



Challenges and Opportunities Facing Iran's Foreign Policy During Hassan Rouhani's Era: Iraq as a Case Study (2013-2021)

¹ **Zebar Azeez Mohammed² Dr. Mahdi Mostafa Faql Ahmad**

¹ **Soran University**

Abstract:

This study examines the challenges and opportunities facing Iran's foreign policy during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), with Iraq as a case study. The importance of this issue lies in Iran's significant role and presence in Iraq's political landscape. These challenges and opportunities shape the extent of Iran's influence in various spheres of Iraqi political life. The study also highlights the key challenges and opportunities confronting Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq during Hassan Rouhani's presidency. It employs a descriptive (qualitative) analysis method and applies the theory of structural realism. As a result, the study found that several significant challenges and opportunities confronted Iran's foreign policy during Hassan Rouhani's presidency, including the emergence of the terrorist organization ISIS, which captured a third of Iraq's territory, balancing the presence and influence of the United States, and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. Opportunities included security cooperation against ISIS, economic expansion, and Iranian influence following the defeat of ISIS. These challenges and opportunities were products of the anarchy of the international system and Iraq's lack of order and power distribution. These challenges and opportunities influenced Iran's influence and role in Iraq under Hassan Rouhani.

1: Email:

Zebar.Azeez2023@soran.edu.iq

2: Email:

mahdi.ahmad@soran.edu.iq

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التحديات والفرص أمام السياسة الخارجية الإيرانية خلال رئاسة حسن روحاني: العراق
نموذجاً (٢٠١٣-٢٠٢١)

زيبار عزيز محمد^٢ د. مهدي مصطفى فقي أحمد^١
^١ جامعة سوران

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى دراسة التحديات والفرص التي تواجه السياسة الخارجية الإيرانية خلال رئاسة حسن روحاني (٢٠١٣-٢٠٢١) العراق نموذجاً. وتكمن أهمية هذه القضية في أن إيران لها دور وحضور قوي في المعادلات السياسية في العراق، إلا أن هذه التحديات والفرص تحدد حجم تأثير السياسة الخارجية الإيرانية في مختلف مجالات الحياة السياسية العراقية. كما تحاول الدراسة تسليط الضوء على أهم التحديات والفرص التي تواجه السياسة الخارجية الإيرانية تجاه العراق خلال فترة رئاسة حسن روحاني، واستخدمت المنهج الوصفي (النوعي) في التحليل وطبقت نظرية الواقعية البنوية. وفي النتيجة توصلت الدراسة إلى أن السياسة الخارجية الإيرانية واجهت خلال فترة رئاسة حسن روحاني العديد من التحديات والفرص الكبرى، مثل ظهور تنظيم داعش الإرهابي، الذي استولى على ثلث أراضي العراق، وموازنة الوجود والنفوذ الأميركي، واغتيال قاسم سليماني. والفرص مثل التعاون الأمني ضد داعش، والتوسع الاقتصادي، و تزايد النفوذ الإيراني بعد هزيمة داعش. وكانت هذه التحديات والفرص نتاجاً فوضوية النظام الدولي وتقسيم القوة في العراق. وكان لهذه التحديات والفرص تأثير أساسي على السياسة الخارجية الإيرانية تجاه العراق في عهد حسن روحاني.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الجمهورية الإسلامية الإيرانية، العراق، السياسة الخارجية، التحديات، الفرص.

المقدمة

Introduction

Hassan Rouhani's arrival as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2013 coincided with a number of regional changes, especially in Iraq as Iran's strategic depth. Hassan Rouhani belongs to the reformist movement, which believes in more openness in political life, domestic and foreign policy, unlike Ahmadinejad, who belonged to the radicals. It was not the ideological changes in domestic and foreign policy. Under Rouhani, Iran's foreign policy has faced a number of developments, some of which have been challenges and some of which have been opportunities. This study attempts to discuss them.

1. The Problem of the Study

This study focuses on Iran's foreign policy's main challenges and opportunities during Hassan Rouhani's tenure (2013-2021): Iraq as a case study. This is the problem that the study seeks to address. Because Iran is an important player in the Iraqi political theater. Here we try to fill the gap by examining

the main opportunities and challenges facing Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq during Hassan Rouhani's tenure.

2. The Significance of the Study

The importance of this study is to examine the main challenges and opportunities that Iran's foreign policy faced during Hassan Rouhani's tenure concerning Iraq. These challenges and opportunities have influenced the redefinition of Iran's role in Iraq and shaped the extent of Iran's political influence in the country. On one hand, these challenges have hindered the sustained influence of Iranian foreign policy in Iraq. On the other hand, the opportunities have served as a pathway to not only maintain but also expand Iran's role and influence in Iraq and the region.

3. The Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate and provide an academic and scientific analysis of the main challenges and opportunities facing Iran's foreign policy during Hassan Rouhani's presidency (2013-2021), using Iraq as a case study.

4. The Questions of the Study

To achieve the objectives of this study and fill the scientific gap, it attempts to answer the question: What are the main challenges and opportunities facing Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq under Hassan Rouhani?

5. The Methodology of the study

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method of analysis. It draws on various reliable sources, including constitutions, books, research articles, etc. Additionally, it has considered impartiality and ethical considerations to provide a scientific response to the research questions.

6. The Scope of the Study

The scope of the study encompasses politics and international relations, concentrating on the field of foreign policy. It spans eight years, from 2013 to 2021, focusing on one individual, Hassan Rouhani, while using Iraq as a case study.

7. The Structure of the Study

In addition to the summary, this paper includes an introduction and a conclusion. It discusses the theoretical framework and highlights the main challenges and opportunities faced by Iran's foreign policy during Rouhani's tenure towards Iraq.

I.Section One: Theoretical Framework: Structural Realism

Structural realism emerged as a response to critiques of classical realism. In his seminal work, "The Theory of International Politics," published in 1979, Kenneth Waltz introduced this theory, which has become a cornerstone in the fields of politics and international relations. Structural realism distinguishes itself from classical realism through its fundamental assumptions. Key proponents of this theory include Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, and it is often referred

to as Neo-Realism in academic discussions⁽¹⁾.

Structural realism rests on several key assumptions. First, it posits that the international system is anarchic, as there is no overarching authority above sovereign states. Second, this anarchic environment significantly influences states' actions, behaviors, and foreign policies. Third, structural realism views states as the primary rational actors in the international arena, each pursuing the maximum advantage while minimizing potential harm⁽²⁾.

The state's supreme goal is to remain within the international system. Therefore, they seek to increase their power. The best measure to ensure their survival in international relations is the principle and system of self-help. Power is a means, not an end. The most effective way to guarantee state survival and security in international relations is through power, especially since the possibility of war is always present.

(1) Wahban, A. M. (2016) Realists and the Analysis of International Relations from Morgenthau to Mearsheimer: An Analytical Study of Realist Theory Over Six Decades. P. 1209. *Journal of Law for Economic Legal Research*, Faculty of Law, Alexandria University, Issue 1, 2016. pp. 1196–1236. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/sites/default/files/lwqywn.pdf>

Mukhalif, M. K. (2014) Neo-Realism in International Relations Assumptions, Classifications and Foundations. P. 215. *Journal of International Studies*, University of Baghdad, Issue 59 (2014), pp. 213-236. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: [file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/jcis,+213-236%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/jcis,+213-236%20(1).pdf)

(2) Waltz, K. N. (١٩٧٩) *Theory of International Politics*. 1st Ed, California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. Pp. 89-111. Misbah, A. (2011) *Theory of International Relations: Major Theoretical Dialogues*. Cairo: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Hadith. Pp. 28-29.

Consequently, states constantly strive to accumulate and enhance their power. They do not trust one another because they cannot comprehend the intentions of different states. Intentions cannot be easily measured⁽¹⁾.

Structural realism theory encompasses two branches: Defensive Realism and Offensive Realism. The former is associated with Kenneth Waltz, while the latter is linked to John Mearsheimer. Defensive Realism posits that states should seek to acquire power to ensure their survival rather than pursue regional or international hegemony, as doing so would lead to punishment from the international system. Conversely, Offensive Realism asserts that states should strive to gain as much power as possible, to the point of becoming regional hegemons, since global hegemony is vicious⁽²⁾. Here, we apply the

(1) Waltz, 1979: 105-134. Mearsheimer, J. (2013) Structural Realism. pp. 77-78. Ed: Dunne, T., Kurki, M., and Smith, S. International Relations Theories Discipline and Diversity. 3th Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 77-94. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: [file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Desktop/Master's%20research/Theoretical%20Frame%20work/Sources%20Theory/Tim%20Dunne,%20Milja%20Kurki,%20Steve%20Smith%20-%20International%20Relations%20Theories-Oxford%20University%20Press,%20USA%20\(.pdf](file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Desktop/Master's%20research/Theoretical%20Frame%20work/Sources%20Theory/Tim%20Dunne,%20Milja%20Kurki,%20Steve%20Smith%20-%20International%20Relations%20Theories-Oxford%20University%20Press,%20USA%20(.pdf).

Hussain, S. (2018) Foreign Policy. 2nd Ed., Erbil: Tafsir Library. P. 280.

(2) Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001) The tragedy of great power politics. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. Pp. 1-23. Mearsheimer, 2013: 77-90; Al-Akeely, H. M. (2021) The Influence of Realist Theory on the Foreign Policy of the U.S.A Case Study: US Foreign Policy towards the Syrian Crisis (2011-2021). Thesis (MA). Middle East University, p. 30.

main assumptions of fundamental realism and the defensive realism perspective to this case.

II. Section Two: Main Challenges IFP Faced Regarding Iraq Under Hassan Rouhani

Iran's foreign policy in Iraq has encountered several challenges throughout Hassan Rouhani's eight-year presidency. Here, we discuss the most significant challenges:

1. Emergence of ISIS (2014-2017)

The emergence of the terrorist organization, so-called ISIS, in 2014 posed a serious threat to Iran's strategic interests in Iraq and the region. Since ISIS has occupied a third of Iraq's territory, including Mosul and Tikrit, it has even become a threat to the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. This organization mainly targeted Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups and communities⁽¹⁾. For Iran, ISIS represented a

(1) Nadir, A. (2015) *The role played by Iran in Iraq*. (Online). pp. 1-5. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND_P_E151z1.arabic.pdf

Hatam, M. H. (2019) The Iranian Role in the Middle East. Regional Variables - Iraq - Syria - Examples. (Online). p. 175. *Madarat Iranian Magazine*, issued by the Arab Democratic Center - Berlin, Germany, Issue (04), June 2019. pp. 165-181. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://faculty.uobasrah.edu.iq/uploads/publications/1609553755.pdf>

Barzani, M. (2020) *Staking Our Claim*. 1st Ed, Erbil: Roxana. p. 54. AAbu-Ruman, M. and Abu Haniyeh, H. (2015) *The Islamic State: The Sunni Crisis and the*

sectarian, ideological, security, and military enemy that challenged the influence of Iran and its allies in Iraq and the surrounding region. It was believed that change must start at the nearest point, specifically from within the Islamic states to the world. Unlike other terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS contended that the powers must be attacked to pave the way for change within Muslim countries⁽¹⁾. As Abu-Ruman points out, ISIS crossed the boundaries of al-Qaeda's thought, vision, and strategies because al-Qaeda did not believe in the establishment of a state. In contrast, ISIS believed in the establishment of a world caliphate⁽²⁾. In other words, ISIS aimed to defeat nearby enemies (the regimes of Islamic countries) as a preparation for conquering distant enemies (the United States and its allies, among others) and establishing a global Islamic caliphate. ISIS posed a significant challenge to IFP and represented an existential threat to Iran's influence in the region, as the so-called state established by ISIS was located in Syrian and Iraqi territory. Both nations are Iran's allies

Struggle over Global Jihadism [PDF]. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11262.pdf>

(1) Qandil, M. M. (2017) *Between ISIS kidnapping and al-Qaeda terrorism* [Online]. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/blogs/2017/2/16/بين-خطف-داعش-وارهاب-القاعدة>

Kunubal, B., Lander, N.S., and Jackson, W.S. (2017) *Overcoming the Islamic State Organization* [PDF]. P. 7. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1562/RAND_RR1562z1.arabic.pdf

(2) Abu-Ruman, M. (2020) *The Future of ISIS: Factors of Strength and Weakness* [PDF]. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/16942.pdf>

and represent its strategic depth, remaining under Iranian influence⁽¹⁾.

These developments and the rapid rise of ISIS prompted Iran to intervene swiftly and comprehensively, utilizing both its soft and hard power. Consequently, Iran took the initiative to provide military and logistical support to the forces of Hashd al-Shaabi and Shiite militias such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl-Al-Haq. Additionally, the Quds Force and its commander, Qassem Soleimani, played a significant role in leading and coordinating Iraqi forces in the fight against ISIS. Iran even coordinated indirectly with the United States

(1) Hashim, Hashm, F. A. (2023) The pillars of Iranian movement towards Iraq: A study of the dynamics of balance and constraints of interests. (Online). pp. 133-138. *Lubab for Strategic Studies*, Issue 17 - Fifth year. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at:

https://lubab.aljazeera.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD-The-pillars-of-Iranian-movement-towards-Iraq-A-study-of-the-dynamics-of-balance-and-co_compressed.pdf

Syria Today, (2025) *Protests in Iraq Due to Political Earthquake in Syria: Retreat of Iranian Influence*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://syrian-today.net/ar/opinion/1030/%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B9%D8%A7>

and the international coalition against ISIS to address this challenge. With the defeat of ISIS in 2017, this challenge vanished. Combating the threat posed by ISIS became a priority in IFP in Iraq, as Iran believed that the fall of Iraq to ISIS was a direct threat to the political system of the Velayat-e-Faqih, as well as to the security and the Iranian

regional project, which is the Shiite crescent⁽¹⁾. Thus, ISIS posed a significant challenge to IFP regarding Iraq. Iran made every effort to

(1) Menati, A., and Hdian, N. (2019) The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy towards Iraq from the Perspective of Balance of Threat Theory (2003-2018). (Online). p. 7. *Journal of Political Sociology of Islamic World*, 7(15), pp.139-164. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: https://iws.shahed.ac.ir/article_1040_edab713333db4c95944bc732957e02b0.pdf?lang=en

Alaeddin, F. (2020) *Iran and the policies of hegemony over Iraq*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2141871/%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82>

Taha, Y. (2018) *Iranian influence in Iraq and Tehran's cards in Najaf and Baghdad*. Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center, 11. (Online). p. 7. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/Telegram%20Desktop/%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%DB%95%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%20%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B2%DB%8C%20%D8%A6%DB%8E%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%20%D9%84%DB%95%20%D8%B9%DB%8E%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82.pdf>

Arango, T. (2017) *Iran's rising influence in Iraq*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/976806/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%89-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%8A->

counter this threat. By eliminating the military presence of ISIS in Iraq, Iran was able to overcome this challenge.

2. Balancing Against US Presence and Influence

After the official withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011, the forces returned to Iraq in 2014 under the name of the "international coalition against ISIS." The return of US troops complicated the issue of Iranian

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[%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-](#)

[%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82](#)

Radad, M. (2017) *Deals with ISIS are an Iranian approach par excellence*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/alsfqat-m-dash-nhj-ayrany-bamtyaz>

Mustaffa, H. (2016) *Rouhani's advisor's remarks about an Iranian empire with Baghdad as its capital shocked no one in Iraq*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at:

<https://aawsat.com/home/article/308051/%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A>

[%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA-](#)

[%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-](#)

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[%D8%A8%D8%BA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%85-](#)

[%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%AF%D9%85-](#)

[%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8B%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A](#)

Zubian, O. (2024) *The Continuing Threat of ISIS in Iraq After the Withdrawal of the International Coalition*. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/thdyd-tnzym-dash-almstmr-fy-alraq-bd-anshab-althalf-aldwly>

influence in Iraq because, following the withdrawal of US troops in 2011 and the creation of a security vacuum, Iran strengthened and expanded its political, military, and security presence⁽¹⁾. Although the United States and Iran faced a common enemy, ISIS, their cooperation

- (1) Hatam, M. H. (20١٩) The Iranian Role in the Middle East. Regional Variables - Iraq - Syria - Examples. (Online). p. 175. *Madarat Iranian Magazine*, issued by the Arab Democratic Center - Berlin, Germany, Issue (04), June 2019. pp. 165-181. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://faculty.uobasrah.edu.iq/uploads/publications/1609553755.pdf>, Al-Obidy, A. A. (2011) *Iraqi-Iranian Relations During American Occupation of Iraq 2003-2011*. Thesis (MA). Middle East University. P. 118. Dakhiel, H. A. and Al-Issa, M. M. (2019) U.S. attitude toward Iranian role in Syria and Iraq under IS. (Online). p. 129. *Madarat Iranian Magazine*, issued by the Arab Democratic Center - Berlin, Germany, Issue (04), June 2019, pp. 126-143. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://democraticac.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%E2%80%93%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%88-2019.pdf> , Razaygah, H. (2016). The US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011: A study of causes and consequences. (Online). pp. 52-53. *Algerian Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, V. 9, N. 2, pp. 39-65. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-2011_- %D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AC.pdf , Mujbil, A. M. (2024). The impact of the American withdrawal on Iraqi national

remained indirect and limited because the existence of a common enemy did not make them friends. On one hand, Iran supported Shiite militias and Hashd al-Shaabi groups, particularly those aligned with Tehran's beliefs. On the other hand, the United States supported the Iraqi army, counter-terrorism forces, and the Peshmerga of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. As the war against ISIS continued, Washington pressured the Iraqi government to limit relations with Iran. The United States also imposed several sanctions on Iraqi entities and personalities linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, hampering Tehran's foreign policy in Iraq⁽¹⁾. Creating a balance against Iran's US presence and influence has resulted in an ongoing rivalry between the two forces in Iraq. Iran seeks to maintain its influence through Hashd al-Shaabi

security. (Online). p. 359. *Journal of the Faculty of Law and Political Science*, Year 6, 2024, Issue No. 23, pp. 339-360. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/13.pdf>

(1) Katzman, K. (2020). *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*. (PDF). Pp. 37-40. Congressional Research Service. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20200130_R44017_381c9dad5c438629d12bcec0dcd25f7416b93294.pdf

Mustaffa, 2016. Taha, 2018: 7. Alaaddin, F. (2020) *Iran and the policies of hegemony over Iraq*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025,

at: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2141871/%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82>

Knights, M. (2019). *Sanctions on Iraqi Political Figures: Shaping the Impact and the Message*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/qwbath-ly-shkhsyat-syasyt-raqyt-tshkyl-alathr-walrsalt>

and its network of political parties, Iran's Shiite allies, while Washington aims to strengthen Iraqi sovereignty and official institutions. Iran's attempt to create a balance of power against the United States aligns with the assumption of fundamental realism that a balance of power is appropriate for international politics⁽¹⁾. Striking a balance against the US presence and influence was a significant challenge for the IFP in Iraq. The killing of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and Hashd al-Shaabi deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in 2020 by the United States reflected this challenge in reality⁽²⁾. Thus, one of the main challenges facing IFP during this period was to strike a balance against the US presence and influence in Iraq.

3. Iraqi Nationalism and Resistance to Iranian Influence

The mass protests that erupted in Iraq in 2019 and 2020 were primarily opposed to foreign intervention, particularly Iranian interference in Iraq's affairs. The demonstrations began in Baghdad and several predominantly Shiite southern provinces. Initially, the

(1) Waltz, K. N. (١٩٧٩) *Theory of International Politics*. 1st Ed, California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. pp. 171-173.

(2) BBC News Arabic (2020) *Qassem Soleimani's killing: Iran targets US forces in Iraq with missile strikes*. (Online). Last Accessed 26 May 2025 at: <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-51029114>

Asabbagh, S. (2022) *Iran's Strategic Depth in the Middle East: A Case Study of the "Axis of Resistance"*. (Online). p. 85. 1st Ed. London - Cairo: Gulf Center for Iranian Studies. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/Telegram%20Desktop/pdf.العمق_الاستراتيجي_الایراني_في_المنطقة_دراسة_حالة_المحور_المقاومة

demonstrators' demands included fighting corruption, improving services, and providing jobs. Still, they quickly evolved into a widespread protest movement against the entire ruling political class and Iran's significant influence within the institutions of the Iraqi state⁽¹⁾.

(1) Menati and Hdian, 2019: 7. Nazmi, F. K. and Hatem, M. (2022) The October 2019 protests in Iraq from the perspective of their participants. (PDF). Pp. 70-81. 1st Ed. Baghdad: Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/8yghb.pdf>

Hassan, H. (2020). The October Protests and the Power Structure in Iraq: A Political Approach. In: Hars, H. and Nazmi, F. K. (EDs). (PDF). Pp. 29-31. *The October Protests in Iraq the Death of the Old and the Impossibility of the New*. 1st Ed. Baghdad: Al-Mada. pp. 21-33. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/files/665969.pdf>

Fayyad, A. e. And Ali, M. n. (2023). The religious Marjaa and the peaceful October protests of 2019. P. 120. *Maahad Magazine*, Issue 12, 2023. Pp. 115-136. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://j.alalamain.edu.iq/index.php/almahad/article/view/270/675>

Monte Carlo International (2019) *Iran: Iraq protests are US-Saudi-Israeli conspiracy*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.mc-doualiya.com/articles/20191008->

<https://www.mc-doualiya.com/articles/20191008-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%80-%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%80-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9>

Aldushi, B. (2020) *Iraqis revolt with shoes against Iran... and Soleimani visits Najaf*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/11/06/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82>

The demonstrators chanted anti-Iranian slogans such as "Iraq is free, free, Iran out and go out," protesting Tehran's domination of Iraq's political decision-making. This wave of protests was considered a turning point because the demonstrations originated in areas traditionally considered to be within the influence of pro-Iranian parties and militias. Portraits of prominent Iranian leaders were openly burned, and even the Iranian consulates in Karbala and Basra were burned several times. This shocked Iran's decision-making centers⁽¹⁾. This aligns with the assumption of realism theory that there is no trust in international relations. The possibility of war and conflict is always present. Intention is not measurable, so states remain suspicious of each other⁽²⁾. These demonstrations challenged the IFP in Iraq by emphasizing Iraqi nationalism and identity across different classes and studies. Mahdi (2019) believes that Sistani's rejection of all foreign interference in Iraqi affairs and his emphasis on the independence of the will of the Iraqi people reflect Iraqi nationalism.

[%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B0%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%81](#)

(1) Al-Obaidi, 2019; Human Rights Watch (2019). *Iraq: Lethal Force Used Against Protesters*. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: [https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/10/iraq-lethal-force-used-against-protesters#:~:text=\(Beirut\)%20%E2%80%93%20Iraqi%20security%20forces,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today](https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/10/iraq-lethal-force-used-against-protesters#:~:text=(Beirut)%20%E2%80%93%20Iraqi%20security%20forces,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today).

(2) Waltz, 1979: 105; Misbah, 2011: 28-29; Hussein, 2018: 280.

Iran, on the other hand, resisted this challenge with both soft and hard power. Although these events damaged Iran's reputation, it still presented itself as a Shiite advocate and strategic partner in Iraq. To many, Iran appeared as an intervening force attempting to maintain its influence, even at the cost of Iraqi blood. As a result, the rise of Iraqi nationalism and efforts to counter Iranian influence in Iraq posed a significant challenge to the IFP in the region. However, Iran has managed to mitigate this challenge by employing its soft and hard power.

4. US Maximum Pressure Policy Against IRI

The policy of extreme US pressure pursued by the Donald Trump administration against Iran was one of the main challenges facing the IFP in Iraq. This policy imposed a series of tough economic and trade sanctions on Iran following Washington's withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018. The sanctions covered several vital sectors, including oil, banks, and Revolutionary Guards companies, causing Iran's revenues to fall and the economy to slow down. This directly affected Iran's ability to finance its networks of influence in the region, especially in Iraq⁽¹⁾. It was forced to limit its activities because Tehran

(1) Mustaffa, 2016. Khuli, M. (2016) Iranian penetration into Iraq...motives, forms and tools of influence. (Online). pp. 5-9. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/27905>

Abas, A (2023) *Border Crossings: The Unholy Alliance Between Iran and Iraqi Militias*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at:

relied on the financial and military spheres to strengthen its allies in Shiite groups, militias, and pro-political parties.

In addition, US sanctions have targeted several individuals and entities in Iraq due to suspected links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards or because their activities contribute to instability, such as the Asaib Ahl-Al-Haq group and the Hezbollah brigade. These groups were placed on the US terror list, complicating economic and commercial transactions. As a result, Iraqi institutions encountered obstacles in cooperating with Iranian parties, which they supported out of fear of punishment. The policy also affected economic deals, particularly in the energy sector, as the United States exerted pressure on Baghdad to decrease its dependence on Iranian gas and electricity, further limiting Iraq's reliance on Iran⁽¹⁾. Consequently, the policy of extreme US pressure against Iran created a two-pronged challenge for Iranian policy, undermining Iran's revenues domestically and restricting its influence in Iraq abroad.

5. Assassination of Qassem Soleimani in 2020

Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, played a key role in coordinating Iran's influence in Iraq, both politically and

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/border-crossings-the-unholy-alliance-between-iran-and-iraqi-militias?lang=ar¢er=middle-east>

(1) Aladdin, 2020. Taha, 2018: 7. Knights, 2019. Ali, O. O. and Hasan, I. A. (2022). The US Pressure and Sanctions Policy in Changing Iran's Conduct. Pp. 59-63. *Political Sciences Journal*, Issue (63), June (2022), pp. 43-71. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/3.pdf>

militarily. Soleimani was the link between Tehran and Iraqi Shiite militias. He also significantly influenced the formation of Iraqi government cabinets by applying pressure on pro-Iranian parties and directing Iranian allies. On January 3, 2020, Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of Hashd al-Shaabi, were killed

in a US drone strike near Baghdad airport⁽¹⁾. Soleimani's assassination marked a turning point in Iranian influence in Iraq and weakened the role of the unified leadership of Iranian-backed Shiite armed militias. Iran struggled to fill the vacuum created by Qassem Soleimani's disappearance, despite having an extensive network of personal contacts and direct influence over the leaders of the armed militias. His successor, Qaani, could not play the same role as Soleimani due to a lack of experience, local language proficiency, and comprehensive knowledge of the Iraqi landscape that Soleimani possessed. Qaani's

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- (1) Asabbagh, 2022: 85. Aladdin, 2020. Ahmad, M. M. (2022) *Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Iraq (2003-2018)*. (Online). Thesis (PhD). Soran University. P. 18. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Desktop/Amended%20Copy%20of%20PhD%20Mahdi.pdf>, Sofi, D. H. (2021) *The Iranian Foreign Policy towards Kurdistan Region of Iraq (2003-2018)*. (Online). Thesis (MA) Soran University. P. 29. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: [file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/Telegram%20Desktop/The Iranian Foreign Policy towards Kurdistan Region Iraq 2003 2018%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/Telegram%20Desktop/The Iranian Foreign Policy towards Kurdistan Region Iraq 2003 2018%20(2).pdf) Gordon, M. R. (2012) *Iran's Master of Iraq Chaos Still Vexes US*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/world/middleeast/qassim-suleimani-irans-master-of-iraq-chaos-still-vexes-the-us.html> Eisenstadt, M. (2015) *Iran and Iraq*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/ayran-walraq>

weakness led to differences among some Shiite militias at the leadership level and in the distribution of gains and revenues. At the same time, Iran's role in imposing direction declined over its allies. In some instances, Shiite militias acted independently and even competed with one another for local influence⁽¹⁾. Thus, the assassination of Qassem Soleimani posed a significant challenge for IFP in Iraq, as the strong link that governed Iranian politics was broken, and the field leader who embodied Iran's quest for hegemony in reality was gone.

The existence of these challenges in front of the IFP in Iraq emphasizes the assumptions of structural realism: that the international system is anarchic, which means there is no higher authority than the

(1) Taha (2018), p. 7. Menati and Hdian (2019) p. 7. Eisenstadt (2015). Al-Ghanimi, A. M. (2021). The militia conflict and Iranian influence in Iraq. Pp. 51-54. *Journal of Iranian Studies*, Fifth Year – Fourteenth Issue – October 2021, pp. 49-68. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://rasanah-iiis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%95%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82.pdf>

Al-Salhy, S. (2020). *Iran tasked Nasrallah with uniting Iraqi proxies after Soleimani's death*. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-iran-asked-nasrallah-organise-iraqi-militias-after-soleimanis-death>

Azizi, Hamidreza (2021) *Challenges to Iran's Role in Iraq in the Post-Soleimani Era*. (PDF). P. 5. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/256705/1/2021C44.pdf>

states. This situation forces a state like Iran to constantly seek to increase its power to ensure its survivability and security in the international arena, relying on itself. Iran remained skeptical about events that threatened its policy, such as the emergence of ISIS, the return of U.S. combat forces, and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in 2020. These challenges also highlight that the potential for conflict and war is always present, as Waltz asserts⁽¹⁾: the possibility of war is always open, so states are constantly gathering strength and increasing their strength.

III. Section Three: Main Opportunities IFP Faced Regarding Iraq During Hassan Rouhani's Era

Iran's foreign policy in Iraq has had many opportunities under Hassan Rouhani. Here, we discuss the most important of these opportunities:

1. Security Cooperation Against ISIS

Iran has identified itself as Iraq's leading security partner in the 2014-2017 war against the terrorist organization ISIS. Iran took advantage of the significant security gap and observed the collapse of a substantial portion of the Iraqi army following the fall of Mosul. Tehran initiated the process of sending military advisers and weapons to support Iraqi forces, particularly the Shiite armed groups that comprised the core of the Hashd al-Shaabi forces, which, following

(1) Waltz, 1979, pp. 105-134.

Sistani's fatwa, were officially established. Hashd al-Shaabi included several militias and armed groups, most of which had ties to Iran before the arrival of ISIS, such as Hezbollah's brigade, Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization. These groups received direct support from the Iranian Quds Force, led by Qassem Soleimani, which resulted in their significant role in the fighting to liberate Iraqi cities, including Tikrit, Fallujah, and Mosul. The war against ISIS also led to the destruction of Sunni areas of Iraq and the domination of Hashd al-Shaabi⁽¹⁾. Taha argues that the war against ISIS presented an opportunity for Iran to solidify its position in Iraq by enhancing its presence, which consequently bolstered Iran's influence in the region⁽²⁾.

In 2016, these groups were officially incorporated into Iraq's security and defense structures, giving them legal status. This gave Iran more significant influence within the Iraqi security establishment, and many Hashd al-Shaabi units remained under Tehran's direct influence.

(1) Menati and Hdian, 2019: 13. Alaaddin, 2020. Taha, 2018: 7. Knights, 2019: 2. Nadir, 2015 Murad, D. M. (2020) Iranian influence in Iraq after the American occupation. (Online). p. 91. *Scientific Journal*, Faculty of Commerce, Assiut University, Issue No. 69, 2020, pp. 81-112. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Desktop/%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%89%D8%A8/%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86/%D8%B3%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B1%DA%86%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%20%DA%AF%D9%87%E2%80%8C%DA%B5%D8%A7%DA%B5%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87%E2%80%8C/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82.pdf>

(2) Taha, 2018: 5.

However, they were superficial followers of the Iraqi state. The situation sparked controversy at home and abroad, as several Iraqi and international parties warned of the existence of a "state within a state." At the same time, Iran believed the Hashd al-Shaabi represented a strategic line of defense against its interests in Iraq and the region⁽¹⁾. Salum argues: The war against ISIS was a golden opportunity that provided Iran with many ways and means to strengthen its regional position in Iraq and the region⁽²⁾. Saadi believes that ISIS made the Iranian dream a reality, which wanted to create a Shiite force outside the official forces of the Iraqi state to use them for its strategic goals in Iraq and the region⁽³⁾. Thus, one of the opportunities for IFP towards Iraq was to elevate the level of security cooperation with Iraq to the highest level.

2. Economic Expansion

(1) Nazmi and Hatem (2022) pp. 70-81. Hassan (2020) pp. 30-31. Fayyad and Ali (2023) p. 120. Zubian (2024). Alaaddin, (2020). Knights et al. (2021).

(2) Salum, M. (2024) *Iran and its Changing Role in Iraqi Geopolitics: From Competition to Alliance*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: https://mecouncil.org/ar/publication_chapters/%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D9%91%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84/

(3) Saadi, F. W. (2021) *The hegemony of the Islamic Republic of Iran over Iraq, its causes and effects*. (Online). p. 11. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <file:///C:/Users/sky%20for%20technology/Downloads/Telegram%20Desktop/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84/>

Economic expansion represented one of the opportunities for IFP towards Iraq. Despite the harsh US sanctions against Iran, the country maintained its role as a major energy supplier to Iraq by providing natural gas and electricity, reflecting the weaknesses in Iraq's energy infrastructure and its dependence on external sources. In addition to energy, Iran has sought to enhance its economic influence by exporting non-oil commodities, such as agricultural and industrial products, to Iraq. Consequently, Iraqi markets became venues for selling Iranian goods. The weaknesses in Iraqi domestic production and the absence of policies to protect local products opened broader avenues for Iranian goods. This situation allowed Iran to expand its economy and strengthen its position in Iraqi markets⁽¹⁾.

This opportunity became more effective after the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran and with the return of international sanctions against Iran, as Iran relied on Iraq as an economic and trade gateway to escape the consequences of those sanctions. In 2021, about 1/4 of Iran's total non-oil exports went to Iraq, and the value of trade between the two countries exceeded \$10

(1) Abbas (2023). Murad (2020) p. 98. Khuli, M. (2016) Iranian penetration into Iraq...motives, forms and tools of influence. (Online). pp. 5-9. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/27905>

Fard, F. W. (2020) *Trade relations between Iraq and Iran...requirements and opportunities*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.bayancenter.org/2020/11/6474/>

billion⁽¹⁾. Thus, one of the opportunities for IFP towards Iraq was economic expansion alongside political, security, military, and ideological growth.

3. Diplomatic Engagement

One of the main opportunities for IFP towards Iraq under Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) is to strengthen diplomatic relations. Iran has adopted a more diplomatic approach to its relations with Iraq as part of a strategy aimed at balancing the new US influence after it withdrew forces under the pretext of fighting ISIS and returning to Iraq. Iran seized the opportunity to reinforce formal diplomatic ties with the Iraqi government, relying on classical state tools alongside the informal influence of the Revolutionary Guards and armed groups⁽²⁾.

Several high-level visits occurred between Tehran and Baghdad, resulting in several agreements signed across various fields. Tehran also intensively engaged in hosting Iraqi officials, including both government and party representatives. Economic, security, and regional issues were discussed during these visits to enhance regional

(1) Hatam (2019) p. 174. Murad (2020) p. 98. Salum, 2024. Asabbagh (2022) p. 85.

(2) Arango (2017). Al-Obaidi, A. A. (2011) *Iraqi-Iranian Relations During American Occupation of Iraq 2003-2011*. Thesis (MA). Middle East University. (PDF). p. 118. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: https://meu.edu.jo/libraryTheses/586782beab2fc_1.pdf

Najat, A. (2021). *Prospects for Economic Relations between Iran and Iraq*. (PDF). Pp. 6-23. Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/9ygv2.pdf>

coordination. Iran leveraged these official channels to strengthen its influence and affect sovereign decisions in Baghdad, particularly in response to US pressure.

This has strengthened Iran's position as an important regional partner for Iraq. On the other hand, it has led to domestic criticism of

Iran's interference in Iraq's affairs⁽¹⁾. Therefore, one of the main opportunities facing IFP towards Iraq during this period was to expand and strengthen diplomatic relations with Iraq. Thus, Diplomatic channels enhanced Iran's influence alongside other Tehran channels and tools.

(1) Menati and Hadian (2019) p. 9. Mustaffa (2016). Najat, A. (2022) *Iraqi mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia: motives and consequences*. (Online). 1st Ed., Baghdad: Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning. pp. 6-23. Last Accessed 26 May 2025 at: <https://www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/863t32.pdf> , Alalam Chanel (2019) *The historic meeting between President Rouhani and Said Sistani*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.alalam.ir/news/4110541/%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A>

4. Post-ISIS Political Influence

After the defeat of ISIS in 2017, Iran's focus shifted from supporting military action to strengthening its political influence within the Iraqi state. Tehran leveraged its strong network of ties with Shiite armed groups and militias gathered under the umbrella of the Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi forces to bolster its position in the Iraqi parliament. These groups and militias built a broad popular base and entered the political process vigorously, resulting in an opportunity to enhance Iranian influence in Iraq after the defeat of ISIS. Iran had a direct influence on the formation of parliamentary coalitions by supporting Shiite armed groups to participate in politics. Especially after the 2018 elections, Iran backed Hadi Al-Amiri's Fatah coalition, which later became a larger coalition called the Construction Coalition that formed the Iraqi government. Hadi Al-Amiri, the leader of the pro-Iranian Badr movement, emerged as one of the most prominent and influential political figures, acting as a bridge to enhance Iran's political and military influence in Iraq. Iran even played a key role in uniting Shiite parties under a coalition, facilitating the formation of the Iraqi government and the appointment of Adel Abdul Mahdi as prime minister⁽¹⁾. The participation of the Quds Revolutionary Guards and

(1) Alaaddin (2020). Taha (2018) p. 5. Eisenstadt (2015). Rizaei, A. (2008) Explaining the foreign policy periods of the United States from the perspective of international relations theories. (Online). Pp. 95-99. *Strategy Quarterly*, Year 16, Issue 48, Tehran Strategic Research Center, Summer 2008, pp. 83-100. Last Accessed 26 May 2025 at: <https://ensani.ir/file/download/article/20110103144542-867.pdf>, Aljazeera A. (2024) *Pro-Iranian Iraqi factions: The shields of the "Islamic*

Shiite armed militias in the occupation of most Sunni areas and disputed regions with the Kurdistan Region, along with the establishment of military bases and headquarters in those locations, influences Iran and its allies, not just in Shiite areas; instead, it has strengthened their position throughout Iraq⁽¹⁾. Thus, one of the main opportunities for IFP towards Iraq under Rouhani was the expansion and consolidation of Iran's influence following the defeat of ISIS. This indicates a reduction in the influence of Iran's opponents in Iraq.

5. Regional Mediation Efforts

Under Hassan Rouhani, Iran pursued a more pragmatic policy to reduce regional tensions, especially with the Arabian Gulf (or as Iran calls the Persian Gulf) states⁽²⁾. Consequently, Iraq emerged as a crucial

Revolution" in Mesopotamia. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2024/2/22/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86>

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(1) Barzani (2020) pp. 110-113. Murad (2020) p. 91. Mustaffa, 2016.

(2) Alnajjar, A. R. (2020) European Union Policy on the Iranian Nuclear Deal 2015–2019. (Online). pp. 176-180. *Madarat Iranian Magazine*, issued by the Arab

diplomatic channel for embodying this Iranian policy, as Tehran utilized Iraq to communicate indirectly with its regional rivals, notably the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Iran leveraged Iraq's strong relations with Tehran and Riyadh, particularly under the leadership of Prime Ministers Haider Al-Abadi and Mustafa Al-Kazemi, to reopen negotiation channels that had long been closed. Given its geopolitical position and relatively balanced relations, Baghdad emerged as an ideal platform for dialogue and negotiations to reduce tensions between Tehran and the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. During 2020 and 2021, several talks took place in Baghdad between Iran and Saudi Arabia, facilitated by Iraq⁽¹⁾. Iran aimed to reshape regional relations through Iraq, particularly following the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018. In pursuing this strategy, Iran sought to lessen its regional isolation, secure new partnerships, or, at the very least, ease tensions, using Iraq

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(1) Najat (2022) pp. 4-11. Reuters (2023). *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Key developments towards resumption of ties*. (Online). Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at:

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as a mediator⁽¹⁾. Consequently, one of the key opportunities for IFP concerning Iraq was the mediating role of the Iraqi region in balancing Iran's regional relations, notably with Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, IFP also impacted Iraq's role, as the Iraqi government was predominantly pro-Iranian and led by a Shiite majority.

Iran has carefully worked on these opportunities to strengthen its position, role, and influence in Iraq and the region, ensure its security and interests, and implement its agenda in Iraq and the region. This aligns with the assumptions of structural realism theory, which posits that states are the primary actors in the international relations arena, pursuing national interests. That power is the most effective means to achieve goals⁽²⁾. Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq under Hassan Rouhani has been aimed at gaining enough power to maintain Iran's position and influence in Iraq and the region, not to achieve regional hegemony.

(1) Taha (2018) p. 5. Abdul-Hay, W. (2023). *Future prospects for Iranian-Saudi relations*. pp. 15-17. Last Accessed: May 26, 2025, at: https://www.alzaytouna.net/arabic/data/attachments/AcademicArticles/PA_Walid-AbdalHay_FP-IntRelations_KSA-Iran_9-23.pdf

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(2) Waltz (1979) pp. 105-134. Mearsheimer (2013) pp. 77-78. Hussein (2018) p. 280.

This aligns with defensive realism, which posits that states should seek power to ensure their survival rather than aspire to become regional or international hegemons. Pursuing hegemony can lead to punishment by the international system⁽¹⁾.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the primary challenges and opportunities IFP faced in Iraq under Hassan Rouhani. The study utilized the theory of structural realism, which effectively interpreted and applied its assumptions. In terms of the theory's directions, defensive realism, as outlined by Waltz, is applied to this case. The study concluded that under Hassan Rouhani, IFP toward Iraq encountered five major challenges: the rise of ISIS which occupied part of Iraqi territory, which resulted in a decline of Iranian influence; the return of U.S. combat forces to Iraq under the pretext of fighting ISIS, which forced Iran to create a counterbalance; Shiite protests and demonstrations in the Shi'a cities opposing Iran's influence in Iraq; and the extreme pressure policy imposed by the United States against Iran. The US assassination of Qassem Soleimani in Iraq in 2020 was another major challenge, as he was the most influential Iranian man in embodying Iranian policy in Iraq. These constituted the main challenges Iran faced in Iraq.

(1) Mearsheimer (2001) pp. 1-23. Mearsheimer (2013) pp. 77-90. Al-Akeely (2021) p. 30.

During this period, there were five opportunities for IFP: top-level security and military cooperation against ISIS, which allowed Iraq to exert control over both Sunni and Shiite areas. Economic expansion was essential to mitigate the effects of international sanctions on Iran and to utilize Iraq as a gateway. Additionally, the expansion of diplomatic relations aimed to enhance the role of Iranian soft power alongside its hard power in Iraq. Following the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the situation became favorable for Iran's influence in Iraq to reach its peak. This allowed Iran to employ the Iraqi government as a regional mediator to alleviate its isolation and strengthen ties, particularly with Gulf countries.

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