Iraq's Syria Policy Before and During the Syrian Civil War in Terms of Domestic Decision-Making Environment

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Abstract: This paper examines Iraq's policy towards Syria before and during the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011. It presents an overview of the restoration of relations between the two countries that have been hostile since their formation, with a view to tracing the factors behind the rapprochement during the Syrian uprising. Drawing from some concepts of the neoclassical realist perspective, such as the domestic decision-making environment, the paper seeks to understand under which international and domestic factors the Iraqi leadership inhabits with respect to restoring and resuming relations with the Syrian regime. The paper argues that the Iraqi leadership is obliged to support the Syrian regime owing to its strategic interests in receiving support from the Iraqi parliament.

Keywords: Iraq, Syrian Civil War, Iran, Iraqi leadership, Foreign Policy Decision-Making

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Irak'ın Suriye Politikası: Suriye İç Savaşı Öncesi ve Sırasında Yurt İçi Karar Alma Ortamı Açısından

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Öz: Bu çalışma, 2011 yılında başlayan Suriye iç savaşı öncesi ve sırasında Irak'ın Suriye'ye yönelik izlediği politikasını incelemektedir. Irak'ın Suriye ile yakınlaşmasının ardındaki faktörlerin izini sürmek amacıyla kuruluşlarından bu yana iki ülke arasındaki düşmanca olan ilişkilerin restorasyonuna genel bir bakış sunmaktadır. Neoklasik realist yaklaşımının ülke içi karar alma ortamı gibi bazı kavramlarından yola çıkan makale, Irak liderliğinin Suriye rejimiyle ilişkilerini yeniden kurma ve sürdürme konusunda hangi uluslararası ve yerel faktörler altında hareket ettiğini araştırmaktadır. Çalışma, Irak liderlerinin iktidarlarını devam ettirmek için Irak parlamentosundan destek alma konusundaki stratejik çıkarları nedeniyle Suriye rejimini desteklemek zorunda olduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Irak, Suriye İç Savaşı, İran, Irak Liderliği, Dış Politika.

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السياسة العراقية تجاه سوريا: من حيث بيئة صنع القرار داخل البلاد قبل وأثناء الحرب الأهلية السورية

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الملخص

يتناول هذا المقال السياسة العراقية تجاه سوريا قبل وأثناء الحرب الأهلية السورية التي بدأت عام 2011. وتقدم الدراسة لمحة عامة عن عودة العلاقات بين البلدين والتي كانت عدائية منذ تأسيسهما، وذلك ومن أجل التعرف على العوامل التي ساهمت في التقارب العراقي مع سوريا. ويناقش المقال بالاستناد إلى بعض مفاهيم النهج الواقعي الكلاسيكي الجديد مواضيع مثل بيئة صنع القرار الداخلي، العوامل الدولية والمحلية التي دفعت القيادة العراقية إلى السعي لإعادة بناء علاقاتها مع النظام السوري والعمل على استدامة هذه العلاقات. كما تشير الدراسة إلى كيف أن القادة العراقيين مجبرين على دعم النظام السوري بسبب مصالحهم الاستراتيجية من أجل الحصول على دعم البرلمان العراقي لمواصلة حكمهم..

الكلمات المفتاحية: العراق، الحرب الأهلية السورية، إيران، القيادة العراقية، صنع القرار في السياسة الداخلية

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Introduction

Iraqi-Syrian relations have always been intimate due to geographical proximity and shared Arab identity. The seizure of power by one of the opposing factions in each of the two countries turned the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'ath regimes into bitter opponents. The two opposing regimes each supported dissidents inside the ruling Ba'ath parties. This threatening inter-state environment resumed between the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the Syrian uprising that began in 2011.[1] However, the Syrian Civil War marked a new period of burgeoning relations between Baghdad and Damascus, positioning Iraq in the Syria-Iran alliance vis-à-vis the Saudi Arabia-UAE and Türkiye-Qatar alliances. This watershed in relations between the two countries bets the question of what factors impelled Maliki to end the hostility towards the Syrian regime.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War and the Cold War permitted domestic anti-regime forces to surface in Iraq.[2] Following the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the US-led coalition put the Iraqi opposition in power and invented an ethno-sectarian apportionment system. In this power-sharing system known as *muhasasa ta'ifia*, ministerial portfolios, civil service jobs, and government contracts have been distributed along ethno-sectarian party lines. Since 2003, successive Iraqi governments have been paralyzed owing to the clash of sectarian and partisan interests.[3] Positions in Nuri al-Maliki's government were distributed between different parties based on the number of each party's parliamentary seats, which made state institutions resemble the fiefdoms of powerful parties. Ministers follow their party's instructions about micro-management issues such as appointments and contracting.[4]

Iraq's social elite used politics to loot public funds, as described by the term "kleptocracy." This term means extensive corruption, whereby high-level political power is abused to allow ruling elites to steal public funds for their own private gain using public institutions. In such settings, internal checks

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1   Raymond Hinnebusch, "Iraq-Syria Relations: The Iraq War and After," in *Iraq since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict*, ed. Keiko Sakai and Philip Marfleet (Oxon: Routledge, 2020).

2   Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 216.

3   Taif Alkhudary, "How Iraq's Sectarian System Came to Be," March 29, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/29/how-iraqs-sectarian-system-came-to-be/.

4   Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister" (Brandeis University, June 2016), 5, http://iraqieconomists.net/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/06/FROM-MALIKI-TO-ABADI-THE-CHALLENGE-OF-BEING-IRAQ%E2%80%99S-PRIME-MINISTER.-BY-HARITH-HASAN-AL-QARAWEE-.pdf; Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012).

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Etütleri

on power are neutralized or co-opted.[5] Prime ministers in contemporary Iraq are restrained both by the need to take back their social base and by the inflexibility displayed by leaders of other communities.[6] Prime minister candidates have tried to gain the consent of the most powerful Shia cleric, Ali al-Sistani, who emerged as a key player in the processes that constituted and sustained the post-2003 Iraqi political order. Although Sistani did not have an official position in Iraq, the political elite of Iraq considered Sistani's consent to be their candidate for prime minister before getting the support or consent of the USA and Iran.

The focus of this study is on Iraq-Syria relations, particularly Iraqi policy towards the Syrian Civil War, paying utmost attention to the impact on their relations of the Syrian uprising that broke out in 2011 and Maliki's second term in prime ministry. The warming relations between the two countries could be understood within the context of the domestic political balance of power in Iraq as well as the post-2003 regional order in the Middle East. Given the increasing Iranian influence on Iraq, regional power struggles between the two regional axes contributed to the marriage of convenience between Syria and Iraq over this period. The study examines relations before the Syrian uprising and then addresses how Maliki's administrative and coercive capacity of the Iraqi state and the regional power struggle over Syria paved the way for the rapprochement between Iraq and Syria.

Relations before the Syrian Civil War

Milestones in the restoration of Syria's relations with Iraq after the US invasion of Iraq were the visit of US-appointed Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi in 2004, the agreement on a railroad from Mosul to Aleppo, and the continuation of diplomatic relations in 2006.[7] In addition, Syria received the then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, Iraqi officials, tribal leaders, and Shi'a politicians such as Muqtada al-Sadr and Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim. In 2009, Syrian and Iraqi prime ministers exchanged visits and signed economic and political cooperation agreements.[8] However, the rapprochement between the two

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5   Thomas Mayne, "What Is Kleptocracy and How Does It Work?," July 4, 2022, https://www.chatham-house.org/2022/07/what-kleptocracy-and-how-does-it-work; Christopher Walker and Melissa Aten, "The Rise of Kleptocracy: A Challenge For Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 3.

6   Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 5; Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*.

7   Carsten Wieland, *Syria - A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2012).

8   Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria-Iraq Relations: State Construction and Deconstruction and the MENA States System," LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series (the LSE Middle East Centre, October 2014),

countries was disrupted later that year following a series of bombings in the Iraqi capital that killed nearly 100 people. Iraq called upon Syria to surrender two individuals suspected of orchestrating the bombings and demanded that Syria extradite a hundred Iraqi Ba'athists within its borders. This request has led to a diplomatic dispute, prompting both nations to recall their respective ambassadors for consultation.[9]

Before Iraq's 2010 parliamentary elections, Syria became a venue for bargaining between rival Iraqi leaders. Tariq al-Hashimi and Ayad Allawi, key challengers to Maliki's hold on power within the Iraqiya bloc, sought Syrian support in the election. Bashar al-Assad initially endorsed Allawi and facilitated a meeting with Muqtada al-Sadr to explore a potential coalition between the two. The Syrian regime even permitted a public conference for the Younis al-Ahmad faction of the Iraq Ba'ath Party, which backed Allawi and pursued reintegration into Iraqi politics.[10] Syria reportedly harbored remnants of the Saddam regime and Ba'ath Party members and allowed the various resistance movements against US troops to use Syria as a main entry point into Iraq and through the provision of logistical support.[11]

For Maliki, Assad was playing a dirty game in Iraq by conspiring with "jihadists" to destabilize Iraq and keep the Americans bogged down there. However, the revolt in Syria has forced a significant change in the strategic thinking of the Shia Islamists in Iraq.[12] Indeed, Iran's close relations with Syria cleared the way to recalibrate ties between Baghdad and Damascus. Before the 2010 parliamentary election in Iraq, Iran urged Assad to back Maliki for prime minister. In the end, Assad switched his support to Maliki, beginning a realignment with the Shi'a-dominated Baghdad regime that paid off in the latter's rejection to isolate him after the Syrian uprising.[13] Since then, Maliki and Assad have strengthened relations, signed trade deals, and increased Syrian investment in Iraq.[14]

19–20, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60004/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_LSE%20Middle%20East%20Centre%20Papers_Hinnebusch_Syria%20-%20Iraq%20relations.pdf.

9   "Iraq PM Challenges Syria to Explain Militant Aid," Reuters, September 3, 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSANS349705.

10 Stephen Starr, "Iraqi Election Fever Hits Damascus," *Asia Times*, March 5, 2010.

11 "Chapter Four: The Regional Struggle over Syria," *Adelphi Series* 53, no. 438 (2013): 128–29.

12 European Council on Foreign Relations, "Syria: The View from Iraq," June 14, 2013, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_syria_the_view_from_iraq136/.

13 Hinnebusch, "Iraq-Syria Relations: The Iraq War and After," 259.

14 Michael S. Schmidt and Yasir Ghazi, "Iraqi Leader Backs Syria, With a Nudge From Iran," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/13/world/middleeast/13iraq.html.

Decision-Making Environment in Iraq After the 2010 Parliamentary Election

The national interests of the Maliki regime are defined by the narrow interests of the ruling elite. The foreign policy during his second tenure began not at the country's borders but at the political boundaries of "Malikiyoun," with strong personal ties to Maliki and the Da'wa Party.[15] In December 2011, the complete withdrawal of the US military presence left Maliki in charge of the country's security and foreign policy. Higher oil prices provided him with resources to rebuild the coercive capacity of the Iraqi state, moving him to politically co-opt, defeat, and isolate his Shia and Sunni rivals.[16] A small group of functionaries, the Malikiyoun, contributed to securing Maliki's grip on power. Maliki positioned them at the center of a network of influence and patronage that bypassed the cabinet and tied the prime minister directly to those generals and senior civil servants who were exerting state power below the ministerial level.[17]

The prime ministers of Iraq have not fully controlled their governments owing to the power-sharing arrangement. The exception to this was Maliki's second tenure, during which he formed a kind of shadow state that circumvented constitutional limitations.[18] Maliki's legacy is the reintroduction of the traditional strong-man model into Iraqi politics.[19] The fragmentation between political party groups allowed Maliki to play political games to control the system as much as possible. In 2011, Maliki temporarily took over the cabinet's vacant Interior, Defense, and National Security ministries. Moreover, Maliki subordinated the Election Commission and the Central Bank to his government, while the Supreme Judicial Court issued administrative authority to eliminate those who challenged Maliki's power.[20] Moreover, Maliki established a command post for the armed forces within the office of the prime minister. With this office, he consolidated his grip on the Iraqi security forces.[21]

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15 Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 182.

16 "Chapter Four: The Regional Struggle over Syria," 129.

17 Toby Dodge, "State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change: The Rise of a New Authoritarianism," *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 245; Joel D. Rayburn, "Rise of the Maliki Regime," *Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 22 (Spring-Summer 2012): 45–54.

18 Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 5; Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*.

19 Ned Parker, "Machiavelli in Mesopotamia: Nouri al-Maliki Builds the Body Politic," *World Policy Journal* 26, no. 1 (2009): 21.

20 Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), 350–51; Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Iraq in the Twenty-First Century: Regime Change and the Making of a Failed State* (Routledge, 2015), 134.{\\i{}Iraq in the Twenty-First Century: Regime Change and the Making of a Failed State} (Routledge, 2015

21 Dodge, "State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change: The Rise of a New Authoritarianism," 249.

The authoritarian power consolidation practices of the Maliki regime alienated the Kurds and the Sunnis.[22] Maliki mobilized the backing of Shi'a voters by utilizing openly sectarian language, demonizing the Sunni sections of Iraqi society as Ba'athists.[23] Maliki utilized the Sunni objection to the central government in a way to reconstruct his image as a strong and determined leader. He used the systemic threat of his archrival Iraqiya's vote to impose a rough unity on the Kurdish and Shi'a parties.[24] He pursued a strategy to divide and rule the Sunni leadership by enticing opponents with government positions and money. As a result, Iraqiya was divided into various streams, destroying the unity Allawi had built.[25] Moreover, the Iraqi security forces tried to arrest Sunni Deputy Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi on charges of coup plotting, inciting a furious reaction from his Shiite allies and Kurdish partners within government institutions.[26]

On the other hand, relations with the Kurds have been problematic since Maliki's second term.[27] The Kurdish parties initially helped make him prime minister as a condition that he implement their nineteen demands, of which the most important were from Article 150 - a budget for the Peshmerga, Kurdish security forces, and an oil and gas law allowing them. However, Maliki continuously fought the Kurds' attempts to achieve their constitutional regional autonomy. When he refused to implement any of these attempts, there was a high level of political conflict between the Kurds and the central government over the Kurds' oil and gas reserves, decreasing their reliance on Baghdad. Disputes over oil contracts increased after the Kurds concluded an exploration deal in November 2011 with the oil giant Exxon against the will of the central government, which caused Maliki to stop the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) allocation of the budget.[28]

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22 Hinnebusch, "Syria-Iraq Relations: State Construction and Deconstruction and the MENA States System," 18.
23 Toby Dodge et al., "Iraq Synthesis Paper: Understanding the Drivers of Conflict in Iraq," Conflict Research Programme–Iraq Papers (London: Middle East Center, the LSE, October 2018), 8, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/90514/1/Iraq%20synthesis%20paper%20understanding%20the%20drivers_2018.pdf.
24 Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 3.
25 Renad Mansour, "The Sunni Predicament in Iraq" (Carniege Middle East Center, March 2016), 7, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_59_Mansour_Sunni_Final.pdf.
26 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Al-Maliki's Government: A Trusted Proxy for Washington or Tehran?," May 29, 2014, https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Al-Malikis_Government_A_Trusted_Proxy_for_Washington_or_Tehran.aspx.
27 Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 3.
28 Dylan O'Driscoll, "Autonomy Impaired: Centralisation, Authoritarianism and the Failing Iraqi State," *Ethnopolitics* 16, no. 4 (2017): 2 and 9, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1086126; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Breaking From Baghdad: Kurdish Autonomy vs. Maliki's Manipulation," *World*

In Foreign Policy Decision-Making (FPDM), structural autonomy is the primary variable insulating the Foreign Policy Executive (FPE) from the influence of domestic actors on national security policy. Domestic actors could play a role in states only if the FPE owns low levels of structural autonomy. Therefore, a state's domestic decision-making environment determines to what extent the FPE keeps them away from the domestic opposition.[29] In domestic circumstances, if there is no governmental vulnerability, such as a military coup or some form of de-selection, domestic actors have little room to maneuver.[30] Maliki could make a U-turn in restoring ties with Syria as the domestic balance of political power totally turned the tide in his favor. Neither Iraqi Sunni political groups nor the Kurds forced Maliki to take a step back on his support for the Syrian regime in the Syrian Civil War.

In domestic circumstances, governmental vulnerability is the second variable conditioning the influence of domestic groups on the FPDM. If an electoral defeat, a military coup, or some other form of de-selection is imminent, the FPE strengthens its position by buying off a powerful interest group. Apart from governmental vulnerability, the degrees of both executive certainty and national consensus about national security policy affect the role of domestic actors in foreign policy-making. If there is executive certainty or national consensus, domestic actors have little room to maneuver. Conversely, when ambiguity reigns in the policy environment, a domestic actor can act as a policy entrepreneur and shape policy.[31]

Transformation of Maliki's strategic thinking

In the 2010 parliamentary election, Maliki, who obtained 89 seats, lost the election to the Iraqiya coalition headed by secularist Ayad Allawi, who won the most parliamentary seats. The elections pushed Maliki to receive support from Iran, albeit he acted against Iran's demands in his first term. Maliki initiated to get Iranian aid, especially after the withdrawal of US troops in December 2011, and to serve Iran's policies in the region. Hence, Maliki could not reject Iran's request for Iraqi Shiite militias to support Bashar Assad in the Syrian Civil War.[32] This is to say that Maliki's domestic interests dovetailed with

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Affairs 175, no. 4 (2012): 51.

29 Ripsman, *Peacemaking by Democracies: The Effect of State Autonomy on the Post-World War Settlements*, 50.

30 Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism and Domestic Interest Groups," 188-89.

31 Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism and Domestic Interest Groups," 188-89.

32 Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2017), 5–9.

Iran's foreign policy interests.[33] As noted above, ties with Syria remained cool until the Syrian Civil War, as the Iraqi ruling elite saw Syria as the leading financier and refuge of the Iraqi Ba'athists.[34] Yet, the civil war impelled the Iraqi leadership to consider that if the Assad regime fell in Syria, Iraqi Sunni groups fighting against the Maliki regime would use Syrian territory as a base to overthrow the government in Iraq. Secondly, if the Assad regime is overthrown, there is a possibility that Sunnis will come to power. For Maliki, the rise of a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus would bolster the alienation of Sunnis in Iraq's western provinces. Thirdly, if Iran loses Syria, Tehran will make more demands on Baghdad and threaten Maliki's autonomy within the country.[35] Finally, renewed Kurdish assertiveness in Syria could move Iraq's Kurds against Maliki's attempts to centralize power.[36]

When Maliki took the decision to restore relations with the Assad regime, the international and regional imperatives presented a high-threat environment for Iraq's FPE. There was a regional struggle between the rival US/Saudi-led (moderate/Sunni) and Iran-led (resistance/Shi'a) axes.[37] On the defensive, Iran sought to create a corridor linking Iran to Syria and the Lebanese coast via Iraq, allowing Iran to supply Hezbollah and providing the Asad regime with a two-sided buffer that could help it survive.[38] Iraq's Shi'a political elite moved further into the Iranian camp. Maliki believed that the same states that were supporting the opposition in Syria — a reference to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Türkiye —were playing "nefarious roles" in Iraq by backing his domestic political rivals within Iraq. That is why Maliki was worried that the Syrian uprising was part of a wider advance also directed at him.[39] The Maliki regime convened the annual meeting of the Arab League in 2012 in Baghdad, rallying Arab states opposed to regime change in Syria. Over half of the heads of state boycotted the summit, including the Gulf states. Particularly, Saudi Arabia perceived Maliki as an Iranian proxy and backed his rivals among the Iraqi Sunnis.[40]

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33 Ramzy Mardini, "Iraq's Abadi Caught between Global Powers and Domestic Politics," Atlantic Council, September 18, 2015, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/iraq-s-abadi-caught-between-global-powers-and-domestic-politics/.

34 Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 193.

35 Hinnebusch, "Syria-Iraq Relations: State Construction and Deconstruction and the MENA States System," 22; Dodge, "State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change: The Rise of a New Authoritarianism," 193–94.

36 "Chapter Four: The Regional Struggle over Syria," 130.

37 Mustafa Yetim and İsmail Numan Telci, "Another 'Third Way' to Narrate the Existing Alliances in the Middle East: Turkey-Qatar, Saudi Arabia-UAE, and Iran-Syria," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 25, no. 3 (2023): 484–505, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2143841.

38 Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Arab Uprisings and The MENA Regional States System," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 11, no. 42 (2014): 7–27.

39 European Council on Foreign Relations, "Syria: The View from Iraq."

40 Hinnebusch, "Syria-Iraq Relations: State Construction and Deconstruction and the MENA States System," 18; "Chapter Four: The Regional Struggle over Syria," 130.

While some Arab states demoted ties with Assad, Iraq moved in the opposite direction. The Maliki regime abstained from the Arab League vote in 2011 to freeze Syria's membership, refused the US call for Assad to go, and opposed further sanctions and overthrowing the Syrian regime by force. In addition, Iraq hosted a delegation of Syrian government officials and businessmen to discuss closer economic ties, including the construction of a gas pipeline that would run from Iran through Iraq to Syria. Furthermore, Baghdad provided much-needed diesel fuel, opened its airspace to resupply flights between Iran and Syria, and allowed Syria to use Iraq's banking institutions. The Maliki regime resumed supporting Syria despite diplomatic pressure from the US. To frustrate these pressures and over-dependence that the US may use as leverage over him, Maliki signed a $4.2 billion arms deal with Russia, making Russia the second largest supplier of weapons to Iraq. Having invested so much in Iraq, the US did not cut off aid to not lose its remaining position in the country.[41] During Maliki's visit to Washington in November 2013, the US agreed to sell his government large quantities of advanced weapons, notwithstanding Maliki's sectarian policies and Iran's influence on him, under the color of counterterrorism and the prevention of chaos spreading to neighboring states.[42]

The decline of the Iraqi central government forces in their struggle against the DAESH (ed-Devletü'l-İslâmiyye fi'l-Irak ve'ş-Şam) in April 2014 not only highlighted the shortcomings of the Iraqi security forces, which had consumed more than 20 billion dollars, but also eroded the political standing of Maliki.[43] During his initial tenure, Maliki had taken a firm stance against militias. However, he was compelled to collaborate with Shiite militia organizations and endorse the creation of the militia coalition known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) due to the security sector's collapse in the face of the DAESH. This shift in Maliki's approach underscored Iran's increasing influence over him.[44] These actions ultimately led to his loss of power, as he no longer enjoyed support from both Kurds and Sunnis. Consequently, this made it impossible for him to secure re-election in the aftermath of the 2014 national elections.[45]

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41 Hinnebusch, "Syria-Iraq Relations: State Construction and Deconstruction and the MENA States System," 22; Dodge, "State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change: The Rise of a New Authoritarianism," 193–94; Schmidt and Ghazi, "Iraqi Leader Backs Syria, With a Nudge From Iran."

42 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Crisis in Iraq: Is It al-Maliki's Policies and Miscalculations or Is It ISIS?," June 18, 2014, https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Crisis_in_Iraq_Is_It_al-Malikis_Policies_and_Miscalculations_or_Is_It_ISIS.aspx.

43 Benjamin Isakhan, "The Road to the 'Islamic State': State-Society Relations after the US Withdrawal from Iraq," in *State and Society in Iraq: Citizenship Under Occupation, Dictatorship and Democratisation*, ed. Benjamin Isakhan, Shamiran Mako, and Fadi Dawood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 272.

44 Mansour and Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," 5–9.

45 O'Driscoll, "Autonomy Impaired: Centralisation, Authoritarianism and the Failing Iraqi State," 12.

Abadi Caught Between Global Powers and Domestic Politics

The rivalry between Abadi and Maliki within the Da'wa Party led to a division of support between their respective allies.[46] Abadi garnered support from various quarters in his resistance to Maliki's ambition to secure a third term as prime minister.[47] Iraqi political parties displayed less interest in appointing a strong prime minister, ultimately choosing Abadi amid a turbulent political landscape.[48] He received support from Ali Sistani domestically, countries like Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Arab League regionally, and international powers such as the US, the UK, and the European Union.[49] His key policy objectives included preventing foreign interventions in Iraq, creating a playground for various regional and global actors, and combating the DAESH. To achieve these goals, he sought assistance from the US and Western countries to counterbalance Iran, adopting a balanced approach in his relations with the two sides.[50]

Maliki tried to use his leverage within powerful groups in the PMF, such as the Badr Organization and Kataib Hezbollah, to weaken Abadi's authority.[51] Some pro-Iranian militia groups in the PMF voluntarily fought along with pro-Assad forces in Syria. Abadi was torn between two choices: either to fight the influential networks that Maliki had embedded within state institutions or to ally with Maliki so as to secure the political support of his State of Law. Abadi opted for the first choice by taking three important steps towards reversing Maliki's leadership style. Firstly, he removed the position of commander in chief, which Maliki had used to circumvent the Ministry of Defense and make military decisions in isolation from the formal chain of command. Secondly, Abadi's government agreed on the "cabinet by-law." A series of rules governing the meetings of the Council of Ministers so as to organize its

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46   Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 4.

47   Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marjaʿ: Shiʿi Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 3 (2019): 481–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1429988; Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 3.

48   Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 3.

49   Caroleen Marji Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs: Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Hayder Al-Khoei, "Maliki's Political Games," Al Jazeera, August 14, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/8/14/malikis-political-games/.

50   Ali Mamouri, "Sistani Denies Supporting Soleiman's Involvement in Iraq," Al-Monitor, December 2, 2014, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/iraq-najaf-sistani-deny-soleimani-iran-interference.html.

51   Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 5; Pieter-Jan Dockx, "The Return of Maliki and a New Sunni Insurgency in Iraq?," the LSE Middle East Center, July 12, 2017, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/07/12/the-return-of-maliki-and-a-new-sunni-insurgency/.

decision-making process. Finally, Abadi further abolished four ministries and transferred their authority either to other ministries or to the provinces.[52]

Abadi was caught between global powers and domestic politics. Since the US military withdrawal, the US has urged Iraq to halt the Iranian overflights over Iraq that buttress the Asad regime. However, Abadi's participation in the efforts to hasten the downfall of the Syrian regime at the hands of Sunni insurgents would jeopardize his political survival in Baghdad. Since the transition of power from Maliki to Abadi in 2014, power in Iraq has become increasingly diffused; "the state represents more a contested arena of actors than a sovereign institution with agency." Abadi did not have a monopoly on decision-making, especially in the security sector. Therefore, he was restrained by Iran's strategic interests in the case of the Syrian uprising.[53] In Maliki's words, Iran was powerful in the Iraqi Parliament; any action that harms Iran's interests could exacerbate Abadi's political vulnerability, forcing him to play a delicate balancing act between regional and international powers.[54]

Unlike Maliki, Abadi could not employ patronage to pull allies and neutralize some of his opponents since oil prices reached unprecedented heights. While Maliki rested on the Shia community, Abadi endeavored to create a constituency on behalf of a reformer amid a wave of popular protests that began during the summer of 2015. Lacking a parliamentary bloc that supported him, Abadi counted on that pressure and on the extra-constitutional force, such as the Shia religious authority, to force parties to accept reforms that limited their powers. Owing to his lack of leverage and a costly war against the DAESH, Abadi could neither assert his image as a reformer nor keep the support of major political groups.[55]

Conclusion

Governmental vulnerability, such as an electoral defeat, in a state's domestic environment is the first variable conditioning the influence of domestic groups on foreign policy decision making. Apart from governmental vulnerability, the degrees of both executive certainty and national consensus about national security policy affect the impact of domestic actors. If there is executive

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52 Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 3–6; Ahmed Ali, "Iraq's Prime Minister Reshuffles the Security Commanders," November 13, 2014, https://www.iswresearch.org/2014/11/iraqs-prime-minister-reshuffles.html.
53 Mardini, "Iraq's Abadi Caught between Global Powers and Domestic Politics."
54 Mardini; Schmidt and Ghazi, "Iraqi Leader Backs Syria, With a Nudge From Iran."
55 Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister," 6–7.

certainty or national consensus, domestic actors have little room to maneuver.[56] In addition to the domestic environment, the international environment is useful for measuring the domestic actor's role in national security policy. In the international environment, when executives face a threat from the regional and international environment, they ignore domestic actors. Consequently, the study concludes that domestic actors have more influence on the foreign policy-making of the Abadi government than the Maliki regime. During the Maliki tenure, Kurds and Sunni political groups could not ensure Maliki did not support the al-Assad regime. Shia political parties backed Maliki's policy towards Syria and forced Abadi to sustain this support to the al-Assad regime, though Abadi tried to balance the US and Iran.

During the US-occupied rule, Iraq's foreign policy priorities have been sovereignty and economic reconstruction.[57] After Maliki's coming to power, foreign policy began to serve the survival and strengthening of the Maliki regime. The regime of Nouri al-Maliki has positioned itself as a supporter of Bashar al-Assad, notwithstanding cooling relations with Damascus previously. In addition, Iraq's close ties with Iran have eased greatly; Maliki's policy towards Syria reflects his own strategic and political calculations. For Maliki, Assad was struggling to face down a Sunni-dominated uprising, largely for the fear that it would empower the same forces in Iraq.[58] Neither Iraqi Sunni political groups nor the Kurds forced Maliki to take a step back on the support of the Syrian regime in the Syrian Civil War. The authoritarian power consolidation practices of the Maliki regime eventually led to his loss of power. Losing support from both Kurds and Sunnis made it impossible for him to secure re-election in the aftermath of the 2014 national election.

Unlike Maliki, Abadi could not employ patronage to pull allies and neutralize some of his opponents since oil prices reached unprecedented heights. Abadi embarked on decreasing foreign influence and beating the DAESH, but he did not enjoy the support of the Iraqi parliament to implement his aims. Abadi struck a major oil and budget deal with the KRG. Long-standing disputes, such as revenue sharing, the status of security forces, and contested jurisdiction over a swath of disputed territories, propelled KRG president Masoud Barzani into organizing a referendum on the independence of the KRG in 2017.[59] During the Abadi epoch, the fight against the DAESH

56   Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism and Domestic Interest Groups," 188-89.
57   Mohammed Soffar, "Foreign Policy under Occupation: Does Iraq Need a Foreign Policy?," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States. The Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Bahgat Korany and Ali El-Din Hillal Dessouki (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 225.
58   European Council on Foreign Relations, "Syria: The View from Iraq."
59   Al-Qarawee, *From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister*, 3; "Post-Maliki

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increased the influence of the US-Iranian rivalry on the domestic political environment. The phenomenon of the DAESH has dramatically increased Iranian military involvement in Iraq, as has the US military commitment to Iraq.[60] Abadi's manner in implementing US sanctions against Iran dealt a serious blow to his ability to present himself as the leader of Iraq.[61] While the US regarded Abadi as a pragmatist leader to counter the Iranian influence in Iraq, the presence of US troops in Iraq remained undebated until the Sadrist movement and the political wings of the Shi'ite militia organizations, which had the edge over the 2018 parliamentary elections, overwhelmingly berated the US troops.

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60 "The U.S. and Iran are aligned in Iraq against the Islamic State — for now," December 27, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-us-and-iran-are-aligned-in-iraq-against-the-islamic-state--for-now/2014/12/27/353a748c-8d0d-11e4-a085-34e9b9f09a58_story.html.

61 Ali Othman, "The US-Iran Scramble for Post-Abadi Iraq: How Will Turkey Be Affected?," Politics Today, October 8, 2018, https://politicstoday.org/the-us-iran-scramble-for-post-abadi-iraq-how-will-turkey-be-affected/.

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