

**Citation:** Bibi, F., & Ali, L. A. (2022). Linkage Between US invasion of Iraq, Arab Spring and Emergence of Daesh: Beginning of New Era for Iran. *Global International Relations Review*, V(II), 69-79. [https://doi.org/10.31703/girr.2022\(V-II\).08](https://doi.org/10.31703/girr.2022(V-II).08)



Fozia Bibi \*

Lubna Abid Ali †

## Linkage Between US invasion of Iraq, Arab Spring and Emergence of Daesh: Beginning of New Era for Iran

**Abstract:** *The role of Iran is essential to analyze the politics of the Middle East. Post 9/11 few events such as the USA invasion of Iraq, the Arab spring and the emergence of Daesh has altered the traditional power structure of the region and also enhanced the role of Iran in the politics of the region. This study analyzes the role of domestic and structural factors in the shaping of the foreign policy behaviour of Iran. Iraq remained a strong power under Saddam till the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Though, the US invasion ended a dictatorship but failed to provide stability, peace and a unified government in Iraq. The empowerment of the Shiia government in Iraq is also a victory of Iran on the ideological front as the US invasion has enabled Iran to achieve its targets without confronting directly with Saddam. . Since 2000 few events such as the US invasion of Iraq, Arab Spring and rise of Daesh transformed the traditional balance of power in favour of Iran. All these events helped Iran to enhance its ideological influence throughout the Middle East.*

**Key Words:** Iran, Iraq, Power, Rivalry, Invasion, Daesh, Ideology

### Background of the Study

The role of Iran is essential to analyze the politics of the Middle East. Post 9/11 few events such as the USA invasion of Iraq, the Arab spring and the emergence of Daesh has altered the traditional power structure of the region and also enhanced the role of Iran in the politics of the region. This study analyzes the role of domestic and structural factors in the shaping of the foreign policy behaviour of Iran. The year 1979 was a turning point for Iran and Iraq, as the Islamic revolution took place in 1979 and toppled Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. During the same year, Saddam Hussein also assumed power in Iraq. These two events deeply influenced and impacted the bilateral relations of these two powers for decades (Anthony H. Cordesman, 2011). Moreover, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in the 1980s and announced that he wants to liberate the

Arabs of South-Western Iran, an area containing rich energy resources.

Saddam feared that the Iranian revolution would inspire insurgency among suppressed *Shiia* majority of Iraq. One other motivation behind Saddam's invasion was to replace Iran and become a main power in the Middle East. The Iraq-Iran war lasted till 1988 and it was one of the bloodiest wars in the modern history of the Middle East. Both countries used chemical weapons, gunboats and missile attacks on the Iraqi and Iranian cities, especially against the oil-lifting tankers by both countries. These kinds of modes of warfare were not used since 1945. Though Saddam was supported by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait against Iran, it is a fact that Saddam miscalculated his invasion of Iran. Saddam misjudged Iran, especially on two fronts: *Firstly*, Iranian society was largely disorganized after the

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: [fbpol@f.rwu.edu.pk](mailto:fbpol@f.rwu.edu.pk) (Corresponding Author)

† Professor, Department of International Relations, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

revolution but patriotism was still there and Iranian forces fought bravely and pushed back the Iraqi troops.

*Secondly*, a surprise invasion was not a wise decision against a large country whose strategic depth could not be penetrated. Many Iranian were intensely devoted to their new religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Mehdi Talati shared his feelings when he took arms against Iraq's invasion of Iran; he says, "We loved Imam Khomeini, and when he gave the order to defend the country, we were happy to answer his call. Iranian people went and I think we went with joy." After losing most of the territorial gains by May 1982, Saddam proclaimed a unilateral cease-fire in June 1982 but Iran demanded compensation for damages and the removal of Saddam. While, Saddam rejected Iranian demands and then Iran launched Operation in Ramadan on July 13 1982, against Iraq to conquer Basra (Mike Gallagher, [2015](#)).

However, the USA once again moved towards Iraq to contain Iranian influence when Iran successfully pushed Iraqi forces out of its territory. Therefore, President Ronald Reagan's administration supported Iraq to counter the influence of Iran (Michael Connell, [2013](#)).

Reagan administration provided assistance to Iraq for instance money, weapons, technology, chemicals etc during the Iran-Iraq war (Russ W. Baker, [1993](#)). American intelligence reported in March 1982, that Iraq was on the verge of collapse, and it created fears in Washington that fundamentalist Iranian leadership would dominate the Middle East and its huge oil reserves. Therefore, a new policy was hurriedly agreed upon, one senior Administration official recalled: "We don't want Iraq to lose the war. Iraq had to be aided, as Iran had been." (Seymour M. Hersh, [1992](#)). Additionally, the USA's role was also crucial in the Tanker war as the USA reflagged Kuwait's tankers to prevent them from Iranian attacks, it further helped Saddam to continue to fight and eventually forced Iran to a ceasefire.

The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988 and made Iraq a strong military power in the region but this war also affected Iraq's economy badly with huge debts from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Saddam

invaded Kuwait in August 1990 as he wanted to seize Kuwait's assets, especially oil reserves to pressurize the Gulf States for debt relief. Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was a serious threat to American interests in the region. Therefore the USA launched Operation Desert Shield to protect its interest and allies. After that USA along with Saudi Arabia also launched Operation Desert Storm to liberate Kuwait from Iraq (Joseph.P. Englehardt, et.al., [1991](#)).

Under Saddam, Iraq was one of the major opponents of Iran and the Iran-Iraq rivalry that shaped and reshaped regional politics for decades. It also increased sectarianism in the country and all these factors further helped Iran to increase its influence in the region. America blamed Saddam for having links with Al-Qaeda and such allegations also provided a justification for the American invasion of Iraq (Shireen T. Hunter, [2010](#)). Post-Saddam era, the influence of Iran has increased and it is the victory of the religiopolitical ideology of Iran. Initially, Iran was interested to cooperate with the USA in Iraq war but the US rejected its offer (Glenn Kessler, [2006](#)). After that Iran asked for elections and the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. Meanwhile, Iran was supporting *the Shiia* community in Iraq and was encouraging them to come into power. This strategy was helpful for Iran to bring a pro-Iranian *Shiia* government to Iraq. Iran can play a constructive role to bring stability to Iraq as almost 60-65 per cent Iraqi population belongs to the *Shiia* community ( Ali A.Allawi, [2008](#)). Iran always desired a *Shiia* but the weak government in Iraq and the USA invasion have fulfilled this dream. After Saddam, Iraq is the first Arab state that is now ruled by *Shiia* since Saladin overthrew the *Fatimids* in Egypt in 1171. Therefore, it is a huge success for Iran, especially in regard to its religio-political ideology (Patrick Cockburn, [2013](#)).

### **Resurgent Iran: An Analysis on the Basis of Neo-Classical Realism**

Neo-classical realism is the theory of foreign policy and international politics. The theory of foreign policy highlights the behaviour of states in the international arena and also focuses on the key trends in international politics such as the

systematic tendency towards the formation of the balance of power (Gideon Rose, [1998](#)). Neo-Classical realism helps to understand the policies of Iran to become a regional power and its strategies in the Middle East particularly in Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria to dominate the region.

Neo-Classical realism helps to analyze the resurgence of Iran and changes in the surrounding of Iran that are positively contributing to the resurgence of Iran. Neo-Classical realism emphasizes the importance of both the system-level and the unit-level variables. It also explains the state behaviour resulting from the power differences among states and system dynamics (Waltz Kenneth, [1979](#)). For instance, unit-level variables such as the role of the Iranian leadership, and their ideology always deeply impact their domestic and foreign policies. Since the revolution, these two factors mainly shaped their politics and remain a key source of concern for Saudi Arabia, the USA and also for Iraq under Saddam. With these domestic factors structural factors like Iraq after Saddam, and movements for regime change in Syria, Yemen and Libya have provided opportunities for the resurgence of Iran. The role of domestic and structural factors helps to analyze the resurgence of Iran.

Iran is using economic, cultural and military means to extend its influence in Iraq (Anthony H. Cordesman, [2012](#)). After Saddam, Iraq is no more a threat to Iran, previously Iraq was a kind of gatekeeper for *Sunni* monarchies of the region. Now the power difference between Iraq and Iran is visible as has tilted in favour of Iran. "Almost 18.2 per cent of the world's proven gas reserves (topping Russia and Qatar) are in Iran and 9.3 per cent of oil reserves are in Iran and also pose the world's 18th largest economy by purchasing power parity (PPP), and its population is 78 million, almost 52 per cent of the population is young. In the Middle East North African region (MENA), Tehran's economic size is second only after Riyadh." (Karen E. Young, [2015](#))

Iran's economic opportunities are also vital to enhance its role in the region. The energy resources of Iran are also a key source of attraction for world powers and many Gulf states

especially the UAE is keenly interested to increase their trade with Tehran. Despite the sanctions, the Iranian economy grew and they are trying to mobilize their resources well. GCC states and West is more concerned about the Iranian role in the region. The USA with the support of its regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states is trying to contain the influence of Iran. However, Tehran is maintaining good ties with great powers like Russia and China to counter the USA and Saudi policies. Additionally, Iran's policies especially its involvement in many regional affairs like Syria and Yemen also show the significant power difference between Iran and the rest of the Middle Eastern states. Therefore, Saudi Arabia along with its allies is concerned to contain the Iranian influence in the region.

Neo-classical realism also highlights that if state leaders fail to mobilize state power and public support; it could result in the imbalance of the international system, and the rise and fall of great powers and can also lead to war (Rathbun, Brian, [2008](#)). In the Middle East, the authoritative regimes of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Libya under Muammar Qaddafi, Yemen under Ali Abdullah Saleh and Syria under Bashar-al-Assad failed to gain public support and mobilize their power. Iran has to deal with sectarianism and the Daesh threat in Iraq and Syria for the protection of its interests. In the Middle East, the Arab uprising resulted in the fall of many authoritative regimes, which were unable to deal with their public demands. Neo-Classical realism helps to analyze the aftermath of the USA invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring and the emergence of Daesh. These above-mentioned events have impacts on the foreign policy of Iran. Taliaferro writes that state-sponsored nationalism and ideology are two key elements of the national power of a state (Lobell, Steven et.al. [2009](#)). In the case of Iran, the role of ideology remained dominant since the revolution and it is shaping the foreign policy behaviour of Iran.

### **Domestic Political Environment of Iran**

---

The foreign policy of a state gets influenced by many factors such as the role of leadership, and

the domestic and international environment (Zaara Zain Hussain, [2011](#)). The domestic environment and International structure are interlinked and they influence each other. After the death of Khomeini in 1989 the new Iranian leaders were lacking in charismatic appeal. New leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini was unable to address the issues of Iranian politics and the Iranian political system becomes a fragmented and controversial entity. From 1989 to 1997, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani remained the key political figure in Iranian politics.

Rafsanjani was a pragmatic leader but after Rafsanjani, President Ahmadinejad's government faced many challenges at home and abroad. He tried to transform and modernize Iran through economic reforms and industrialization. Mohammad Khatami's foreign policy was mainly based on the principle of 'democracy at home, peace abroad' but the 9/11 attacks affected his constructive policies. After 9/11, "USA called Iran *axis of evils*" (Hunter Shireen, [2010](#)) and it also affected USA-Iran relations. Moreover, the victory of Ahmadinejad as President (2005-2013) also brought changes in the foreign policy behaviour of Iran. President Ahmadinejad strongly opposed the interventions by great powers, especially in their internal affairs. During the Presidency of Ahmadinejad Iranian economic and security conditions were not so satisfactory and he used the external environment to gain public support as people were not satisfied due to his policies and economic uncertainty. Moreover, the Iranian domestic political environment was also got affected by events like the US invasion of Iraq, the Arab uprising and the rise of Daesh. Besides this, USA's presence in Iraq also provided many opportunities and challenges for Ahmadinejad's government. For instance, he blamed the USA for their economic problems as he wanted to divert attention from domestic weaknesses and he adopted a hard stance towards their nuclear program.

President Ahmadinejad was not ready to compromise on their nuclear program as it was an important step to show that Iran is an advanced regional power. Arab uprising also changed the environment of the region and it also affected Iranian politics. For instance, Ahmadinejad

could not fulfil his promises to address public problems such as unemployment, inflation, and corruption. Ahmadinejad also faced criticism at home and the disputed elections of Iran in 2009 resulted in demonstrations against the victory of Ahmadinejad as President for the second time. Though, during his second term in office, he adopted more conciliatory policies than in his first tenure.

After Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani assumed Presidency in August 2013 and mainly focused on sorting-out Iranian issues at home and abroad. For instance; he is trying to address the issues of unemployment, corruption, and inflation at home and tries to use diplomatic means to negotiate with the West. All this resulted in the removal of sanctions on Iran after the JCPOA. Although, the Arab spring did not affect Iranian society at a wider level but has pushed Iranian leaders to adopt moderate policies and address public grievances. However, President Trump's victory in the American elections, withdrawal from JCPOA and re-imposition of sanctions have increased the pressure on the government of President Rouhani.

### **The demise of Saddam: Prospects for Iranian Resurgence**

The incident of 9/11, provided an opportunity for the Bush administration to invade Iraq, they perceived that it would be essential for the transformation of the Middle East according to their interests (Suskind Ron, [2013](#)). It was also vital for the Bush administration to legitimize the war against a State that was not directly a threat to the USA. In a speech on August 26, 2002, President George W. Bush announced that Saddam Hussein was increasing biological and

chemical capabilities and was trying to acquire nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (Shireen Hunter, [2010](#)). The WMDs under the control of a dictator were posing a serious threat to the region wherefore risks of inaction were far greater than the risk of action. (Sherle R. Schwenninger, [2003](#)).

President Bush took advantage of WOT and turned it against Iraq. Bush's administration blamed Iraq for having links with Al-Qaeda and

was also accused of WMDs and declared that it is an imminent hazard to the USA. Though, some strong pieces of evidence were found after the invasion that the Bush administration was well aware of the fact that Iraq was not a threat to America and WMDs would never be found. President Bush was trying to secure American interests in the region and Saddam Hussein could pose constraints in the accomplishment of their goals (Joseph Cirincione et.al. [2004](#)). The USA invaded Iraq due to many reasons. For instance; the vulnerability of oil in America was rising and as a result, their dependence on oil imports was also increasing (Campbell, Colin John, [1998](#)). Iraq was a good option and solution for the USA to avoid oil shocks. Under Saddam, it was not possible to use Iraqi oil for the American interest particularly. The USA imposed sanctions against Iraq which meant that Iraqi oil would remain off from the international market. While, there was also the possibility that Saddam Hussein could try to get off the isolation and he could also utilize Iraq's oil for political advantages as he did before during the Arab-Israel conflict (John, Duffield, [2005](#)).

This situation was alarming for the maintenance of USA hegemony in the region. American supremacy in the Middle East was depending on several pillars, especially the dual-containment of Iraq and Iran, the Saudi alliance and the peace process but all these pillars were increasingly shaking. Iraq and Iran, both were trying to escape from isolation policy as Saddam was selling oil at concession prices notably to France, China and Russia. EU states were interested in engagement with Iran despite the sanctions and that also helped Iran to end its isolation from the international market. Iraq was a weak State and an easy target for the US as invasion enabled them to increase its influence (Raymond Hinnebusch, [2007](#)). Although, the war with Iraq was also a great risk for the USA with an economic burden, high military expenditure, disruption in oil prices etc. According to an estimate, the cost of war for the USA in Iraq was almost

\$3 trillion. It was also obvious that instability in Iraq would lead to high oil prices. In 2003 the prices of oil were less than \$ 25/barrel and after the invasion, it reached \$140/barrel by

2008 (Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Birmes, [2010](#)). The other objective behind the invasion was to bring stability, democracy and USA friendly government to Iraq. However, the USA could not get success to achieve these objectives as war resulted in more chaos, instability, civil war, insurgency and sectarianism in Iraq. All these factors further increased Iran's involvement in the region particularly in Iraq. Before the invasion, the pro-*Sunni* regime of Saddam was a serious threat to Iranian interests. After the removal of the Baathist regime, the new *Shiia* government is no more a threat to Iran. Many analysts criticized the USA invasion of Iraq, for instance; Anthony Cordesman also said that 'The US made multiple strategic mistakes in the case of Iraq (Cordesman, Anthony, and Patrick Baetjer, [2005](#)).

According to Shireen Hunter, the US invasion of Iraq did not immediately result in the establishment of a democratic government. It also did not bring about a democratic revolution in the rest of the Middle East (Shireen, Hunter, [2010](#)). Since the USA invasion, the Middle East is in continuous influx. USA invasion disturbed the traditional balance of power as before the invasion the balance of power mostly involved the Arab states and Iran. Now Iran is trying to extend its influence not only in its neighbouring Iraq but also at the wider regional level.

The *Shiia* empowerment in neighbouring Iraq helps Iran to focus on the rest of the states to enhance its influence as, before 2003, Iran's key focus was to counter Saddam's anti-Iranian policies. Besides this, the victory of *Shiia* in the politics of Iraq has some psychological effects. For instance, it has created a perception that *Shiia* empowerment has enhanced Iranian influence in the Middle East and it is also the victory of Iranian ideology.

At home, Iran faced serious unrest from the public after the elections of 2009, which also exposed the limitations of Iran in this regard. Hizbollah's defeat in the 2009 elections of Lebanon also reveals Iran's inability to effectively deal with such challenges. Moreover, in February 2011 *Shiia* in Bahrain demonstrated against the *Sunni* monarchy but King Hammad bin Isa Al-Khalifa cracked down on the protestors with the help of Gulf States. King

Hammad blamed Iran for backing the insurgency in Bahrain and condemned it. Arab powers such as Saudi Arabia and UAE sent security forces to quell the protestors, On March 14, 2011, almost 800 police from UAE and 1200 troops by the Saudi Kingdom entered Bahrain to crush the protestors (Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, [2011](#)). As a result, the protests in Bahrain could not get success and the failure of the *Shiia* revival in Bahrain also showed that Gulf monarchies would take any action to maintain their status quo in the region. *Sunni* alliance against Iran is still a major challenge that shows its ambitions to dominate the region but it will not be an easy task.

USA invasion has eliminated the anti-Iran government in Iraq. Initially, Iran indirectly supported the establishment of a weak government in Iraq. For that Iran supported Nouri-al- Maliki who became Iraqi Premier in 2006, he relied more on Iran to stay in power (Jason m. Breslow et al., [2014](#)). Iran tried to gain its objectives within the imposed framework of the USA to bring democracy to Iraq, as the *Shiia* community is in majority and in democracy majority is always authority. Nouri-al-Maliki got support not only from Iran but also from the USA as the Bush administration believed that he would bridge the gap between different sects of Iraq.

According to Christopher Hill (US ambassador to Iraq), "Iran's financial support to Iraqi groups ranged from \$100 to \$200 million a year ." (Mohamad Bazzi, Commentary, [2016](#))

Although, till 2006, it became evident that America failed to bring peace, stability and democracy to Iraq. During the first twelve months of the invasion, almost nineteen vehicle-born bomb attacks were reported and this number increased in the next few years. For instance, "54 attacks in 2004, 82 attacks in 2005, 101 attacks in 2006 and 204 attacks in 2007 were reported (Tine Gade, [2007](#))." Iran supported *Shiia* groups such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Fadhila and Jaysh-al-Mahdi and provided them with information, weapons and training in unconventional fighting (Steven K. O'hern, [2010](#)). These groups were involved in the killing of Americans and other local Iraqi groups.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia opposed the selection of Nuri-al-Maliki as the Prime Minister of Iraq for the second time in December 2010 as Maliki was pro-Iranian and he could not address the grievance of different sects that further aggravated sectarianism. He was a reliable ally for Iranian interests and allowed Iran to use Iraqi territory to support the Bashar-al-Assad regime. Moreover, thousands of Iraqi *Shiia* also joined Assad's forces to fight against his opponents in Syria (Mohamad Bazzi, [2015](#)). During eight years of rule (2006-2014), Maliki maintained a monopoly over the central government of Iraq. Additionally, Daesh also took a stronghold and caused serious turmoil and militancy in Iraq. The presence of Daesh reveals the inability of Iraq's government, Iran and USA policies to handle the chaos that encouraged Daesh to successfully operate in Iraq and Syria.

### Post Arab Spring: Implications for Iran's Foreign Policy towards the Changing Environment of the Middle Eastern Region

Another key factor that altered the geopolitics of the Middle East was the Arab spring. According to Arshin, social justice and democratic norms were the key demands of a protestor in the Arab revolt. "The main factors behind the revolt in the Arab world are dictatorship, oppression, nepotism, social inequality, structural poverty and demographic changes (Adib Moghaddam, [2013](#))." Arab awakening has changed the structure of the Middle East. For instance, it weakens the socio-political setup in Syria and Yemen. While in Bahrain the demonstrations were successfully suppressed. Taliaferro argues that "the relative ability of a State to mobilize its resources from domestic society as determined by the ideology, nationalism or institutions of the State also shapes the internal balancing strategies (Lobell, Steven et.al, [2009](#))." Iranian quest for dominance of the region is basically derived from the triumph of their nationalism and ideology. Iran is spending huge amounts on their defence and also providing military and economic assistance to different *Shiia* groups across the region to exert its ideological influence.

Since the last few decades, the Iranian proxies in the region has been increased. Syria and Yemen are key examples of it. Along with hard power, Iran is using soft power at all levels to gain its interest. Therefore, Iran is building good ties not only with *Shiia* communities but also with other groups. President Rouhani Iran is also focusing to maintain good terms with some *Sunni* Kurdish groups by showing them that Iran shares the same sentiments with them. Iran's soft power strategies also include scholarships for foreigners, and exchange at cultural, educational and religious institutes.

Iran increased trade and cultural influence in Iraq. For instance, "Iran has emerged as one of Iraq's largest trading partners, with Iranian exports to Iraq topping \$1.8 billion in 2006 (Majid Rafizadeh, [2016](#))." Iran sent more than two thousand religious scholars and students to Iraq. Though one-third of them belong to the intelligence and Iran has sent them to influence the *Shiia* population of Iraq and also to influence the voters. Iran is also constructing an airport at Najaf to facilitate the exchange of visitors and scholars. Neoclassical realism states that democracies suffer from some significant inadequacies that prevent them from balancing against external threats (Sten Rynning, [2001](#)). As the post-American invasion it happened in Iraq, Arab Spring has presented many opportunities and challenges for Iran. Khomeini claimed that the uprisings in the Arab world (Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen) are inspired by the Iranian revolution and he further called these events divine blessings. In the beginning, few experts predicted that the Arab uprising will be more beneficiary for Iran. The US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan already removed Iran's main opponents Saddam and the Taliban and enhanced the Iranian influence in the region. These uprisings have boosted oil prices and also benefited Iran. Arab uprisings were started when Mohammad Bouazizi, in Tunisia burned himself on fire in December 2010.

This incident further triggered demonstrations not only in Tunisia but also in many other countries of the Arab world such as Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen, Libya and Syria. The main factors behind demonstrations were a lack of basic human rights, lack of freedom of

speech, unemployment, corruption, ruling elite class etc and the common public especially youth was dissatisfied in those countries. In some states, the protestors were asking for better living opportunities, while in some countries the demonstrators were demanding regime change these protests have resulted in the downfall of many regimes in the Arab world such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen.

Zine-ul-Abidine of Tunisia fled to Saudi Arabia in January 2011 when people protested against his authoritative regime. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt resigned in February 2011 and his 30 years of rule had ended. In Libya Muammar Qaddafi was removed from the government after massive protests and international intervention and was killed on October 20, 2011. President Abdullah Saleh of Yemen was replaced by Abdal-Rabah Mansoor Al-Hadi in February 2012. In Bahrain, *Shiia* inhabitants demonstrated their rights, freedom and equality but it was trodden with the armed assistance of GCC. Since 2009 Iran is also facing different kinds of protests against the government (Shahir Shahid Sales, [2014](#)).

### **The Emergence of Daesh and Challenges for Iran**

---

Daesh was founded in 2004 as an extremist Sunni Organization and it took control of huge swathes of land in western Iraq and eastern Syria. The one key factor which helped Daesh to establish itself as a strong non-state actor was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. President Barack Obama during his interview with Shane Smith said that the outgrowth of ISIS in Iraq is an example of unintentional consequences of the Iraq war which grew out of the American invasion. The de-Baathification of Iraq post-Saddam by the USA has created grievances among *Sunni* minorities.

Al-Qaeda took the advantage of their resentment and created Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to combat US troops. However, the USA withdrawal left behind a weak and unstable Iraq and the Arab uprising further deteriorated the peace in the region. Iran, by having a weak Iraq in the neighbourhood, got more advantages. Daesh has found fertile ground to pursue power

in Iraq and filled the vacuum after the USA withdrawal. AQI frequently moved between Iraq and Syria to resupply during the Iraq war. Meanwhile, in Syria AQI got the opportunity to establish a network when Bashar-al-Assad used power to suppress his own people and the uprising turned into civil war. After that, they separated from Al-Qaeda and renamed their organization Daesh when they captured Mousal. Daesh was the first rebel group who took control of territory in the major cities of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Now they wanted to show that their power is not limited to a particular region and they have a global strategy. The conflict between *the Sunnis* and *Shiia* communities in Iraq is an important factor in the resurgence of Daesh as it has provided a fertile ground for their interest in the region. Daesh leaders want to establish a Caliphate under their *Sunni* leader Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi.

Since 2003-2004 Daesh emerged as a powerful terrorist group and they have extensive resources such as modern technology, weapons and tools and these tools are helping them to reshape the region according to their own ideology and interests. They are not merely a terrorist group but they also seized and administrate huge territory in Iraq and Syria. They are implementing ruthlessly interpreted principles of Islamic rules. Therefore, minorities' especially *the Shiia* community is the main target of Daesh which also violates human rights, mass execution and forced conversion.

Such kinds of Daesh brutal policies have been criticized by the entire world and their governance is questionable as they are violating the basic human rights of not only the Iraqi and Syrian minorities but also the journalists and International workers (Peter Welby, 2017). The dynamics of these operations resulted in the loss of territory by ISIS (almost 40 per cent of Iraqi territory and 20 per cent of Syrian territory) and it is also helping regional players like Iran and Turkey to increase their influence (Dina Esfandiary, et.al. 2017).

Since the revolution, Iran has adopted different strategies to counter the *Sunni* dominance of Saudi Arabia (Mohamad Bazzi, 2015). The anti-*Shiia* ideology of Daesh also

provoked Iran and its allies (Hezbollah, Bashar-al-Assad) to take action against it. However, the emergence of Daesh also provided opportunities for Iran to collaborate and end its decades-old cold ties with the USA. Similarly, the USA also adopted soft power and negotiated to end its conflicts with Iran. Obama administration realized that Iran would play a significant role to defeat Daesh. In December 2014 President Obama said that Iran is a successful regional power that would be good for everybody (David A. Patten, 2015).

Iran is one of the important regional powers and it has the potential and capability to counter the Daesh threat with the support of powers like the USA and Russia. The common interests of these two powers have pushed them towards diplomatic solutions to their conflicts. It was also expected that JCPOA will provide better economic opportunities for Iran to engage with the rest of the world. Furthermore, Iran can buy modern arms, weapons and technology to fight against Daesh. All these factors are contributing to making Iran a strong regional power and this is a serious concern for *Sunni* Arab States mainly Saudi Arabia.

### Analytical Discussion

The core argument of this study is to highlight the role of domestic and structural factors in the shaping of the foreign policy behaviour of Iran. The perception of policymakers, domestic factors, the role of their leadership and structural factors always played a significant role in the formulation of the foreign policy of Iran. The perception of Iranian policymakers shaped their policies for instance the Iran-Iraq relations under Saddam and the post-Saddam era are the key example of it. The role of international structure is a key driving force in the formulation of foreign policy. Neo-Classical realism helps to understand how these events are shaping the domestic and structural environment surroundings of Iran. For instance, the USA's invasion of Iraq has altered the power structure in the Middle East. It also ended the decades-old rivalry between Iran and Iraq. Previously, Iran was spending a huge amount on defence to counter the Iraqi threat. Iran always wished and



tried for pro-Iranian governments in its neighbours. The USA invasion favoured Iranian interests and resulted in the empowerment of the *Shiia* government in Iraq. Another major event was the Arab spring which also altered the environment surrounding Iran. However, initially, it was expected that the Arab spring would bring positive changes in the region but it could not bring peace and stability though it has overthrown many authoritative regimes like in Libya and in a few countries, it has resulted in chaos and turned into civil wars like in Yemen and Syria. Moreover, the presence of Daesh in Iraq and Syria was alarming for Iran. It also pushed the Obama administration to adopt diplomatic means to gain cooperation from Iran against Daesh.

Gulf leaders believe that the Obama administration mainly focused on a better relationship with Iran and turned eyes from Iranian hegemonic strategies in Yemen, Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, the shift of power in Iraq from *Sunnis* to *Shiia* is a significant change in the surroundings of Iran because since the revolution Iran is working to export its ideology to other countries of the region. Therefore, the Gulf powers especially Riyadh was not much happy with the policies of the Obama administration towards Iran. Although, the change in American leadership has brought new hopes for the Gulf States to counter and contain the Iranian influence in the region. After the success of Donald Trump, the GCC leadership is an optimist about US- GCC relations. Since the fall of Saddam's regime, Iran enhanced its role in regional (for instance in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon etc) and world politics, for instance, trade with Russia, China and the EU. Besides all this Iran is also interested to play an active role in the development of Afghanistan and engagement with the Taliban is also a part of their strategic interests. The Iranian leaders are trying to end isolation as constructive engagement in global affairs will help Iran to increase its influence in regional politics. Although there are many challenges like

corruption, unemployment and inflation at

home and abroad (*Sunni* Arab world, Iran's relations with Israel and USA), Iran needs to tackle all these challenges in time.

The wave of Arab uprising has proved a game changer for Iran and many authoritative regimes have been overthrown which further paved the way for Iran to adopt more assertive policies in the region. Iran is the major defender of the *Shiia* community throughout the world. The negative perception of Iran and Saudi Arabia towards each other is intensifying the proxy wars in the region. Iran is engaged in many regional proxies to counter Riyadh's influence for instance; in Yemen, Bahrain and Lebanon. Today Iran is a more confident State than it was a few years back and even despite the sanctions Iran is trying to exert influence in regional and world politics. Arab uprising has affected those states badly who had weak economic structures such as Yemen, Syria and Lebanon and in a few weak states, the uprising has turned into civil war like in Yemen and Syria.

Adib Moghaddam (2013) argues that the Arab revolts were not based on socio-economic-political or religious ideology. They were not even demanding for complete revolution like Islamic revolution. Their socio-economic and political inequalities were the key reasons of their grievances. The Arab uprising resulted in the *Shiia* dominance in many countries in the region, especially, in Iraq *Shiia* empowerment was a great success for Iran, the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Assad's stand against his own public to stay in power are some incidents which are beneficial for Iranian interest. As *Shiia* dominance is the success of Iran's ideology as well as it is the one key objective of Iranian leadership since the Islamic revolution. The ongoing crisis in the region is helping Iran to influence the weak states of the region like Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. Moreover, these states have to deal with their domestic challenges and it is also in the best interest of Iran as it may not face serious challenges from these states even in near future and Iran will be able to focus more actively to counter Saudi influence.

## References

- Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2013). *On the Arab revolts and the Iranian revolution: Power and resistance today*. A & C Black.
- Allawi, A. A. (2008). *The occupation of Iraq: Winning the war, losing the peace*. Yale University Press.
- Baker, R. W. (1993). Iraqgate: The big one that (almost) got away. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 31(6), 48.
- Bazzi, M. (2015). Iran will do what it takes to fight ISIS, 'CNN'. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/03/opinion/bazzi-iran-iraq/index.html>
- Bronner, E., & Slackman, M. (2011). Saudi troops enter Bahrain to help put down unrest. *The New York Times*.
- Campbell, C. J. (1988). *The coming oil crisis*.
- Cirincione, J., Matthews, J. T., Perkovich, G., & Orton, A. (2004). WMD in Iraq: evidence and implications. *Biosecurity and bioterrorism: biodefense strategy, practice, and science*, 2(1), 51-55. <https://doi.org/10.1089/153871304322964345>
- Cockburn, P. (2013). The Shia are in power in Iraq—but not in control. *The Independent*.
- Cordesman, A. H. (2012). *The real outcome of the Iraq war: US and Iranian strategic competition in Iraq*. Center for Strategic and International Studies
- Cordesman, A., & Baetjer, P. (2005). *Iraq's evolving insurgency. Working draft*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Duffield, J. S. (2005). "Oil and the Iraq War: How the United States Could Have Expected to Benefit, and Might Still." 109-141. <http://www.rubincenter.org/2005/06/duffie-id-2005-06-07/>.
- Englehardt, J. P. (1991). *Desert Shield and Desert Storm. A Chronology and Troop List for the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf Crisis*. Strategic Studies Institute U.S. Army War College. 1-76.
- Esfandiary, D., & Tabatabai, A. M. (2017). A comparative study of US and Iranian counter-ISIS strategies. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40(6), 455-469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.121265>
- Gade, T. (2007). *Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between global and local jihad*.
- Glenn, K. (2006). "In 2003, U.S. Spurned Iran's Offer of Dialogue," *Washington post*.
- Hinnebusch, R. (2007). The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 16(3), 209-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920701616443>
- Hunter, S. (2010). *Iran's foreign policy in the post-Soviet era: Resisting the new international order*. ABC-CLIO. 208-209.
- Hussain, Z. Z. (2011). *The effect of domestic politics on foreign policy decision making*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/02/07/the-effect-of-domestic-politics-on-foreign-policy-decision-making/>
- Jason, M., Breslow., & Evan, W. (2014). "Who is Nouri al-Maliki?," *Frontline*. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/who-is-nouri-al-maliki/>
- Lobell, S. E., Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Taliaferro, J. W. (Eds.). (2009). *Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Michael, C. (2013). *Iranian Operational Decision Making: Case Studies from the Iran-Iraq War*. No. COP-2013-U-002591-final. centre for naval analyses Alexandria VA strategic studies research dept, 2013.
- Mike, G. (2015). "The beauty and the horror of the Iran-Iraq war," *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34353349>
- Mohamad, B. (2016). 'Commentary: With Washington looking the other way, Iran fills a void in Iraq,' *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-iran-commentary-idUSKCN0YN2XW>
- O'Hern, S. K. (2010). *Intelligence Wars: Lessons from Baghdad*. Prometheus Books.
- Patten, D. A. (2015). Defeating ISIS, Rolling Back Iran. *Middle East Quarterly*.
- Rafizadeh, M. (2016). 'How Iran Dominates the Middle East? Soft Power,' *Huffingtonpost*. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-iran-dominates-the-mi\\_b\\_10089658](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-iran-dominates-the-mi_b_10089658)
- Rathbun, B. (2008). A rose by any other name:

- Neoclassical realism as the logical and necessary extension of structural realism. *Security Studies*, 17(2), 294-321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098917>
- Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World politics*, 51(1), 144-172. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>
- Rynning, S., & Guzzini, S. (2001). *Realism and foreign policy analysis*. Copenhagen Peace Research Institute.
- Sales, S. S. (2014). "Remember Iran's Green Movement?," *Iran Pulse*. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/03/iran-green-movement-moderates-relevance-rouhani-hard-liners.html>
- Schwenninger, S. R. (2003). Revamping American grand strategy. *World Policy Journal*, 20(3), 25-44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209873>
- Seymour, H. (1992). "U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War Against Iran," *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/26/worl>  
[d/us-secretly-gave-aid-to-iraq-early-in-its-war-against-iran.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/26/world/us-secretly-gave-aid-to-iraq-early-in-its-war-against-iran.html?pagewanted=all)
- Stiglitz, J. E., & Bilmes, L. (2010). *The true cost of the Iraq war: \$3 Trillion and beyond*. The Washington Post.
- Suskind, R. (2004). *The price of loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the education of Paul O'Neill*. Simon and Schuster.
- U.S. And Iranian Strategic Competition. (2022). Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition>
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. University of California, Berkeley.
- Welby, P. (2017). 'What is ISIS?' *Centre on Religion & Geopolitics*. <https://institute.global/policy/what-isis>
- Young, K. E. (2015) "Imagining Economic Opportunity in Iran,". The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. <https://agsiw.org/imagining-economic-opportunity-in-iran/>