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## From Identity Convergence to Social Divergence: A Study of the Interaction of the Islamic Republic of Iran with Iraqi Shi'a Parties, 2003-2021

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### Abstract

The present study aims to identify and analyze the vulnerabilities, challenges, and consequences of the Islamic Republic of Iran's interaction with Iraq's Shi'a parties from 2003 to 2021. The theoretical framework of the research is based on the constructivist approach, which enables a simultaneous explanation of the role of political and religious identities, beliefs, and discourses in shaping the behavior of Iran and the Shi'a parties. This approach demonstrates that Iran's policies and support were influenced by material and security interests and identity-based and structural interpretations of Iraq's domestic and regional relations. The research method is quantitative-descriptive-analytical, with data collected through questionnaires distributed among Iranian and Iraqi political, cultural, and academic elites, and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The findings indicate that Iran's interactions with Iraq's Shi'a parties, within the framework of constructivism, contributed to consolidating the parties' positions, strengthening their identity and discursive cohesion, and fostering ideological alliances. However, in some cases, these interactions led to social divergence, increased internal divisions, and opened space for the influence of regional and extra-regional rivals. This analysis underscores that Iran's international behavior and policies cannot be understood solely through the lens of material interests, but must also be examined within the framework of Iraq's Shi'a identities, beliefs, and discourses. The study concludes by emphasizing the necessity of adopting a balanced policy grounded in identity-based understanding and respect for Iraq's independence.

**Keywords:** Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq's Shi'a parties, Constructivism, Realism, Foreign Policy, Convergence, Divergence

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## Introduction

The relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq entered a new phase after the fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003, during which Iraqi Shi'a parties emerged as the most significant political actors, playing a central role in bilateral interactions. Given geographical proximity and shared religious, cultural, and historical ties, Iran has consistently sought to consolidate its position in Iraq's political landscape through political, financial, and military support for these parties.

Over the past two decades, developments in Iraq demonstrate that these interactions, despite notable achievements in strengthening the position of Shi'a parties and expanding security and political cooperation between the two countries, have also been accompanied by challenges and vulnerabilities. These challenges include internal rivalries and divisions among Shi'a parties, the erosion of their popular legitimacy, and the increased opportunity for regional and extra-regional powers—such as the United States and Saudi Arabia—to penetrate Iraq's political structure. This situation has caused Iran's policies to simultaneously play both a reinforcing and weakening role for the Shi'a parties: on the one hand, contributing to the consolidation of their power, while on the other, in some instances, leading to social divergence and the weakening of Shi'a cohesion.

From a theoretical perspective, explaining this situation requires a constructivist approach. This perspective emphasizes the role of identities, values, beliefs, and discourses in international relations. It enables a simultaneous analysis of the identity-related and normative

dimensions of the interactions between Iran and Iraqi Shi'a parties. According to this view, Iran's behavior and the responses of the Shi'a parties cannot be understood solely through material interests. However, they must also be examined within the framework of shared and divergent Shi'a identities and discourses in Iraq.

The research method employed in this study is quantitative-descriptive-analytical. The statistical population consists of individuals with responsibilities or experience concerning Iraq, including former and current Iranian cultural attachés in Iraq, the Iraqi cultural attaché in Iran, officials from the Public Relations Department of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, diplomats, cultural officials, and university administrators active in the fields of law and political science. Data were collected through electronic questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS software.

The main objective of this article is to identify and analyze the consequences, challenges, and vulnerabilities of the Islamic Republic of Iran's interactions with Iraqi Shi'a parties between 2003 and 2021, as well as to assess the extent of their impact on intra-Shi'a unity and Iran-Iraq relations. The central research question is: How have the interactions and policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran with Iraqi Shi'a parties between 2003 and 2021 had on Shi'a internal cohesion and Iran-Iraq relations, and how have they led to identity-based and social convergence or divergence?

This research hypothesizes that Iran's policies and interactions with Iraqi Shi'a parties, while consolidating the position of these parties within Iraq's political structure, have at certain

junctures also generated social divergence, deepened internal divisions, and facilitated the penetration of regional and extra-regional powers.

### **Literature Review and Research Background**

Following the fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003, numerous studies have been published regarding the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq, particularly its interactions with Shi'a parties. While these studies have illuminated significant aspects of Iran-Iraq relations, they have paid comparatively less attention to the identity-related and social challenges arising from such interactions.

A critical study in this regard is a master's thesis entitled "Examining the Role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Consolidating Iraqi Shi'a Movements with Emphasis on the Nouri al-Maliki Government" (Allameh Tabataba'i University, 2023). This research demonstrated that Iran significantly strengthened the State of Law Coalition through financial and security support. However, it also contributed to the widening of rifts among Shi'a groups. The limitation of this study lies in its focus on a single period and a single actor (al-Maliki), whereas the present research encompasses the entire period from 2003 to 2021.

The book "Iran and the Shi'as of Iraq: Politics and Diplomacy after the Fall of Saddam" (2020) likewise examines Iran's role in Iraq's domestic politics and regional relations. However, its primary focus lies on diplomatic and geopolitical dimensions, focusing less on social challenges and intra-Shi'a dynamics.

Similarly, the doctoral dissertation "The Regional Strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq (2003-2018)" analyzes Iran's security and military policies and its interactions with extra-regional actors. Despite its importance, this study emphasizes the macro-strategic level and devotes less attention to the direct impact of these policies on the cohesion or divergence of Iraqi Shi'a parties.

Articles such as "The Influence of Foreign Powers in Iraq after the Fall of Saddam: A Case Study of Iran and Saudi Arabia" (2019) and "Iran's Political Objectives in Iraq after 2003" (Abd al-Amir Hadi Balbul al-Umari and Zahir Abd al-Zahra al-Rubaie, 2019) focus primarily on regional rivalries and Iran's role in expanding political influence. However, these interactions' identity-related dimensions and social consequences receive little attention.

On the other hand, the article "Assessing the Capacity of Iraqi Shi'as and Its Impact on the Axis of Resistance" (Qasemi, 2021) and the book "Shi'a Political Parties in Iraq: History, Transformations, and Roles" (2017) examine the capacities of Iraqi Shi'as from a broader perspective. Nevertheless, they do not specifically address the vulnerabilities arising from Iran's policies in its interactions with Shi'a parties.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to fill the existing gap in the literature. This research analyzes Iran's supportive role by adopting a constructivist approach and focusing on 2003-2021. It examines the identity-related and social consequences of its interactions with Iraqi Shi'a parties and the resulting vulnerabilities.

## Theoretical Framework: Constructivism

### Constructivist Theory

Constructivism is among the theories with an anti-materialist ontology. It adopts a critical approach that argues that reductionist perspectives are insufficient because they largely neglect culture and the set of shared ideas in analyzing international issues. Therefore, a comprehensive interpretation of the global arena must also consider ideas, norms, and culture (Lupovici, 2009, p. 18). From the constructivist perspective, the international system is constituted by the distribution of ideas rather than material capabilities. Priority belongs to ideas and beliefs in the debate between materiality and meaning.

The ontological dimension, which is a central proposition of constructivist metatheory, comprises three fundamental claims:

Cognitive structures are as important as material structures.

It is identities that shape interests and actions;

Agents and structures mutually constitute one another (Wendt, 1999).

In general, constructivist theory is categorized into three types based on the level of analysis: systemic constructivism, domestic constructivism, and holistic constructivism.

Systemic constructivism, like neorealism, provides a systemic analysis of developments in international relations. However, unlike neorealism, constructivism primarily focuses on the normative structures of the international environment while largely ignoring domestic normative structures. Alexander Wendt, the foremost theorist of systemic constructivism,

identifies two types of state identities: social and corporate (collective) identities.

Corporate identity refers to a state's cultural, ideological, material, and human characteristics, clarifying its domestic nature. Social identity, conversely, pertains to the concept of a state's presentation of itself and others in international relations. According to Wendt, international politics is the outcome of social identity (Wendt, 1994: 385). Social identity emerges through interaction among actors. In these social interactions, states construct meaningful structures and send signals and messages to one another based on their perceptions of themselves and others. States interpret these messages according to their identities and meaning structures, determining friends and enemies in international relations (Moshirzadeh, 2007, p. 322).

Unlike systemic constructivism, domestic constructivism focuses exclusively on the relationships between internal norms and meaning structures (Reus-Smit, 2001, p. 20). This branch emphasizes internal normative changes in the concepts of self and others, and how these changes influence cooperation or competition among actors. According to this perspective, domestic social processes, as the primary source of identity formation, can determine state interests independently of their international interactions (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 68).

Holistic constructivism challenges the duality between domestic and systemic structures, emphasizing normative constructs at both national and international levels. It seeks to provide an integrated analysis of factors influencing state identities and interests by bridging national and international levels of analysis

(Reus-Smit, 2001, p. 221). Koslowski and Kratochwil, proponents of holistic constructivism, argue that social and corporate identities, as analytical perspectives and dual aspects of a unified socio-political order, shape state behavior. Corporate identity exists before social identity and is formed before

international interactions (Alons, 2007, p. 211). From this perspective, a state's foreign policy results from the interaction between social identity (international level) and corporate identity (national level) (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998: 265).

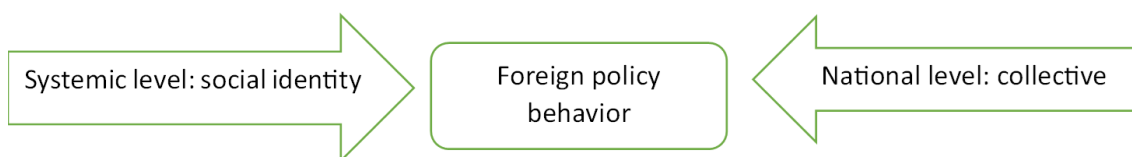


Diagram 1: The logic of holistic constructivism

Based on the holistic constructivist approach, it can be argued that the Islamic Republic of Iran's national identity has been shaped by multiple discourses that have guided Iranian foreign policy from the time of the Islamic Revolution to the present. At the international level, the nature of the norms governing international relations—peaceful or aggressive—has played a significant role in moderating or intensifying these discourses.

According to this perspective, the domestic and international normative environments influence Iran's foreign policy behavior. In other words, Iranian foreign policy stems partly from the layers and complexities inherent within the domestic context. Understanding these complexities requires a reasoned understanding of the interactions, underlying structures, and value system of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution (Sari' al-Qalam, 2000, p. 47). This value system defines the country's identity in the international system, while the type of identity determines the foreign policy

orientation. As Michael Smith notes, foreign policy is a phenomenon that emerges from identity (Smith, 2000, p. 16).

On the other hand, the nature of the international normative environment, whether peaceful or aggressive, moderates or intensifies this identity within foreign policy. This dynamic will be further elaborated below. Thus, the formation of Iran's identity in the international system results from a bidirectional process and emerges from the interaction between domestic and international normative environments.

To analyze Iran's foreign policy within the framework of holistic constructivism, it is first necessary to explain the fundamental discourses that govern and give meaning to its foreign policy. This discursive framework primarily derives from the Islamic Revolution, Islam, the Shi'a political-religious perspective, Imam Khomeini's (RA) views, the Constitution, and the Supreme Leadership.

### **Convergence and Divergence in the Constructivist Approach**

In constructivism, identities, beliefs, and values are central in shaping social and political interactions (Wendt, 1999). One of the key concepts within this framework is convergence and divergence, which reflect the patterns of interaction and cohesion among social and political actors within a shared identity or discursive context.

Convergence refers to actors coordinating their goals and behaviors due to shared identities, values, and fundamental beliefs (Hopf, 2002). Such coordination can occur at the individual, group, or collective level and serves as a basis for cohesion, cooperation, and the consolidation of social and political positions.

Conversely, divergence arises when differences in interpreting identities, values, or objectives lead to gaps and disagreements among actors (Hopf, 1998). Divergence can result from conflicts in attitudes, discourses, or strategic approaches, often leading to reduced cohesion, increased tension, and internal competition. In many constructivist studies, divergence is not merely seen as a source of vulnerability or weakening but also as a natural—and sometimes constructive—process in social interactions, as conflicts and disagreements can prompt the redefinition of identities and the reconstruction of values (Checkel, 1998).

Constructivist research has shown that convergence and divergence often co-occur within social and political systems, and their intensity and direction depend on how identities are interpreted, the level of interaction among actors, and prevailing discourses (Finemore & Sikkink, 2001). In other words,

actors may converge on specific identity or value dimensions while diverging on others, which explains the complexity of social and political interactions.

Therefore, analyzing convergence and divergence within the constructivist framework focuses on how social and identity cohesion or fragmentation emerge among actors. This approach demonstrates that identities and discourses play a determining role in convergence and cooperation and can serve as sources of divergence and tension. Understanding them is thus essential for explaining social and political behavior.

### **Fundamental Discourses of Iran's Foreign Policy**

The revolutionary discourse simultaneously challenged the redefinition of fundamental concepts in domestic and foreign policy—such as national goals, national interests, national power, and national values—as well as the dominant global discourse and the prevailing order of the international system (Tajik et al., 2003, pp. 61-62). In the political sphere, discourse encompasses a set of meanings and symbols that enable a deeper understanding and explanation of states' international behavior (George, 1994, pp. 29-30). More broadly, discourse can be defined as "any activity within the framework of cultural interactions that leads to the exchange of meaning" (Tajik, 1999: 6). Discourses are intertwined with linguistic and extra-linguistic structures and emerge through social processes and interactions within a specific temporal and spatial context (Bashir, 2005: 8-14). In fact, the prevailing discourses within any society shape that society's identity and semantic structures,

which in turn give direction and meaning to foreign policy (Karami, 2004, p. 11). As Ted Hopf argues, "identities play a decisive role in society, for they tell you and others who you are, and they tell you who others are" (Hopf, 1998, p. 175).

Revolutions typically possess unique features and objectives; therefore, they do not necessarily adhere to conventional norms and expected behaviors in international relations (Dehghani Firozabadi, 2008, p. 4). Every discourse contains several central concepts, the most important of which are the signifier, the signified, and articulation. Through these, a discourse can attain a hegemonic position within society. According to Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is the result of articulation, whereby relations among signifiers are stabilized so that their signifiers are redefined through new articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). Political discursive articulation occurs around a central signifier, or nodal point (Torfing, 1999, p. 98). The nodal point constitutes the core of each discourse; all signifiers are articulated in relation to it. Before articulation, nodal points exist as floating signifiers that may assume multiple signifiers. Ultimately, each discourse, based on its semantic system, highlights those signifiers compatible with its own order while relegating others to the field of discursivity (Kasraei & Pouzesh Shirazi, 2009, p. 344). Thus, before their signifiers are stabilized, signifiers belong to the discursivity field, and the meaning of a nodal point is consolidated through articulation.

Within Iran's foreign policy discourse, the anti-Western revolutionary identity constitutes the nodal point around which signifiers are organized into chains of equivalence that

give meaning to the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Since the Islamic Revolution, the new foreign political identity has been persistently threatened by competing identities, particularly the secular Western identity. The Islamic Republic has continuously emphasized its anti-Western revolutionary identity to counter these identity-based threats, thereby constructing a chain of equivalence composed of diverse signifiers organized around this new identity (Mohammad Nia, 2012, p. 37).

Iran's foreign policy discourse thus comprises a set of signifiers and equivalences, each referring to a specific meaning within the semantic order of the revolutionary discourse. In this process, floating signifiers such as resistance, opposition to domination, anti-imperialism, independence, Islamic unity, and responsibility have been articulated around the central signifier of the anti-Western revolutionary identity. These articulations have endowed them with new meanings and elevated their significance in Iran's foreign policy. Indeed, this chain of equivalence, by marginalizing rival discourses, has contributed to the homogenization of foreign policy discourse. Therefore, understanding Iran's foreign policy requires grasping this discursive constellation, which shapes the identity structure of the Islamic Republic and distinguishes its foreign policy from that of other states.

1. The principal identity-constructing discourses of the Islamic Republic include:
2. Discourse of resistance and opposition to domination
3. Responsibility-oriented discourse
4. Self-reliance and economic independence (resilient economy)



5. Islamic unity and strengthening relations with Muslim countries
6. Discourse of "justice" and reform of the global governance system
7. Enemy discourse

### **Identity Foundations and Paradigms of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Political geographers begin the study of a country or state by examining the causes of its emergence, representing the foundational idea behind the establishment of the state. After their formation, states require the coordination and alignment of their people to sustain their existence. The realization of this goal depends on the state's ability to promote the necessity of its founding political idea, thereby securing the allegiance of the populations across different regions of the country and shaping the nation's collective identity (Hafez Nia, 2002, p. 13).

Identity provides self-understanding concerning others; identities constitute the foundation of interests. Agents do not possess sets of interests independent of their societal context to pursue (Wendt, 1992: 398). Identities have no inherent individual meaning; instead, they are fundamentally social constructs, gaining significance through interaction with others. Political identities, likewise, are consistently shaped within the framework of institutionalized interactions between political actors. Since state and national identities are formed and defined in relation to other states and nations, the identities of political actors are also constituted through their relationships with

entities located beyond their territorial boundaries.

Accordingly, the principal identity foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be identified as follows:

1. Religion and sect
2. Language
3. Race and ethnicity
4. History
5. Doctrinal and Islamic orientation
6. Discourse of justice-seeking
7. Commitment to the Palestinian cause
8. System of religious democracy
9. Confrontation with U.S. hegemony
10. Export of the Islamic Revolution

### **The Impact of the Islamic Revolution of Iran on Iraqi Shi'a Parties Prior to 2003**

The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 brought about a fundamental transformation in the political and social structures of the region. It exerted a profound influence on the Shi'a community of Iraq. Following the revolution's victory, Iraqi Shi'a parties such as the Islamic Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution, inspired by the Iranian experience, expanded their political organization and social activities (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2008).

Drawing upon the discourse of the Iranian Revolution, these parties gradually strengthened their role in resisting the Ba'ath regime in Iraq and expanded their religious, educational, and political initiatives. The Revolution provided a foundation for increased legitimacy and public trust in these groups. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, they played a decisive role in Iraq's political landscape



(Mohammadnia, 2012). The Supreme Council, with its military wing—the Badr Organization—and the al-Da'wa Party, emerged as two of Iraq's most prominent revolutionary political groups.

At the same time, the Revolution prompted certain traditional and secular Shi'a currents in Iraq to grow wary of Iran's ideological influence, at times adopting independent positions. This dynamic illustrates the complexity of relations between Iraqi Shi'a parties and the impact of the Iranian Revolution on their identity and strategic orientations (Lupovici, 2009).

Another significant consequence of the revolution was strengthening the Shi'a parties' educational and social networks. Through Iran's support in religious training and political organization, these groups enhanced their managerial and political capacities, enabling them to emerge as principal actors in Iraq's post-Ba'ath political developments (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 1998).

In sum, the Islamic Revolution of Iran played a pivotal role in shaping and empowering Iraqi Shi'a parties, profoundly influencing the trajectory of Iraq's political developments in the ensuing decades. These effects encompassed the consolidation of Shi'a parties' position and the challenges arising from sensitivities among certain currents to perceived foreign influence.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, as a historical turning point, left a lasting impact not only on Iran but also across the broader Middle East, particularly within Shi'a communities. It served as a source of inspiration for Iraqi Shi'a parties that, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, were engaged in confrontation with Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.

The influence of the Islamic Revolution on Iraqi Shi'a parties can be analyzed from several perspectives:

### **The Impact of the Iranian Islamic Revolution on Iraqi Shi'a Parties before 2003**

1. **Strengthening Shi'a Religious and Political Identity:** The Islamic Revolution of Iran, through the establishment of a state founded on Shi'a principles and the concept of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), reinforced the religious identity of Shi'a communities across the region. For Iraqi Shi'a parties, this transformation was a primary source of inspiration, strengthening their resolve against Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime, which had long pursued repressive policies against Shi'as. Parties such as the Islamic Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) were profoundly influenced by the Iranian Revolution, with many of their leaders benefiting from Iran's political and spiritual support.
2. **Fostering Unity and Convergence among Shi'a Parties:** Following the Iranian Revolution, Tehran actively sought to promote unity among Shi'a groups in Iraq, particularly those resisting the Ba'athist government. Many Iraqi Shi'a leaders sought refuge in Iran, where they could take advantage of direct support to organize and strengthen their resistance movements. A prominent example of this is the establishment of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in 1982 in Iran, which

became one of the leading Shi'a organizations in Iraq and maintained close ties with Tehran.

3. **Financial and Military Support:** The Islamic Revolution enabled Iran to provide financial and military assistance to Iraqi Shi'a groups. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Iran offered extensive support to Shi'a parties opposing Saddam Hussein. This assistance included the supply of weapons, military training, and logistical support. The Islamic Da'wa Party and SCIRI were among the primary beneficiaries of such aid.
4. **Revolutionary and Islamic Resistance Ideals:** The revolutionary and anti-authoritarian ideals of the Iranian Revolution inspired Iraqi Shi'a parties. These parties adopted the discourse of the Iranian Revolution to continue their resistance against the Ba'athist regime and advocate for the rights of Iraqi Shi'as. Moreover, establishing an Islamic government based on Shi'a principles gained significant prominence among the leadership of Iraqi Shi'a organizations.

Following 2003, the Shi'a parties of Iraq gradually began their development and organizational consolidation process by relying on their newly gained experience of political power. Among them, three parties occupied a more prominent position: the Supreme Council, led by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim; the al-Da'wa Party, led by Nouri al-Maliki; and the Sadrist Movement, under the leadership of Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr. During the electoral cycles of 2006-2010 and 2010-2014, the al-Da'wa Party, under the leadership of al-

Maliki, played a central role, with the prime ministership of Iraq emerging from this current. With the rise of the ISIS crisis and the intensification of internal disputes among the Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish blocs, Haider al-Abadi of the al-Da'wa Party assumed leadership and governance of the country, holding the premiership until Iraq's liberation in 2018.

In the 2018 elections, Adel Abdul Mahdi, a figure closely associated with the Supreme Council, succeeded in securing the office of prime minister; however, due to various factors, civil movements, backed by both domestic and foreign support, brought down his one-year government and forced his resignation. During this period, the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran for Shi'a parties and their cohesion was clearly evident. With the rise of the civil movement in 2019, anti-Iranian sentiment in Iraq reached its peak, as this movement believed that Iran was the principal backer of the Shi'a parties and a guarantor of their power through the support of the Islamic Republic. Subsequently, Mustafa al-Kadhimi was appointed prime minister of Iraq and governed until new elections were held. Ultimately, following the elections and until 2025, Muhammad Shia al-Sudani, an independent figure backed by other political parties, rose to prime minister. The Islamic Republic of Iran has maintained close and cordial relations with Iraqi Shi'a parties under the framework of the Coordination Structure. This framework encompasses almost all traditional Shi'a parties, except the Sadrist Movement and civil groups such as the Tishreen Movement, which cannot be said to share warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Having introduced the influential Shi'a parties of the Republic of Iraq from 2003 to 2022, the

research sought to interview Iraqi officials, researchers, and political experts to solicit their views regarding the political challenges the Islamic Republic of Iran faced concerning Iraq's Shi'a parties. The aim was to categorize these challenges and ultimately provide recommendations for enhancing Iran's relations with these parties. During this study, efforts were made to conduct interviews with 15 Iranian experts, officials, and scholars, and their perspectives were categorized in the following sections. Furthermore, recognizing the necessity of the issue, a questionnaire—consisting of 21 questions—was distributed electronically in Arabic and Persian among more than 50 Iranian and Iraqi elites (second-tier officials). The collected responses, aligned with the research questions, objectives, and hypotheses, were analyzed to conclude.

The questionnaire addressed the following questions:

1. Has the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards Iraq's Shi'a parties led to the empowerment of the Shi'a in Iraq?
2. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties ensured their continued presence in power in Iraq?
3. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties enhanced Iran's popularity in Iraq?
4. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties resulted in the establishment of an anti-imperialist front in Iraq?
5. Does Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties depend on the discourse (ideology) of each party?
6. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties strengthened intergovernmental relations between the two countries?
7. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties facilitated the presence of rivals (Saudi Arabia and the United States) among Iraqi Shi'a groups?
8. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties caused a rift between the Shi'a populace and political parties?
9. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties promoted Iraqi national unity?
10. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties led to the rise of anti-Iranian sentiment among Iraqis?
11. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties contributed to Iraq's independence from foreign adversaries?
12. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties facilitated state-building in Iraq?
13. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties contributed to the formation of Shi'a armed groups?
14. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties strengthened Iraq's official military forces (al-Hashd al-Sha'bi)?
15. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties enhanced public participation in elections?
16. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties led to the establishment of secular Shi'a parties?
17. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties increased corruption among Iraqi political parties?
18. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties contributed to the emergence of the Tishreen Movement in 2019?
19. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties resulted in the development of the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (in the socio-political sphere)?
20. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties strengthened the civil current in Iraq?

21. Has Iran's policy towards Iraq's Shi'a parties led to the alignment of the Marja'iyya (Grand Ayatollah Sistani) with the state?

### Analysis of Questionnaires and Research Findings

#### Description of Collected Data:

Based on the research questions, objectives, and hypotheses, 21 questions were formulated in consultation with the academic supervisor and distributed among 57 Iranian and Iraqi elites. In this questionnaire, respondents were asked to provide answers on a five-point Likert scale ranging from very low, low, moderate, high, to very high. Among the participants, 13 were Iranian officials and 44 were Iraqi officials, meaning that 22.08% of the

respondents were Iranian and 77.92% were Iraqi. The larger proportion of Iraqi respondents was intentional, as the study primarily sought to capture Iraqi perspectives and positions regarding the challenges of the Islamic Republic of Iran's policies in Iraq. Furthermore, given the broader availability of the statistical population in Iraq, the number of Iraqi participants exceeded that of the Iranian participants.

#### Analysis of Findings Based on Statistical Tests:

In this study, the responses of experts and elites were analyzed, and the mean and standard deviation of each question were calculated. The table below presents the mean scores for each question across all respondents and the separate mean scores for Iranian and Iraqi participants.

Average overall scores (Iranians and Iraqis)	Average Iranian scores	Average Iraqi scores	Difference in average question scores between Iranian and Iraqi participants
Question 1: 3.70	Question 1: 3.38	Question 1: 3.80	Question 1: -0.41 (Iranians less)
Question 2: 3.84	Question 2: 3.69	Question 2: 3.89	Question 2: -0.19 (Iranians less)
Question 3: 2.39	Question 3: 1.85	Question 3: 2.55	Question 3: -0.70 (Iranians less)
Question 4: 3.14	Question 4: 2.46	Question 4: 3.34	Question 4: -0.88 (Iranians less)
Question 5: 2.79	Question 5: 3.38	Question 5: 2.61	Question 5: +0.77 (Iranians more)
Question 6: 3.72	Question 6: 3.46	Question 6: 3.80	Question 6: -0.33 (Iranians less)
Question 7: 3.53	Question 7: 3.23	Question 7: 3.61	Question 7: -0.38 (Iranians less)
Question 8: 3.16	Question 8: 3.62	Question 8: 3.02	Question 8: +0.59 (Iranians more)
Question 9: 2.79	Question 9: 2.15	Question 9: 2.98	Question 9: -0.82 (Iranians less)
Question 10: 2.44	Question 10: 2.62	Question 10: 2.39	Question 10: +0.23 (Iranians more)
Question 11: 2.98	Question 11: 2.54	Question 11: 3.11	Question 11: -0.58 (Iranians less)
Question 12: 2.86	Question 12: 3.15	Question 12: 2.77	Question 12: +0.38 (Iranians more)
Question 13: 4.23	Question 13: 4.08	Question 13: 4.27	Question 13: -0.20 (Iranians less)
Question 14: 4.35	Question 14: 4.62	Question 14: 4.27	Question 14: +0.34 (Iranians more)

Question 15: 2.51	Question 15: 1.85	Question 15: 2.70	Question 15: -0.86 (Iranians less)
Question 16: 2.39	Question 16: 2.77	Question 16: 2.27	Question 16: +0.50 (Iranians more)
Question 17: 3.16	Question 17: 3.31	Question 17: 3.11	Question 17: +0.19 (Iranians more)
Question 18: 2.81	Question 18: 3.08	Question 18: 2.73	Question 18: +0.35 (Iranians more)
Question 19: 2.67	Question 19: 2.54	Question 19: 2.70	Question 19: -0.17 (Iranians less)
Question 20: 2.35	Question 20: 2.54	Question 20: 2.30	Question 20: +0.24 (Iranians more)
Question 21: 2.65	Question 21: 2.31	Question 21: 2.75	Question 21: -0.44 (Iranians less)

## Questionnaire Analysis: From Identity Convergence to Social Divergence

### 1 – Introduction to the Analysis

The collected questionnaires from Iranian and Iraqi experts reflect differing perceptions of the Islamic Republic of Iran's policies toward Iraqi Shi'a parties. Using the constructivist framework, it is evident that Iran's behavior is influenced not only by power calculations but also significantly by the Shi'a parties' identities, discourses, and socio-political beliefs. The analysis below is structured around three axes: identity convergence, social divergence, and identity-political outcomes.

### 2 – Analysis of Identity Convergence Relevant questions: 1, 2, 4, 6, 12, 14

- **Strengthening Shiism and party cohesion (Questions 1 & 2):** The average scores show that Iranians (3.38 and 3.69) are slightly less convinced than Iraqis (3.80 and 3.89) of the positive impact of Iran's policies. From a constructivist perspective, this discrepancy indicates that Iraqi experts have experienced more tangible effects of Iran's support on the political identity and power of Shi'a parties, whereas Iranians focused less on identity impact.
- **Formation of an anti-imperialist front (Question 4):** A notable

difference of -0.88 (Iranians lower) reflects differing views regarding Iran's impact on ideological discourses in Iraq. Iraqis perceive these policies as a driver of ideological convergence and establishing regional fronts.

- **Iran-Iraq governmental relations (Question 6):** A difference of -0.33 shows relatively high convergence; Iran's policies have strengthened formal and identity-based ties between the two countries.
- **State-building and strengthening formal military groups (Questions 12 & 14):** These questions indicate that Iran's support has contributed to consolidating party power and institutionalizing Shi'a state and security structures. Average scores show minor differences, indicating relative agreement between Iranians and Iraqis.

**Conclusion:** The identity convergence axis shows Iran's policies have reinforced Shi'a identity and party cohesion, stabilized their power, and fostered shared ideological discourses.

### 3 – Analysis of Social Divergence Relevant questions: 7, 8, 10, 11, 15, 17

- **Influence of rivals (Question 7):** A difference of -0.38 shows that

Iranians are slightly less aware of the presence of Saudi Arabia and the U.S. among Shi'as than Iraqis. This difference reflects divergent perceptions of threat and the presence of regional competitors.

- **Gap between people and parties (Question 8):** A +0.59 difference (Iranians higher) indicates that Iranians perceive a greater effect of their policies in creating intra-party divides.
- **Iran phobia (Question 10) and Iraqi independence (Question 11):** Minor differences (+0.23 and -0.58) suggest that some policies may have decreased Iran's legitimacy among parts of Iraqi society, reflecting social divergence and shifting perceptions regarding Iran's influence.
- **Participation and corruption (Questions 15 & 17):** Differences of -0.86 and +0.19 indicate that some policies reduced public participation and increased structural problems, contributing to social divergence and weakening internal party cohesion.

**Conclusion:** The social divergence axis demonstrates that Iran's policies, in addition to their positive effects, have caused divisions, heightened competition, and reduced social cohesion among parties and the population.

#### 4 – Identity and Discursive Outcomes Relevant questions: 5, 3, 9, 13, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21

- **Party ideological dependency (Question 5):** A +0.77 difference (Iranians higher) indicates that Iranians perceive party discourse as highly influential in Iran-Iraq interactions.
- **Iran's popularity (Question 3) and national unity (Question 9):** Differences of -0.70 and -0.82 suggest Iran's policies have not fully secured popularity or national unity; the

discrepancy between Iranian and Iraqi perceptions reflects different understandings of political identity and social legitimacy.

- **Formation of armed groups and social movements (Questions 13, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21):** These questions show identity and structural consequences. Average scores indicate minor differences, with convergence observed in some areas (Question 14: strengthening al-Hashd al-Sha'abi) and divergence in others (Question 19: the Wilayat al-Faqih movement).

**Conclusion:** Iran's policies have shaped specific discourses and identity-based movements, but in some domains, they have also led to divergence and reduced internal and social legitimacy.

#### 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of the questionnaire data indicates:

1. **Iran's policies as a factor for identity convergence:** Iran's policies have been a significant driver of identity convergence among Shi'a parties, strengthening collective religious identity.
2. **Simultaneous social divergence:** Some policies, however, have caused social divergence, intra-party splits, and shifts in public perception of Iran. This was particularly evident in 2019 with the Tishreen movement and anti-Iranian slogans in southern regions. Additionally, gaps between political parties and the public, and voter turnout below 40%, indicate a lack of public trust in Shi'a parties aligned with Iran.



3. **Differences in Iranian and Iraqi perceptions:** The divergence between Iranian and Iraqi viewpoints reflects differences in the perception of identity, discourse, and social beliefs, which can be explained through the constructivist framework.
4. **Diverse outcomes of Iran's engagement:** The analysis shows Iran's interactions with Iraqi Shi'a parties have mixed consequences: positive in consolidating power and cohesion, and negative in creating gaps and opportunities for rival influence.

**To reduce divergence and enhance convergence, the following recommendations are proposed:**

1. **Respect for national sovereignty and state-centric approach:** Focus on supporting Iraq's official institutions (government, army, parliament) rather than relying solely on paramilitary groups.
2. **Cultural and public diplomacy:** Expand scientific, educational, media, and social ties to create sustainable "people-to-people" connections and reduce political sensitivities.
3. **Balance in political relations:** Engage with all political, ethnic, and religious currents to avoid monopolization and one-sided favoritism.
4. **Support for state-building processes:** Strengthen the army, police, and legal institutions to consolidate government authority and reduce parallel competition.
5. **Management of regional and extra-regional competition:** Utilize multilateral diplomacy, reduce confrontation with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, and focus on soft power tools.
6. **Conditional support based on transparency and efficiency:** Back groups that adhere to Iraq's national interests, fight corruption, and enjoy genuine popular support.
7. **Strengthen relations with the Najaf religious authority:** Respect the independence of traditional religious authority and avoid any actions that may cause conflict or confrontation.
8. **Mediation to reduce Shi'a splits:** Act as a facilitator in dialogue among Shi'a parties rather than favoring a specific faction.
9. **Develop a multi-level strategy:** Elevate policies from a purely security- and faction-oriented approach to a comprehensive and sustainable strategy encompassing civilizational, national, religious, and ideological dimensions.

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