Iran, Turkey and the Levant

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Religion, War and Politics

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Iran and Turkey have been following a parallel political trajectory since the end of the 1990s and the start of the 2000s, when both countries appeared to be on the verge of cautious political reforms. In Iran, Mohammed Khatami's surprising victory in the presidential election of 1997, as well as his re-election four years later, raised hopes among the country's moderates and reformists. In Turkey, the 2002 electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*), a new party that belonged to political Islam and espoused democratic and pro-European reforms, generated expectations for further democratization in the country. Soon, however, hopes all but faded among the Iranian and Turkish reformists, moderates, and liberals. In Iran, the clerical elite and the security establishment moved decisively to extinguish Khatami's reformist agenda and from 2005, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, domestic politics tilted heavily back toward religious conservatism. In Turkey, the AKP's second consecutive electoral victory in 2007 revealed a growing authoritarian trend, as the governing party initiated a series of unsubstantiated court cases against the military and deepened its control of the state bureaucracy, the justice system, and the media.

But society's tectonic plates kept shifting in both countries. In the 2009 presidential election, the Iranian regime hurried to announce the re-election of the incumbent president, a decision that was widely considered an attempt by the clerical elite and the security establishment to fabricate the result and steal the election. The announcement triggered the eruption of mass protests which evolved into the Green movement, named after the opposition's color during the election campaign. The emergence of the Green movement demonstrated that many Iranians were not willing to silently accept the country's descent into further authoritarianism. It also demonstrated the regime's willingness to strike back at the protesters, as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Basij paramilitary force resorted to violence to suppress the Green movement.

In Turkey, the first major popular challenge to the AKP's rule erupted in the summer of 2013, when thousands of people came to the streets to protest against the government's decision to transform Gezi Park in central Istanbul into a shopping mall. The eruption of the Gezi movement, a reaction of the Turkish civil society to the authoritarian decisions of the

AKP, caught the party's leadership by surprise. Like Iran, Turkish security units used excessive force against the protesters. Nevertheless, the anti-government protests in Istanbul and other Turkish cities challenged the government and exposed the authoritarian tendencies of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling party. Despite the aggressive counter-reaction, the rise of the Green movement in Iran and the Gezi movement in Turkey demonstrated that both countries were experiencing crises that exposed the limits of their governing elites' authoritarian politics.

Indeed, what followed in both Iran and Turkey were periods defined by the emergence of moderate, reformist and democratic forces propelled by these crises of authoritarian politics, a process previously described by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way who observed how temporary regime weakness and instability have produced democratic "moments" that have often led to competitive elections.[1] In Iran, this was manifested in the June 2013 presidential election, with the victory of the moderate Hassan Rouhani, who succeeded the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The after-effects of the Green movement and its violent suppression lingered until the presidential election of 2013, leading to the victory of a moderate candidate from a large segment of the Iranian society eager for political change. Rouhani's election had an immediate impact on Iranian politics, with the new president promoting the transformation of Iran's relations with the United States, with the tacit approval of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. However, this diplomatic turn transformed President Rouhani and his Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, into targets for the hardliners and the IRGC.

In Turkey, the democratic moment was manifested in the June 2015 parliamentary election, with the electoral rise of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP, *Halklarin Demokratik Partisi*). This was the first time that a pro-Kurdish party managed to pass the 10 percent threshold and enter the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The emergence of the Gezi movement and its violent suppression was an important factor in galvanizing Turkey's civil society and shifted many voters toward the non-traditional opposition parties. In the aftermath of the Gezi movement, the HDP widened beyond a solely pro-Kurdish agenda and managed to attract many new voters. The electoral rise of the HDP had the potential to generate a broader opposition movement and set in motion the unraveling of the AKP's political dominance. As a result, the HDP became the main target of the ruling party and the security forces.

During the second half of the 2010s and in light of the crises of authoritarianism that led to the rise of reformist and democratic political

[1] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, No. 1 (January 2015): 52.

forces, the governing elites in Iran and Turkey adjusted their rule to the new and more challenging domestic circumstances that had emerged. This process had a transformative effect on their political systems and would eventually lead to the reshaping of authoritarianism in both countries. The political systems of Iran and Turkey are the result of different historical processes and therefore encompass distinct institutions and characteristics. Iran's is the outcome of a revolutionary process that transitioned the country from one form of authoritarianism, the Pahlavi monarchy, into another, the Islamic Republic, the latter built around the theocratic vision of Ayatollah Khomeini. As a result, the Iranian political system contains institutions that can be found solely in Iran, such as the Assembly of Experts or the Expediency Council, designed to safeguard the tenets of Khomeini's Islamic government. On the other hand, Turkey's political system is the outcome of the country's transition from an empire to a republic, and its founder, Kemal Atatürk established and consolidated a political system that evolved from a one-party to a multi-party system.

Despite the different historical processes that shaped them, the Iranian and Turkish political systems share certain similarities. One of them is the enduring presence and impact of authoritarian politics. Iran's transitioning through different forms of authoritarian rule has made authoritarianism an inherent element of the country's political system, both under the monarchy and the theocracy. Similarly, Turkey's establishment as an authoritarian state after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire set the stage for a long and enduring presence of authoritarianism in its politics, particularly in the form of military guardianship. The element of guardianship has been another similarity in the political systems of Iran and Turkey. Since 1979, Iran has been under the guardianship of the Shia clerical elite under the ideological direction of Ayatollah Khomeini's guardianship of the jurist (*velayat e-faqih*). As is described in the book, this has evolved into the guardianship of the jurist and the IRGC. Equally, Turkey had been under the guardianship of the Turkish military for decades, the most important institution in the country until the political consolidation of the AKP and the subsequent fusion of the governing party and the military. Another similarity is the enduring role of the parliament, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majles*) in Iran and the Grand National Assembly in Turkey. Both institutions derive their existence from historical moments, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 in Iran and the Ottoman constitutional period of 1876 respectively, that shaped them as principal symbols of reformist politics. As such, the Iranian and Turkish parliaments, and the electoral processes associated with them, were often, although not

always, bastions of reformist forces and movements, and have frequently played an active and decisive role in the domestic politics of both countries.

Since the political systems in Iran and Turkey combine authoritarianism with elected institutions, such as the parliament, they have both been characterized as hybrid regimes. In the case of Iran, the 1979 revolution and the emergence of the Islamic Republic transformed its political system into a hybrid regime made of an omnipresent theocratic power structure and important but restricted elected institutions such as the presidency and the parliament. Over the last four decades, the Iranian political system has been characterized as a guardianship regime, where the clerical elite has a powerful oversight role.[2] The Iranian political system has even been characterized as an electoral democracy, mostly due to the competitive election of 1997 and the unexpected rise of the reformist President Mohammed Khatami.[3] Both characterizations are the outcome of the Islamic Republic's decades-long oscillation between noncompetitive and competitive types of authoritarianism.

Like Iran, Turkey has been called a tutelary or guardianship regime, primarily due to the military's oversight role. The military's frequent interventions in the country's politics from the 1960s onwards transformed it into a powerful institution with a permeating influence in civilian affairs. The National Security Council (NSC), as well as the judicial autonomy of the military vis-à-vis the state, were important factors that constrained the elected institutions and processes of the Turkish Republic. Turkey's political system has also been characterized as an electoral democracy, but also a restrictive or semi-competitive democracy, a result of the frequent banning of a number of parties related to the Kurdish minority and political Islam by the military.[4] After the AKP curtailed the military's role in politics, Turkey gradually transitioned from a guardianship regime into a different hybrid regime, a competitive authoritarian type, which combines authoritarian and democratic characteristics.[5]

The crises of authoritarian politics in Iran and Turkey and the subsequent emergence of moderate and reformist forces in their domestic politics unfolded simultaneously with the climax of instability in the Levant and the civil war in Syria. The Levant, a region extending from the Eastern

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[2] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.
[3] Samuel Huntington, "After Twenty Years: The Future of the Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy* 8, No. 4 (October 1997): 8-9.
[4] Huntington, 9. See also, Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 14.
[5] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 31, No. 1 (January 2020): 51.

Mediterranean shores to the Syrian desert, had for decades been an important but complex region for the Iranian and Turkish ruling elites. During the Cold War, both states shared a pro-Western orientation and were integral parts of pro-Western alliances in the Middle East. At the center of the region, the Levant was an area defined by the Arab-Israeli conflict and an expansive ideological struggle between radical and conservative Arab states. The Iranian revolution in 1979 was a geopolitical earthquake and its impact, along with that of the Iraq-Iran war launched in 1980, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the Palestinian uprising in 1987, turned that decade into a violent period for the region. Immediately afterwards, the dawn of the post-Cold War era began with Operation "Desert Storm," America's decisive reaction to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and continued with a series of important, but mostly incomplete and flawed, diplomatic agreements. By the end of the first decade of the post-Cold War era, the Levant was balancing on a tightrope.

In 2003, with the world under the shadow of Al Qaeda's 9/11 terrorist attacks and Washington's war on terror, the US invasion of Iraq pushed the region into an accelerating instability. Iraq descended into a deadly sectarian civil war, an incubator of a new Islamic militancy that kept producing new shapes of radical militias. Lebanon and Syria were among the first states to feel the impact of the seismic events taking place in the eastern edge of the Levant. With the fragile regional balance abruptly jolted, Lebanon found itself in the eye of the storm. The assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, and the subsequent withdrawal of the Syrian forces from Lebanon after three decades, sent the country into a tail dive. With the previous order shattered, further violence was only a matter of time. The Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006 between Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), a short but intense military confrontation, was the culmination of the violent search for a new order. Hezbollah's capacity to withstand the IDF's aerial and ground assault, the military and political difficulties the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert encountered after the war, and the Assad regime's weakened regional position, revealed the complexities of the emergent new Levant.

The Arab uprisings, which erupted in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread across North Africa and the Middle East at the beginning of 2011, added another major convulsion in an already volatile and unstable region. For decades, the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East had been adapting to challenges that threatened their tight grip on power. Through a mixed strategy of repression, clientelism, cooption, and subsidies, the presidents and kings had managed to avert major domestic challenges to

their power.[6] But by the 2000s, these survival strategies had been exhausted and the cracks in the authoritarian structure of the Middle Eastern states began to widen. In December 2010, these cracks turned into an earthquake and by the first months of 2011, the decades-old authoritarian order of the Middle East began to fall apart. Tunisia was the place where it all started, but Egypt was the terrain under which the tectonic plates of the Middle East shifted.

In the first months of 2011, the uprisings had spread from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula and the fall of rulers who held power for decades—in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—sent shockwaves throughout the region. The Arab uprisings reached the Levant in the middle of March, when the first anti-Assad protests took place in the southern town of Deraa. To protect itself, the regime of Bashar al Assad resorted to sustained violence, plunging the country into civil war. The violent rift that surfaced in Syria intersected with the ongoing civil war in Iraq and the repercussions of the Second Lebanon War. As a result, the gradual disintegration of the states in the geographical core of the Levant—Lebanon and Syria—but also of Iraq in the region's eastern edge, created the conditions for perpetual conflict.

The simmering instability in the Levant had a significant impact on Iran and Turkey, two states that despite their proximity to the region encompass certain characteristics that have spared them, albeit not completely, the maladies and tragedies that struck Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq. Former empires, Iran and Turkey emerged into the twentieth century as new nation-states, with sizable minorities but an already dominant, if not completely crystallized, national identity. This was in contrast to most of the Levantine states, which became the subjects of Western colonial designs, where the emergence of the state preceded the largely incomplete and often unachievable formation of a common national identity, what Rejai and Enloe have called "state-nations."[7] The emergence of Iran and Turkey as nation-states did not exempt them from internal convulsions and rifts, particularly in relation to the rights of minorities who were unwilling to accept the intransigent prerequisites of the modern national identities prevalent in both countries. Furthermore, Iran and Turkey were not exempted from the emergence of authoritarian politics, more often than not a necessary precondition for the unchallenged consolidation of their modern

[6] Kamrava, Mehran. "The Rise and Fall of Ruling Bargains in the Middle East". In *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17-46.
[7] Mostafa Rejai and Cynthia Enloe, "Nation-States and State-Nations," *International Studies Quarterly* 13, No. 2 (June 1969): 143.

national identity. But they were spared civil war, state collapse, and territorial fragmentation, a common trajectory of the state-nations of Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

Nevertheless, the unraveling of the Levant could not have left Iran and Turkey unaffected. Both had been involved in the past in a number of political and military crises in the region. Importantly, Iran had been involved in the Lebanese civil war in 1982, which led to the rise of Hezbollah. Turkey had threatened Syria with an invasion in 1997 should the Assad regime not end its support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*). However, until 2003 and the US invasion of Iraq, Iranian and Turkish involvement in the region was limited and defined by a largely unchanged regional order. The US invasion and the descent of the Levant into an endless period of instability transformed the geopolitical landscape and along with it Iranian and Turkish perspectives toward the region. Initially, after the invasion of Iraq, the simmering instability generated concern in Tehran and Ankara, mostly regarding the possible transfusion of the violent crises unfolding next to their borders, such as the spreading of sectarian clashes, the rise of Kurdish separatism, and the expansion of Islamic terrorism.

Gradually, however, their concerns began to change into modest aspirations and later, into growing ambitions. For the governing elites in Iran and Turkey, the dangers had evolved into opportunities. After the eruption of the Arab uprisings, Iran expressed its support for the anti-regime forces in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain, but changed its position when the uprisings reached Syria and threatened the Assad regime, Tehran's loyal ally in Damascus. From 2013 onwards, Iran intervened militarily in the Syrian civil war, mostly through its proxy allies, expanding its presence in central and south Syria. On the other hand, Turkey remained supportive of the anti-regime forces in North Africa and the Levant, with the expectation that the rise of political Islam in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria would reshape the Middle East to Ankara's benefit. The protracted conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and the steady rise of the Kurdish militias, accelerated the militarization of Turkish regional policy, prompting Ankara to invade northern Syria and occupy large areas across the Euphrates, as well as to expand its military operations in northern Iraq.

This book describes the deepening involvement of Tehran and Ankara in the wars of the Levant and looks at how this long military engagement has been transformed by the Iranian and Turkish governing elites into a mechanism for reshaping and safeguarding their rule against emerging domestic challenges. The crises of authoritarian politics and the rise of moderate, reformist, and democratic forces have compelled the

Iranian and Turkish governing elites to readjust their domestic position and adapt their rule to the new circumstances, demonstrating what Steven Heydemann calls "bounded adaptiveness," a "capacity for adjustment and accommodation."[8] This capacity of governing elites to show "an adaptive, flexible style of rule" can provide them with resilience in times of threatening domestic challenges.[9] The emergence of movements and political forces that had the potential to challenge their rule led the governing elites in Iran and Turkey to readjust their domestic alliances toward nationalist forces, and to shift their center of gravity toward a renewed form of militarized nationalism. The objective of this shift was the contraction of space that remained available for political contestation and the transformation of the political field into "an expression of the organic unity of the nation."[10] In this ideologically contracted space, political contestation against the governing elite becomes a subversive act against national security, and political activists are presented as suspects that threaten the security of the state and the nation.

The wars in the Levant and the involvement of Iran and Turkey provided their governing elites with the context, the narrative, and the medium for the contraction of political contestation and the reshaping of authoritarian rule in both countries. A state's foreign policy is closely linked with its domestic politics and this interplay between the foreign and domestic spheres is described by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph Siverson as the condition where "a leader's search for the security of the state intertwines with the search for policies that will maintain the leader in power against domestic opposition."[11] In this way, national security threats that emerge from the external environment, or those events and developments that are perceived or presented as such, become an integral part of the governing elites' domestic agenda. Therefore, a national security threat can be seen by the governing elite as an opportunity to facilitate a policy or a set of policies that can shield it from domestic challenges and help it retain power.

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[8] Heydemann, Steven. "Social Pacts and the Persistence of Authoritarianism in the Middle East". In *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, ed. Oliver Schlumberger, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 26–28.

[9] Heydemann, 26.

[10] Heydemann, 31.

[11] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, "War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability," *The American Political Science Review* 89, No. 4 (December 1995): 853.

This shift of authoritarian rule toward militarized nationalism has had two very important effects on Iranian and Turkish politics: The infusion of the military in the new structure of power and a deepening securitization of domestic politics. The military's infusion was a process that evolved in two very different ways in Iran and Turkey, mainly due to the equally different origins of the two militaries. In Iran's case, the IRGC is a military body created by the revolutionary regime because it did not trust the armed forces that had been formed under the monarchical regime. As a result, the IRGC was completely loyal to the Islamic government and always inclined to support and protect the Supreme Leader's power structure. In Turkey, however, the military had been the guardian of the Kemalist tradition and order, often confronting and banning parties that belonged to political Islam. Consequently, for the AKP's leadership, the integration of the military into its domestic agenda was a much harder task in comparison to that of the Iranian theocratic elite, and took place through a relentless struggle that culminated in a failed coup on July 16, 2016.

In Iran, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei cultivated a growing alliance with the IRGC to counter the domestic challenges that were emerging, particularly after 1997. This alliance, which deepened further during the last decade, has also led to the insertion of IRGC members in an increasing number of positions within the elected and unelected institutions of the Islamic Republic. In Turkey, after the failed July 2016 coup, President Erdoğan and the AKP tamed the military and turned it into a bastion of their authoritarian politics. From that point onwards, the Turkish military and security forces were fully integrated into the AKP's regional and domestic agenda, and acquired a higher presence in civilian positions of power, primarily in the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Consequently, the conflicts that raged across the Levant were gradually intertwined with the domestic politics in Iran and Turkey, as their governing elites adapted their survival strategies to the evolving regional circumstances, and national security became the context for the militarization of foreign policy and the securitization of domestic politics. Conflict and a series of military interventions in Syria and Iraq transformed the IRGC and the Turkish armed forces into primary actors for the conduct of regional policy, raising their role and importance within the survival strategy of the Iranian and Turkish governing elites. In this process, engagement in endless wars against external threats with domestic accomplices has become the medium that reshapes and sustains authoritarianism in Iran and Turkey.

Chapter 1 of the book describes the unraveling of the Levant after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and traces the gradual immersion of Iran and Turkey into the wars that erupted throughout the region as a

consequence. The overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein by the George W. Bush administration triggered a perpetual instability that expanded steadily across the Levant. The chapter looks first into the multiple shockwaves that the US invasion unleashed in Iraq, the repercussions on Lebanon and Syria, and then examines the ways in which the impact of the regime change in Baghdad entangled with the existing political and ideological fault lines of the Levant. The chapter then traces the military and political motives of the Iranian and Turkish involvement in the Levantine crises.

Chapter 2 focuses on Iran, its military involvement in the Levant, and the reshaping of authoritarianism in the Iranian domestic context. The chapter details the roots and evolution of the Islamic Republic, focusing initially on the emergence of the Iranian hybrid regime and then, after the death of its founder Ayatollah Khomeini, on its reconfiguration. In the second part, the chapter analyzes the rise of the IRGC, its growing importance for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and its increasingly pivotal role in Iran's military interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Under the leadership of General Qassem Suleimani, commander of the elite Al Quds unit, the IRGC and their allied Shia militias across the Levant expanded and consolidated the Islamic Republic's influence to an unprecedented degree, providing Tehran with significant regional weight and leverage. The chapter then delves into the parallel increase of the IRGC's domestic power in politics and the economy and their gradual rise as an integral part of the emergent militarized nationalism and the reshaped authoritarianism in Iran.

Chapter 3 focuses on Turkey, its military incursions and operations in Syria and Iraq, and the far-reaching impact they have on Turkish politics. The first part of this chapter describes the rise of political Islam and the role of the military in Turkey's politics, two elements that have had an enduring effect on the evolution of the Turkish state. The second part of the chapter analyzes the shifts in the AKP's regional policy and its involvement in the Syrian civil war, a pivotal moment for the evolution of Turkey and its political system. The AKP's attempted regime change in Syria immersed Turkey into the entangled web of Middle Eastern geopolitics. But the expansion of the Kurds in north Syria and the electoral ascendance of the pro-Kurdish HDP in Turkey compelled President Erdoğan and the AKP to once more shift their Syria policy, to launch a series of military invasions against the Kurds and connect their Syrian campaign with the domestic political environment. In this process, the AKP adopted an increasingly militarized nationalism, which facilitated its domestic maneuvering and its unprecedented symbiosis with the military.

Chapter 4 describes the role of Iran and Turkey in the transformation of the Levantine conflicts into a fragmented yet expansive zone of instability. The chapter looks into the ways that these conflicts have evolved into endless wars fought by networks of state and non-state actors, fueled by sectarian narratives and symbols connected by nerve-like cross-regional sectarian identities, and increasingly entangled with the existing inter-state competition and animosities. The chapter then focuses on the long military involvement of Iran and Turkey in the region and analyzes the constant ripple effect of this enduring militarization on their domestic politics. In the final part, the chapter looks into Israel's war in Gaza, focusing further on the involvement of Iran and Turkey in yet another endless war, but also on the regional impact of this latest conflict in the Levant.

CHAPTER 1

THE UNRAVELING OF THE LEVANT

The fragility of the Levant

The perennial fragility of the Levant has been an enduring effect of its transition through various transformative events over the last century. The post-Ottoman Levant was reshaped, from 1920 onwards, according to the colonial ambitions of Great Britain and France, establishing the context for most of the social dysfunctions and political dislocations that would emerge in the future. The redrawing of the post-Ottoman Levantine geography by the colonial powers was based on the European premise of state formation, where national consciousness had already been cultivated for decades, and ignored the various and often contested identities already present in the region.[12] Consequently, the imposition of new borders across the Levant reshaped an area that had been to a large extent culturally and economically organized as a continuous territory, demanding that the peoples of the new states undertake the very difficult task of forming viable national identities in a very short period.[13] Simultaneously, the colonial administrations in Lebanon and Syria, as well as in Palestine and Iraq, implemented policies that fomented inter-communal competition and animosity, rendering the already difficult task of nation-building in the new states almost impossible.[14]

The independence of the new states in the Levant, which unfolded in stages from the 1930s onwards, added new complexities to the existing asymmetries and dysfunctions. Lebanon and Syria entered into post-colonial eras, defined, as Clifford Geertz writes, by "a complex, uneven,

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[12] Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 20.

[13] Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 251–252.

[14] Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, 19-37. See also, Fawaz Traboulsi*, A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 75-85, and Phillip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1925-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1987), 53–54.

and many-directioned movement by its various parts, which conduces to a sense less of progress than of agitated stagnation."[15] Shortly afterwards, the creation of the state of Israel added a major geopolitical factor and inserted renewed ideological urgency within the nascent Arab state system. Toward the end of the 1950s, when the Middle East had already become part of the Cold War, the Levantine states began to feel the first serious effects of the shockwaves from the defeat of the Arab armies in the first war with Israel in 1948 and the Suez crisis in 1956. In 1958, Lebanon experienced the eruption of the first major sectarian conflict, Syria abandoned its recently won independence and merged with Nasser's Egypt, and Iraq transformed from a pro-Western monarchy into an Arab nationalist republic after a bloody military coup.

Lebanon was the first Levantine state to experience the impact of the regional shockwaves that had been unleashed by the various crises of the Middle East. The Lebanese state had based its independence on a reconfiguration of the French colonial design, namely the confessional allocation of power between the dominant Christian Maronites, the less privileged Sunni Muslims, and the largely marginalized Shia Muslims. But this was an inter-communal political compromise that consolidated sectarianism in the heart of the Lebanese political system and rendered Lebanon sensitive to every regional crisis that contained important sectarian dimensions. Indeed, after the first major sectarian crisis of 1958, a short but tense armed confrontation between Christians and Sunnis, Lebanon's political fabric developed fissures that added a domestic dimension to every regional crisis and intertwined the country's inherent structural dysfunctions with the emergent external pressures. The shattering defeat of the Arab armies in the Six-Day War of June 1967 had even more profound repercussions for Lebanon. The rising importance of the Palestinian national movement, the relocation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership to Beirut, the renewed influx of Palestinian fighters as a result of their 1970 defeat by the Jordanian monarchy, and the increasingly aggressive Israeli strikes inside Lebanese territory eroded Lebanon's sovereignty and placed the country's fragile inter-communal balance under immense pressure. The major rifts between the various communities resurfaced and deepened, prompting them to withdraw to the boundaries of their own different identities. Eventually, after another major regional crisis, the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973, the weakened foundations that sustained the Lebanese state collapsed and the country descended into a long civil war.

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[15] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 237.

Syria avoided the fate of Lebanon, or rather, it was able to delay it. This was mainly due to the rise to power of Hafez al Assad in 1970 and the subsequent consolidation of a national security state that managed, through terror and clientelism, to contain the various centrifugal forces within Syria's vibrant political life. Initially, Hafez al Assad succeeded where all other previous Syrian leaders had failed, to pull the country away from what seemed to be an inherent weakness, accentuated by its domestic political instability and its geographical position. It was precisely the centrality of Syria's position after its independence that had placed it at the epicenter of the evolving regional competition of the relatively nascent Arab state system, a period that has been described in detail by Patrick Seale.[16] Syria's domestic instability, exacerbated by Arab defeats to Israel, was increasingly entwined with the emergence of the regional antagonism between Nasser's Egypt and the conservative Arab monarchies. Because of its geographical position at the center of the Levant, Syria's political trajectory was considered decisive and these regional rivalries were increasingly reflected in her domestic politics, unraveling in the process the Syrian body politic.[17] Hafez al Assad was able to put an end to this period of Syrian weakness, but the cost for Syria and its people would prove devastating.

The Assad regime, an amalgamation of a Baathist dictatorship and a national security state, maintained power based on two elements: The obliteration of its domestic opponents and the oversight of Lebanon's domestic politics. By the second half of the 1980s, the Assad regime had managed to fulfill its objectives, having defeated the Syrian Islamists following a domestic conflict that culminated in the massacre of Hama in February 1982, and pushing back the IDF from Lebanon with the vital help of the Lebanese Shia. The Assad regime gradually took over control of Lebanon, a period that formally began with the Taif Agreement in 1989 and the end of the Lebanese civil war. This pax Syriana added a new layer of authoritarianism to Lebanon's confessional politics, solidifying again, after the fifteen-year civil war, a deeply dysfunctional political system. By placing Lebanon under its control, Syria had undoubtedly increased its stature in the Levant, distancing itself even further from the previous era of weakness. But Syria's ascendance in the Levant was built on shaky foundations, as the legitimacy of the Assad regime, eroded by all those years of state terror and violence, was being extinguished at an accelerating pace.

Iraq, at the eastern edge of the Levant, had like Syria managed to delay its unraveling. After its formal independence in 1932, the Hashemite

[16] Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1987).
[17] Seale, 1.

Kingdom of Iraq experienced an unstable political period of more than two decades, marked by successive military coups and ethnic unrest. On July 14, 1958, another military coup, triggered by the rising ideological polarization of the Arab Cold War in the Middle East, transformed Iraq into a republic.[18] For the next two decades, Iraq entered into a renewed period of domestic instability. The delaying factor, like Syria, was the imposition of a Baathist dictatorship at the end of the 1960s. Saddam Hussein, the important figure of the regime in Baghdad and its absolute leader from 1979, based his rule on the suppression of the Iraqi Shias and the Kurds, as well as on the regional competition with Iran in the east and Syria in the west.

In September 1978, a few months before Saddam Hussein's rise to absolute power in Baghdad, Egypt and Israel signed the Camp David Accords, once more transforming the balance of power in the Levant. Less than six months later, in February 1979, the Middle East changed again as the Iranian revolution led to the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a Shia revolutionary regime that threatened to inflame the region. In the rapidly shifting geopolitics of the Middle East, Saddam Hussein saw an opportunity to expand his influence and transform Iraq into a regional superpower, substituting Egypt as the dominant Arab state.[19] His fateful decision to invade Iran in September 1980, beginning a conflict that would last eight years, pushed Iraq to the verge of destruction and turned the 1980s into one of the most violent decades in the history of the modern Middle East. Saddam Hussein's second fateful decision, the invasion of Kuwait in August 1989, led him into direct confrontation with the United States in 1990-1991 and placed Iraq under a strict sanctions regime.

The relentless violence of the 1980s dismantled the Lebanese state, turned the Syrian regime into the most vicious dictatorship in the region, and led Iraq, pushed by its brutal dictator, to the verge of collapse. By the beginning of the 2000s, the Levant was treading on a tightrope. Lebanon had almost disintegrated and was only just kept together, by the hegemonic presence of the Syrian forces and their alliance with Hezbollah and Iran. Under the iron fist of the Syrian regime and the growing Iranian influence, Lebanon was suffocating. In Syria and Iraq, the authoritarian regimes were still standing, but on clay legs, as their legitimacy had been steadily eroding. Their power over increasingly fragmented and impoverished societies now

[18] Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War (1958-1964): A Study of Ideology in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press).

[19] Salame, Ghassan. "Inter-Arab Politics: The Return of Geography". In *The Middle East: Ten Years after the Camp David*, ed. William B. Quandt (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1988), 319–353.

rested only on fear and violence. In the new decade, the Levant was standing on fragile ground.

The US invasion of Iraq

The US invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003, triggered a violent process that shattered this fragile balance and led to the unraveling of the Arab states in the Levant. Operation "Iraqi Freedom" was part of the US war on terror launched by the Bush administration after the September 2001 Al Qaeda terrorist attacks in New York and the Pentagon. The war on terror began in Afghanistan in October 2001 with Operation "Enduring Freedom", with the aim of destroying Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime. A few months later, in his January 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush outlined his new foreign policy doctrine which consisted of three fundamental elements: The concept of preemptive war, the policy of regime change, and the expansion of US military operations across an infinite geographical territory.[20]

The invasion of Iraq was the climax of the George W. Bush doctrine. Writing on the US invasion and the reasons that set it in motion, Raymond Hinnebusch emphasizes Washington's objective "to undertake a coercive assertion of global hegemony":

> "The Bush doctrine and the 2002 National Security Strategy, formulated in response to the 9/11 attacks, make explicit the coercive turn: the call for 'full spectrum dominance'; the strategy of dealing with resistance to the US not simply through traditional containment, but via 'preventive wars'; the resort to unilateralism, with ad hoc 'coalitions of the willing'; the view that states not with the US in the war on terrorism are against it; and the claim that only the US liberal model is legitimate, with sovereignty exempting no nation from the demand that it conforms."[21]

The American military historian Andrew Bacevich argues:

> "[The US] invaded Iraq in order to validate three precedent-setting and mutually reinforcing propositions. First, the US was intent on establishing the efficacy of preemptive war. Second, it was going to assert the prerogative, permitted to no other country, of removing regimes that Washington deemed odious.

[20] Reymond Hinnebusch, "The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16, No. 3 (Fall 2007): 219.
[21] Hinnebusch, 219–220.

> And finally it was seeking to reverse the practice of exempting the Islamic world from neoliberal standards […] The Iraqi army was not likely to pose significant opposition, having amply demonstrated its incompetence, even before taking into account the effects of periodic US bombing along with a decade of crippling sanctions […] In other words, what made it imperative to invade Iraq was not the danger it posed but the opportunity it presented." [22]

After January 2002, the argument for war against Iraq was promoted by senior members of the Bush administration, as well as by prominent academics and political analysts. The argument had then expanded to promote the reasons for which the US had to act preemptively. It was repeatedly argued that the Iraqi regime possessed weapons of mass destruction, that it had close ties with Al Qaeda terrorists, and that it was planning new attacks against the US and its allies. US Vice-President Dick Cheney argued that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and that regime change in Iraq would benefit the Middle East and strengthen the moderate forces in the region.[23] In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Fouad Ajami made the case for war against Iraq, arguing that it would lead to the modernization of the Arab world:

> "For American power there are two ways in the Arab world. One is restraint, pessimistic about the possibility of changing that stubborn world, reticent about the uses of American power. In this vision of things, the United States would either spare the Iraqi dictator or wage a war with limited political goals for Iraq and for the region as a whole. The other choice, more ambitious, would envisage a more profound American role in Arab political life: the spearheading of a reformist project that seeks to modernize and transform the Arab landscape. Iraq would be the starting point, and beyond Iraq lies an Arab political and economic tradition and a culture whose agonies and failures have been on cruel display (…)."[24]

Operation "Iraqi Freedom" was launched on March 19, leading to the swift collapse of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. On April 7, US forces entered Baghdad and were in control of most areas of the Iraqi capital

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[22] Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016), 240.
[23] "Full Text of Dick Cheney's Speech," *Guardian*, August 27, 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/aug/27/usa.iraq.
[24] Fouad Ajami, "Iraq and the Arabs' Future," *Foreign Affairs* 82, No. 1 (January/February 2003): 2–10.

two days later. It was a momentous event, the first time that the US forces were in occupation of an Arab capital. The ramifications of this decision would be profound, not only for Iraq but the whole region. The confrontation with Iraq's elite military units never materialized and, a few weeks later, US forces were facing a rising insurgency. American journalist Dexter Filkins, who was covering the Iraq War for the *New York Times*, described the difficulties that the US forces were beginning to encounter in post-Baathist Iraq:

> "The insurgency: it was everywhere and it was nowhere. The Americans would bring in the heavy artillery and the troops, they would roll into Iraqi towns ready for a fight, and they would discover, invariably, that the enemy had disappeared. Often, the people they were looking for were standing a few feet away. Over the course of the long war, American officers often spoke in acronyms like 'AQI' (Al Qaeda in Iraq) and 'AIF' (Anti-Iraqi Forces). We reporters did likewise, using terms like 'insurgents' and 'guerillas' as if these were distinct groups, as if they were wearing uniforms and carrying flags. They almost never were. The insurgents were Iraqis; the Iraqis were insurgents. Sometimes they fought; the rest of the time were standing around like everyone else."[25]

The situation in Iraq deteriorated rapidly as a result of two decisions taken by the US-installed Iraqi Provisional Government (IPG). On May 16, the head of the IPG, former diplomat Paul Bremer, ordered the immediate dismantling of the Baathist state institutions and the firing of all civil servants who had been connected to it. A week later, on May 23, the American diplomat ordered the dismantling of all military and security corps that had been related to the Baathist state.[26] In effect, these two decisions, which were implemented less than a month after the occupation of Baghdad and against the advice of various military and security officers, pushed a large number of Iraqi Baathists to the margins of the new state and into the rising Sunni insurgency.[27] By the time of the transfer of power from the US officials to the new interim government in Baghdad in June 2004, Iraq was rapidly descending into chaos and civil war.

The Pentagon, under Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, had planned a swift military operation with a limited number of soldiers, supported primarily by the superior US air power and the Marine Corps. This plan may

[25] Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 121–122.
[26] Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts* (London: Pan Books, 2011), 12.
[27] Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2006), 181.

have been enough for a rapid incursion into Baghdad and the decapitation of the Iraqi regime, but it was insufficient for the occupation and administration of post-Baathist Iraq. These tasks required not only a much larger number of ground troops than the approximately 150,000 that had been deployed by the Pentagon, but also different kinds of forces, such as special units for the policing of urban centers, border control, and the safeguarding of civil reconstruction.[28] On the political level, the formation of a government without legitimacy in a political system with non-existent democratic institutions was pushing Iraq into a domestic conflict that was deteriorating due to a lack of security and functioning state institutions.[29]

An important asymmetry in the US war plan was the main reason for this rapid deterioration of the internal conditions in Iraq. The main objective of Operation "Iraqi Freedom" had been the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, while very little attention and planning had been given to the post-Baathist period.[30] Indeed, the US military operation was very effective in fulfilling Washington's main objective: The decapitation of the Iraqi regime and the occupation of Baghdad. But what Washington considered as the main phase of its military operations in Iraq was only the beginning of a long and evolving asymmetric conflict. This perception was based on the US administration's belief that the Baathist regime would be successfully replaced by an effective pro-Western government in Baghdad. The Bush administration believed that Iraq's state infrastructure would have the capacity to support the new post-Baathist government and that it would become, along with the oil-exporting industry, the pillar of the new Iraqi state. In reality, however, the basic infrastructure of the Iraqi state had been gradually unraveling during the eight-year war with Iran (1980-1988), the Gulf War that followed (1990-1991) and the years of harsh Western sanctions (1992-2003).[31] Even before the US invasion, the Iraqi state was on the verge of collapse, the economy was in tatters, and the state administration and security forces were disintegrating. The US invasion and subsequent occupation dismantled the few remaining state infrastructures that had been left. Within weeks of the invasion, Iraq was a state that resembled an empty shell, without basic infrastructure, public administration, or security.[32] As a

[28] Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 83, No. 5 (September/October 2004): 35–36.
[29] Diamond, 37.
[30] Diamond, 67–69.
[31] Toby Dodge, "State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change: The Rise of a New Authoritarianism," *International Affairs* 89, No. 2 (March 2013): 252.
[32] Toby Dodge, "Iraqi Transitions: From Regime Change to State Collapse," *Third World Quarterly* 26, No. 4/5 (2005): 710.

result, the deepening violence and accelerating instability that began to engulf the country after the overthrow of the Baathist regime prolonged the presence of US troops in Iraq, transforming them from an invading army into an occupation force.[33]

In 2004, US forces faced major insurgencies first in Fallujah in central Iraq and then in Najaf in the south. Fallujah, a conservative Sunni city, became the first major battleground between US forces and the rising Sunni insurgency in April 2004. American soldiers opened fire against a mostly peaceful protest and the city rose against the American military presence.[34] Marines were deployed to suppress the insurgency and were engaged in fierce battles with Sunni fighters, with devastating effects on the local population. Then followed the first eruption of the Shia insurgency in Najaf, the holiest city of Shia Islam, where Imam Ali Abi ibn Talib, the first Shia Imam, is thought to be buried. In August, the Mahdi Army, a militia headed by the volatile Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr, occupied the Imam Ali mosque and confronted the US forces.[35] Three months later, Fallujah erupted again in a fierce urban battle, the Second Battle of Fallujah between November and December 2004.

By the end of 2004, it was becoming evident that the Sunni insurgency was erupting in full force. The journalist Jason Burke, who was covering the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for the *Guardian*, has provided some important observations about the evolution of the Iraqi insurgency:

> "In Iraq between 2003 and 2004 we can see many of the features that define the new phase of Islamic militancy and are likely to be characteristic of activism in the years to come […]. What we see in Iraq, instead of operations masterminded by one individual or one organization, is a whole complex array of different groups, of all different sizes, loyal to different leaders and often linked to different, if overlapping, networks outside the country, working together for a roughly common cause, though sometimes with widely different priorities and tactics. In this, Islamic activism in Iraq is a microcosm of militancy more widely in the Muslim world. One crucial aspect of the activities in Iraq, at least in the early period of the occupation, was the frequent cooperation, at a tactical level, between radical

[33] Larry Diamond, "Building Democracy after Conflict: Lessons from Iraq," *Journal of Democracy* 16, No. 1 (January 2005): 17-18.
[34] Rory McCarthy, *Nobody Told Us We Are Defeated: Stories from the New Iraq* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), 128–129.
[35] Filkins, *Forever War*, 124.

> Muslims and secular Iraqis loyal to Saddam Hussein's Baath party regime or motivated by a distinctly unmuslim nationalism."[36]

The country's descent into full-scale civil war was accelerated by the rise of new Sunni jihadi militias, which found a breeding ground in the chaos and insecurity of post-Baathist Iraq. Among those was Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), headed by the Jordanian Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who was the mastermind of a series of suicide bomb attacks against the Shia community. One of the most dramatic attacks, with devastating consequences for the trajectory of the sectarian violence in Iraq, was the February 2006 bombing of Al Askari mosque in Samara, one of the holiest sites of Shia Islam.[37] This was a concerted attempt by Zarqawi to foment sectarian hatred and to reap the benefits of the rising inter-communal violence that was spreading across the country. At the same time, several Iraqi Shia militias were receiving assistance and support from neighboring Iran. Consequently, the situation in Iraq was becoming increasingly fragmented and the country was being transformed into a conflict on multiple fronts.

By 2006, US military commanders in Iraq had begun to realize the magnitude of Iraq's domestic unraveling. Having focused on the initial military targets of Operation "Iraqi Freedom"—the defeat of the Iraqi army, the capture of Baghdad and the decapitation of the Baathist regime—the Bush administration realized, albeit with considerable delay, the widening gap between the initial military targets and the handling of the post-Baathist reality in Iraq. General John Abizaid, commander of the US forces in Iraq, observed in 2006 that "the war had crosscutting ethnic, sectarian, religious, and nationalist dimensions."[38] Bacevich writes:

> "By October 2006 according to a classified briefing prepared by CENTCOM's intelligence directorate, violence was at an all-time high [and] spreading geographically […] Yet the spike in sectarian fighting within Iraq had implications extending well beyond the boundaries of that country: Iran was now playing a covert but increasingly prominent role in supporting Shia extremists […] With US forces unable to make good on Bush's promise to pacify Iraq and transform it politically, Iran was now emerging as the principal beneficiary of American overreach. The sequence of US interventionism in the Persian Gulf,

[36] Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 269.
[37] Michael Howard, "Iraq Slips towards Civil War after Attack on Shia Mosque," *Guardian*, February 23, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/23/iraq.iraqtimeline1.
[38] Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, 260–261.

> initiated with an eye toward curbing Iranian power, was now producing precisely the inverse effect."[39]

The regional impact of the US invasion of Iraq and the civil war that followed would be profound and enduring. One immediate impact was the rise of sectarian tensions in Iraq but also across the Middle East. The inter-communal violence that erupted in post-Baathist Iraq was a direct result of the regime change policy that the Bush administration had engineered and executed in Baghdad, which underestimated the impact of the invasion on a power system that had been built across eight decades. Since the 1930s, despite multiple reconfigurations, Iraq was ruled by a power system that never really lost its Sunni identity: It had been a Sunni monarchy until 1958, a predominantly Sunni military government and then a Sunni-based Baathist regime until the 2003 invasion. Those eight decades of predominantly Sunni rule had pushed Iraq's Shia majority and Kurdish minority to the political, social, and economic margins of the Iraqi state. These communities had been the victims of the Baathist state's military attacks, mass executions, political assassinations and constant persecution. Consequently, when the US military overthrew the Baathist regime in Baghdad they not only dismantled the Sunni power system but set in motion a power shift from the Sunni minority to the Shia majority.[40] The eruption of sectarian violence after 2003 transformed the country into a source of instability which was impossible to contain within Iraq's borders and the spillover effects were beginning to be felt throughout the region, from Lebanon to Pakistan. The US war on terror and the evolving Iraqi civil war were transforming the region into a zone of expanding instability.

Another repercussion of the US invasion and the eruption of the civil war in Iraq was the emergence of a new regional wave of Sunni militancy, centered on Iraq as a "magnet" for Sunni militants who viewed the developing civil war as a fertile ground from which they could expand their influence and add more recruits to their radical, violent agenda. Many Sunni militants entered Iraq through the Syrian border, often with the tacit assistance of the Assad regime, which was poised to derail, or at least delay, the US post-Baathist political project.[41] The co-existence of various Sunni Islamist groups inside the violent cauldron of Iraq's civil war would have profound and lasting impacts. AQI, one of the many radical groups that was

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[39] Bacevich, 276–277.

[40] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 170.

[41] Sami Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag: An Exclusive Insight into the Inner Workings of ISIS* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 62–63.

responsible for various terrorist attacks, would be the precursor of other more violent groups, such as the Islamic State. Iraq had been transformed into what Afghanistan had been in the 1980s after the Soviet invasion, as Islamist militants throughout the region surged into Iraq to fight the American marines.[42]

Another aftershock of the overthrow of the Baathist regime was the abrupt change to the regional balance. For more than two decades, Saddam Hussein's regime had become a frontier state that separated Iran from the Middle East and kept it contained to the Persian Gulf. During the eight-year-long Iraq-Iran war, most of the Sunni Arab states, with the important exception of Hafez al Assad's Syria, supported the Iraqi war effort. The Sunni Gulf monarchies in particular, which viewed Khomeini's Shia revolutionary regime as the most important security threat to their domestic stability, were willing to assist and even subsidize Saddam Hussein's war against the Iranian regime. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the George H.W. Bush administration, concerned about the regional repercussions, opted to contain instead of overthrow Saddam Hussein. A similar approach, with some differences, was followed by the Clinton administration, which in 1994 initiated the "dual containment" policy in the Gulf region with the aim of simultaneously containing both Iraq and Iran.[43] The balance of power that had been established since the beginning of the 1980s, largely based on Iraq's position and its role as a bulwark against Iran's Shia regime, had been preserved despite these major regional crises until the overthrow of Saddam's Baathist regime by the 2003 US invasion and the chaos that ensued.

The fall of Saddam and the end of the decades-long period of Sunni rule in Baghdad ended Iraq's function as a Sunni bulwark and opened its territory to the ascendance of Shia Iranian influence. This was a momentous shift in the regional balance of the Middle East. For the first time in its modern history, Iran had the opportunity to gradually expand its political and religious influence inside Iraq, a development that sent geopolitical shivers throughout the region and particularly across the Arabian Peninsula. The Gulf monarchies, especially Iran's major regional adversary Saudi Arabia, viewed Tehran's incursion into Iraq as a critical setback for Saudi national security and attempted to counterbalance the expanding Iranian influence in Lebanon and Syria.

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[42] Burke, *Al Qaeda*, 270.

[43] Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (London: Phoenix, 2009), 300.

Iraq and the end of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon

By the end of 2003, it had become evident to the Bush administration that the stabilization of Iraq was a complex task that would require greater effort and manpower than previously thought. As a result, any plans or ideas for the expansion of the military operations in Syria or Iran, which had been previously voiced by several officials and influential commentators, were shelved. Instead, Washington opted to apply pressure on the Assad regime in Lebanon, which the Bush administration considered to be the soft underbelly of the Syrian regime where it could apply pressure without the risk of a direct confrontation. Subsequently, in December 2003, the US Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA). The bill, which threatened Syria with sanctions, declared that:

> "The Government of Syria should immediately and unconditionally halt support for terrorism, permanently and openly declare its total renunciation of all forms of terrorism, and close all terrorist offices and facilities in Syria, including the offices of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command."

Furthermore, it declared that the government of Syria should:

> "(1) immediately and unconditionally stop facilitating transit from Syria to Iraq of individuals, military equipment, and all lethal items, except as authorized by the Coalition Provisional Authority or a representative, internationally recognized Iraqi government; (2) cease its support for "volunteers" and terrorists who are traveling from and through Syria into Iraq to launch attacks; (3) undertake concrete, verifiable steps to deter such behavior and control the use of territory under Syrian control; and (4) immediately declare its commitment to completely withdraw its armed forces, including military, paramilitary, and security forces, from Lebanon, and set a firm timetable for such withdrawal."[44]

In May 2004, President Bush accused the Assad regime of supporting terrorist groups and facilitating the transfer of foreign fighters to Iraq and proceeded to impose sanctions against Damascus. These included

[44] H.R. 1828 – Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, 108th Congress (2003-2004), https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/1828.