportunities for Iran to expand interaction with major European powers, including France and the United Kingdom. Ultimately, the ISIS crisis provided Iran with opportunities to increase regional cooperation with neighboring states and to strengthen more autonomous approaches to regional security crises. These developments also demonstrated Iran's capacity, under conditions of crisis, to contribute to regional stability while protecting its own national security.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran can be regarded as one of the most influential regional actors in Iraq. In the post-Saddam period, Iran has provided extensive support for stability and security in Iraq and for the continuation of the country's political process. Iran has consistently and firmly defended Iraq's territorial integrity and national unity. The clearest manifestation of Iran's position on this issue occurred in relation to the independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In this context, officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran issued repeated warnings, adopted a firm position against the referendum, and implemented several restrictive measures intended to exert pressure on Kurdish authorities. The reduction of exports to the Kurdistan Region, closure of border crossings, and support for Baghdad in applying political and military pressure on Kurdish separatist currents were particularly important in this respect. Iran has multiple reasons for supporting a unified Iraq and opposing extensive federalism, confederalism, and the partition of Iraq. The implications of extensive federalism or confederalism, and particularly Iraq's partition, for Iran's territorial integrity and national cohesion are significant, especially because the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq could directly influence centrifugal tendencies among Iranian Kurds.

Furthermore, the Iraqi government has developed relatively favorable relations with Iran and has created important opportunities for the Islamic Republic. Another important consideration is the impact of Iraq's partition and the associated insecurity on regional stability, including Iran's national security. This has encouraged Tehran to oppose centrifugal processes and separatist tendencies in Iraq. Consequently, Iran is one of the principal supporters of a unified Iraq and plays an important role in preventing Kurdish independence. Turkey's sensitivity toward developments in Iraq has consistently been closely connected to the Kurdish issue and to the potential impact of developments in Iraqi Kurdistan on Turkey's Kurdish population. Despite Turkey's substantial political and economic relations with the Kurdistan Region and the Barzani leadership, Ankara has consistently emphasized its strategic interest in preserving a unified Iraq and opposing Kurdish independence. This explains Turkey's strong reaction to the Kurdistan independence referendum at multiple levels. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, referring to the referendum, warned that all options available to Turkey, including economic measures as well as air and ground military measures, remained under consideration. He also accused Masoud Barzani, then President of the Kurdistan Region, of betrayal for proceeding with the independence referendum and warned that such a move could create the danger of an "ethnic war" in the region. Turkey possesses several instruments through which it can exert pressure on Iraqi Kurdish authorities, including Iraq's transportation links to Europe, energy pipelines, and influence over the water resources of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which it may employ when necessary. Saudi Arabia, as one of the most important Arab actors in Iraq's surrounding environment, has likewise had limited incentive to support extensive federalism, confederalism, or the partition of Iraq and has generally supported the preservation of a unified Iraqi state. Iraq's Arab identity and the possible consequences of its partition for Saudi territorial integrity and national security are among the factors contributing to this approach. For Saudi Arabia, the significance of Arab identity, particularly in its strategic positioning vis-à-vis Iran and Turkey, has influenced the Saudi leadership's approach toward developments in the Arab world, including Iraq. This shared Arab identity, linking Arab states and societies, has also contributed to opposition to the fragmentation of Arab countries. Despite Riyadh's initially confrontational approach toward post-Saddam Iraq, the reopening of the Saudi embassy in Iraq and subsequent expansion of bilateral relations have reflected a more positive Saudi approach. Accordingly, following this policy adjustment, Saudi Arabia has had little strategic incentive to promote extensive instability or support centrifugal processes in Iraq. This position was clearly reflected in Saudi opposition to the Kurdistan independence referendum.

Israeli officials have at different times expressed support for political arrangements that would weaken or fragment large regional states such as Iraq and have argued that the emergence of an independent Kurdish state could improve Israel's security environment by strengthening relations between Israelis and Kurds. The importance Israel attributes to relations with non-Arab ethnic groups and states in the region, historically associated with variants of a "periphery strategy," has also been cited as one reason for Israeli support for Kurdish independence and possible Iraqi fragmentation. Strategic competition with Iran and Syria, and at times with Turkey, could also be affected by the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Accordingly, alongside its support for Kurdish independence, Israel has emphasized what it portrays as historical similarities and affinities between Israel and Kurdistan.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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