




**The Pathology of Iran's Interaction with Shia Parties in Iraq (2003–2021): A Constructivist Analysis of the Iran–Saudi Rivalry**

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Mohammadreza Ghaedi<sup>3</sup>**Extended Abstract****1. Introduction**

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran played a decisive role in Iraq's political transformation. Its comprehensive support for Shia parties not only helped secure their dominance within Iraq's power structure but also reinforced identity-based and ideological ties between the two countries, fostering a degree of political and social convergence.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia emerged as Iran's primary competitor, intensifying the complexity of regional rivalries within Iraq. Riyadh pursued a balancing strategy by building ties with Sunni groups as well as Shia factions critical of Tehran. This policy aimed to limit Iran's influence while bolstering Saudi leverage among Iraqi constituencies opposed to Iranian sway. Consequently, this rivalry shaped Iraq's political processes and, in many cases, deepened internal divisions within Shia parties, generating conflict among rival groups.

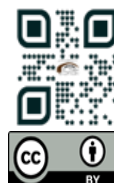
**2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This research examines the interactions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Shia parties in Iraq from 2003 to 2021. Employing a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach and utilizing constructivist theory, it analyzes the role of these interactions in the formation and strengthening of Shia identity in Iraq. During this period, Iran sought to

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consolidate its influence by providing military, economic, and ideological support to Shia groups, while simultaneously countering its regional rival, Saudi Arabia.

Constructivism is a critical theory that asserts the insufficiency of rationalist perspectives, which often neglect the role of culture and ideas in analyzing international relations. From this standpoint, a comprehensive interpretation of international affairs necessitates attention to ideational factors such as shared rules, norms, and culture (Lupovici, 2009: 18).

Constructivists posit that the international system is constituted primarily by the distribution of ideas, not merely by the distribution of material capabilities. In the relationship between material reality and social meaning, constructivism assigns primacy to ideas and intersubjective understandings. The ontological foundation of constructivism—a core metatheoretical proposition—rests on three key principles:

- Ideational structures are as significant as material structures.
- Identities shape interests and, consequently, actions.
- Actors and structures are mutually constitutive.

Broadly speaking, constructivist theory can be categorized into three distinct approaches based on its level of analysis: systemic, domestic, and holistic constructivism.

Systemic constructivism, akin to neorealism, provides a macro-level analysis of international relations. However, its primary focus is on the normative structure of the international environment, deliberately disregarding domestic politics. Alexander Wendt, a leading proponent of this approach, distinguishes between two types of state identity: collective identity (referring to a state's internal cultural and ideological characteristics) and social identity (referring to the image a state projects of itself and perceives in others). For Wendt, international politics is a product of the social identities that states hold of each other (Wendt, 1994: 385).

In contrast, domestic constructivism focuses exclusively on the relationship between a state's internal norms and its domestic structures of meaning. This approach emphasizes how normative changes within conceptions of the "self" and the "other" impact cooperation or conflict among actors. In this framework, domestic social processes are the primary source of identity formation, capable of determining state interests independently of the international system.

Holistic constructivism challenges the strict dichotomy between domestic and international structures, arguing for the importance of both national and international norms. This approach seeks to integrate these two levels of

analysis to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the factors that shape state identity and interests.

From a constructivist perspective, state interests are not predetermined but are derived from the nature of inter-state relations. These relations are, in turn, shaped by the meanings that actors collectively ascribe to one another through interaction. Identity is thus relational, defined through a process of self-understanding and expectations of others. Constructivists contend that no norms exist a priori; instead, rules and norms are emergent properties that are created and sustained through continuous social interaction and practice.

### **3. Discussion**

The Iran–Saudi competition turned Iraq into a key arena of regional influence, extending beyond politics into security, social, and cultural domains. This rivalry often exacerbated Iraq's domestic crises, undermining both national unity and social cohesion. Within the Shia community in particular, disputes over relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia produced significant political and ideological fractures, representing one of Iraq's most critical challenges during this period.

The findings of this study suggest that while Iran's engagement with Shia parties fostered bilateral convergence and strengthened religious identity, the Iran–Saudi rivalry simultaneously escalated sectarian tensions and weakened Iraq's internal cohesion. By applying a constructivist framework, this study offers a comprehensive evaluation of the dynamics and consequences of this competition and proposes possible pathways for enhancing regional interactions.

- **Identity-Based Rivalry: Iran and Saudi Arabia**

From a constructivist perspective, the contrasting identities of Iran and Saudi Arabia—as Shi'a and Sunni powers, respectively—play a decisive role in shaping their policies in Iraq. Iran's revolutionary-Shi'a identity contrasts sharply with Saudi Arabia's conservative-Sunni identity, generating an inevitable competition for influence in Iraq (Mabon, 2013). In this theoretical framework, state identities fundamentally shape interests and, consequently, international behavior.

Following the 1979 Revolution, Iran adopted a Shi'a-revolutionary identity as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. This identity emphasizes resistance to the West, support for Islamic movements, and promotion of the Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) model. In contrast, Saudi Arabia draws on its conservative-Sunni and Wahhabi identity to preserve the traditional order and assert leadership over the Sunni world. The resulting identity-based

confrontation has rendered Iraq a critical arena for the rivalry between these two powers.

- **Efforts to Shape Norms and Identities**

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia employ various instruments to advance their identity-driven objectives in Iraq. Iran promotes Shi'a norms and provides extensive support to allied parties to consolidate its revolutionary-Shi'a identity. Conversely, Saudi Arabia supports Sunni groups and even Shi'a factions opposed to Iran, seeking to contain Tehran's influence while propagating its preferred norms (Matthiesen, 2014). This competition has effectively transformed Iraq into a battleground for competing narratives and identity constructions.

- **Consequences of the Rivalry for Iraq's Shi'a Parties**

A direct outcome of this rivalry has been the deepening of divisions and increased fragmentation within Iraq's Shi'a community. Some parties have aligned closely with Iran, while others have pursued ties with Saudi Arabia or the West. This fragmentation has weakened Shi'a political cohesion, creating significant challenges for Iraq's stability, governance, and national sovereignty (Haddad, 2016).

#### **4. Conclusion and Suggestions**

The present analysis indicates that Iran's engagement with Iraq's Shi'a parties initially strengthened their position within Iraq's political structure. However, regional rivalries and the involvement of competing powers, particularly Saudi Arabia, have deepened internal divisions among these parties, gradually reducing the effectiveness of Iran's interactions. From a constructivist perspective, the contrasting identities and norms of Iran and Saudi Arabia—namely Iran's revolutionary-Shi'a identity versus Saudi Arabia's Sunni-Wahhabi identity—have been central in shaping these rivalries and their effects on Iraq's political and social landscape. This identity-based competition has driven both states to pursue distinct spheres of influence in Iraq and other regional states, intensifying political and religious contestation.

Iran's foreign policy in Iraq has focused on strengthening Shi'a identity and expanding influence among Shi'a groups, while Saudi Arabia has sought to consolidate a Sunni-Wahhabi identity as a counterbalance. This identity-driven rivalry, combined with regional interests and the involvement of extra-regional actors such as the United States, has added considerable complexity to Iran's relations with Iraq's Shi'a parties.

To enhance its position, Iran should adopt strategies emphasizing cultural and identity-based engagement. Creating platforms for cultural and religious

dialogue can foster constructive relationships and promote cohesion among Iraq's Shi'a currents. Respecting the autonomy of Shi'a parties can further enhance their legitimacy and reduce internal tensions. Such an approach would not only consolidate Iran's influence in Iraq but could also contribute to broader regional stability.

Constructivist theory suggests that managing competition with Saudi Arabia effectively requires the "construction and reinforcement of shared identities and norms." By promoting a Shi'a identity grounded in convergence and respect for diversity, Iran can establish sustainable influence in Iraq and the region without exacerbating identity-based conflicts. Constructivism underscores that identities and norms shape state behavior and provide avenues for cooperative international engagement, enabling states to pursue common interests within mutually respectful frameworks.

In conclusion, enhancing Iran's foreign policy in Iraq necessitates a reassessment of its approach: prioritizing shared identities, respecting cultural and religious diversity, reducing sectarian competition, and fostering economic relations. These measures can strengthen internal cohesion among Shi'a groups and lay the groundwork for broader regional and international cooperation.

## 5. Keywords

Shia parties, divergence, religious identity, constructivist approach, regional interactions

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