

Shia Commonality and Post-2003 Iraq's Relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Shia commonality has shaped post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations, conceptualising a state's collective identity as both a structuring force and a processual dynamic. It develops a theoretical model in which the self-other nexus – the founding dynamic of a state's collective identity – is structured through three interdependent constructs: Power, Myth and Security, bound by the Symbolic Cluster. The Symbolic Cluster, defined as the interrelation of symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence, ties together the constructs derived from the self-other nexus, shaping how state identity influences foreign policy and domestic governance. Through an analysis of religious authority, political authority and non-state armed groups, the study demonstrates how post-2003 Iraq's Shia identity has been both a vehicle for cooperation and a site of contestation in its relations with Iran.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach, integrating semi-structured interviews, literature analysis and primary source examination, including Arabic-language newspapers, media articles and institutional reports. Between 2016 and 2017, I conducted in-person interviews in Iran (Tehran and Qom), Kuwait and Bahrain, including with Mohammad Qalibaf, former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander and crucial Iranian conservative leader. From 2019 to 2022, I conducted additional interviews via Zoom with interlocutors in Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala, ensuring access to key insights while maintaining researcher safety.

This research refines theoretical constructivist approaches, demonstrating that a state's collective identity is not merely discursively produced but embedded in power structures, historical myths and security discourses that actively shape inter-state behaviour. It introduces symbolic violence in international relations, demonstrating how states extend symbolic legitimacy beyond the domestic sphere to justify intervention, exclusion, or influence. Additionally, it conceptualises Iran's institutionalised isolation as a contemporary institution, framing it as a structurally embedded condition in the international system, shaping Iraq's foreign policy constraints.

The study illustrates how Iran has leveraged Shia commonality to entrench its influence in Iraq's religious, political and security fields, reinforcing Iraq's structural dependence. While Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has maintained clerical autonomy, his vision for an independent Iraqi state has been constrained by Iran's deep penetration into Iraq's political and military landscape. Iraqi political authority, fragmented and externally reliant, has failed to consolidate an autonomous identity, while non-state armed groups, particularly the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), have militarised politics and reinforced Iran's role in Iraq's security apparatus.

This thesis advances scholarship on identity formation and inter-state relations by offering a systematised framework for understanding how collective identity operates through the self-other nexus and the constructs of Power, Myth, Security and the Symbolic Cluster. While applied to post-2003 Iraq, the model's broader applicability provides a structured approach for analysing inter-state relations shaped by ideological affinities, contested narratives or symbolic competition. By demonstrating how identity functions as both a structuring force and a site of struggle, this study contributes to International Relations, Political Sociology and Middle Eastern Studies, offering insights into the role of identity in shaping inter-state dynamics in an era of increasing geopolitical fragmentation.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Dissertation untersucht den Einfluss schiitischer Gemeinsamkeit auf die irakisch-iranischen zwischenstaatlichen Beziehungen nach 2003 und konzeptualisiert die kollektive Identität eines Staates zugleich als strukturierende Kraft und als prozessuale Dynamik. Entwickelt wird ein theoretisches Modell, in dem das Selbst–Anderes-Nexus – als konstitutive Dynamik kollektiver staatlicher Identität – durch drei interdependente Konstrukte strukturiert ist: Macht, Mythos und Sicherheit, zusammengehalten durch das Symbolische Cluster. Dieses wird als Verschränkung von symbolischem Kapital beziehungsweise symbolischer Macht, symbolischer Resonanz und symbolischer Gewalt definiert. Es bündelt die aus dem Selbst–Anderes-Nexus hervorgehenden Konstrukte und strukturiert die Weise, in der staatliche Identität außenpolitisches Handeln und innerstaatliche Herrschaftsordnungen prägt.

Anhand der Analyse religiöser Autorität, politischer Autorität sowie nichtstaatlicher bewaffneter Akteure wird gezeigt, dass die schiitische Identität des Irak nach 2003 zugleich Kooperationsressource und Konfliktfeld in den Beziehungen zum Iran darstellt.

Methodisch basiert die Untersuchung auf einem qualitativen Forschungsdesign, das halbstrukturierte Interviews, systematische Literaturanalyse sowie die Auswertung von Primärquellen – darunter arabischsprachige Zeitungen, Medienberichte und institutionelle Dokumente – integriert. Zwischen 2016 und 2017 wurden leitfadengestützte Vor-Ort-Interviews im Iran (Teheran und Qom), in Kuwait und Bahrain geführt, unter anderem mit Mohammad Qalibaf, ehemaligem Kommandeur der Islamischen Revolutionsgarde (IRGC) und einflussreichem Vertreter des iranischen konservativen Lagers. In den Jahren 2019 bis 2022 erfolgten ergänzende Interviews über digitale Kommunikationsformate mit Gesprächspartnern in Bagdad, Nadschaf und Kerbela, wodurch zentrale empirische Einsichten unter gleichzeitiger Gewährleistung der Forschungssicherheit erschlossen werden konnten.

Die Arbeit präzisiert konstruktivistische Theorieansätze, indem sie darlegt, dass kollektive staatliche Identität nicht allein diskursiv erzeugt wird, sondern in Machtstrukturen, historischen Mythen und Sicherheitsdiskursen verankert ist, die zwischenstaatliches Verhalten aktiv strukturieren. Mit der Einführung des Konzepts symbolischer Gewalt in die Analyse internationaler Beziehungen wird aufgezeigt, wie

Staaten symbolische Legitimität über den innerstaatlichen Raum hinaus projizieren, um Intervention, Exklusion oder Einflussnahme zu legitimieren. Darüber hinaus wird die institutionalisierte Isolation Irans als zeitgenössische Institution gefasst und als strukturell eingebettete Bedingung des internationalen Systems konzeptualisiert, welche die außenpolitischen Handlungsspielräume des Irak nachhaltig begrenzt.

Die Untersuchung verdeutlicht, wie der Iran schiitische Gemeinsamkeit strategisch nutzt, um seinen Einfluss in den religiösen, politischen und sicherheitspolitischen Feldern des Irak zu konsolidieren und dadurch strukturelle Abhängigkeiten zu vertiefen. Während Großajatollah Ali al-Sistani eine relative klerikale Autonomie aufrechterhält, bleibt seine Vision eines souveränen irakischen Staates durch die tiefgreifende iranische Durchdringung der politischen und militärischen Strukturen des Landes eingeschränkt. Die irakische politische Autorität, fragmentiert und extern abhängig, vermochte keine konsistente autonome Identität auszubilden, während nichtstaatliche bewaffnete Akteure – insbesondere die Volksmobilisierungskräfte (PMF) – zur Militarisierung politischer Prozesse beitrugen und die Rolle Irans im irakischen Sicherheitsapparat verfestigten.

Die Dissertation leistet einen Beitrag zur Forschung über Identitätsbildung und zwischenstaatliche Beziehungen, indem sie einen systematisierten Analyserahmen zur Funktionsweise kollektiver Identität im Zusammenspiel von Selbst–Anderes-Nexus, Macht, Mythos, Sicherheit und Symbolischem Cluster entwickelt. Obwohl am Fall des Irak nach 2003 erarbeitet, eröffnet das Modell eine übertragbare analytische Perspektive auf zwischenstaatliche Beziehungen, die durch ideologische Affinitäten, konkurrierende Narrative oder symbolische Konkurrenz geprägt sind. Indem Identität sowohl als strukturierende Ordnungskraft als auch als Austragungsort politischer Kämpfe konzeptualisiert wird, trägt die Arbeit zu den Internationalen Beziehungen, der Politischen Soziologie und den Nahoststudien bei und bietet vertiefte Einsichten in die identitätspolitische Dimension gegenwärtiger geopolitischer Fragmentierungsprozesse.

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List of Abbreviations

CSH	Coalition for Saving the Homeland
CF	Coordination Framework
DS	Duality of Structure
IHCHR	Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights
IHEC	Independent High Electoral Commission
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
IR	International Relations
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
NP	Normalising Power
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PMF	Popular Mobilisation Forces
RP	Repressive Power
SC	Symbolic Cluster
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
UIA	United Iraqi Alliance
UN	United Nations
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNIDR	United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research

Introduction

At the time of writing in 2025, more than two decades after the US-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein, the country remains plagued by chronic instability, widespread corruption and deep political and social divisions.

Iraq continues to rank among the most corrupt countries in the Middle East,¹ and political institutions are widely perceived as unresponsive and ineffective. Social unrest has become a persistent feature of Iraqi political life, with mass protests erupting repeatedly over governance failures, economic hardship and systemic corruption.² State repression of these movements has been severe, with security forces and paramilitary groups deploying violence to suppress dissent.³ At the same time, Iran has extended its influence across Iraq's political, economic and security spheres,⁴ a development that carries significant implications for Iraq's position in the region, particularly given Iran's continued isolation within the international community.

Context & Research Question

Since 2005, when Iraq held its first national elections under the new post-Baathist system, Shia parties have consistently dominated government coalitions. However, this has not translated into political stability. Iraqi politics has been marked by recurrent crises, with government deadlocks, violent power struggles and intense factionalism shaping the country's trajectory.⁵ Armed wings of political parties have played an active role in these conflicts, with militias often deployed to assert political

¹ Transparency International, "Iraq: Corruption Perceptions Index", *Transparency International*, accessed March 2025, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/iraq>.

² Samya Kullab, "Clashes break out at protests over arrested activists in southern Iraq", *AP News*, October 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/a454a61c1747738cb56aa0ff5fd1c49a>.

³ Amnesty International, "Iraq: Protest death toll surges as security forces resume brutal repression", *Amnesty International*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/iraq-protest-death-toll-surges-as-security-forces-resume-brutal-repression/>.

⁴ Muhanad Seloom, "From Rivals to Allies: Iran's Evolving Role in Iraq's Geopolitics", *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, April 2024, https://mecouncil.org/publication_chapters/from-rivals-to-allies-irans-evolving-role-in-iraqs-geopolitics/.

⁵ International Crisis Group, "Iraq: Staving Off Instability in the Near and Distant Futures", *International Crisis Group*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-staving-instability-near-and-distant-futures>.

leverage during disputes.⁶ Popular dissatisfaction with the government remains high, with persistent calls for reform met with forceful crackdowns.⁷ Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, as the highest-ranking Shia cleric in Iraq and one of the most influential figures in the global Shia community, has repeatedly condemned the political elite, calling for governance reforms and denouncing corruption.⁸ However, despite his moral authority, the entrenched nature of Iraq's political system has made significant reform elusive.⁹ This intra-Shia competition for power has been further complicated by Iran's sustained and systematic interference in Iraq's internal affairs, a trend that has been evident since the early years of the occupation and the outbreak of the 2003–2007 civil war.¹⁰

Against this backdrop, this study examines the role of Shia commonality in shaping Iraq-Iran relations after 2003. While many analyses of Iraq's post-invasion trajectory focus on material power, geopolitics or institutional failure, this study interrogates how a shared element of identity influences inter-state relations. The research is guided by the following question: how does Shia commonality impact post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran? This study thus situates itself within broader discussions in International Relations, Political Sociology and Middle Eastern studies, contributing to debates on identity, inter-state relations and foreign influence, state building and reconstruction. By examining how a shared element of identity – Shia commonality – operates within the Iraq-Iran relationship, this research advances scholarship on state identity and inter-state dynamics in deeply contested political environments.

⁶ Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 April 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

⁷ Amnesty International, "Iraq: Five Years after Tishreen Protests, Impunity Reigns Supreme", *Amnesty International*, 29 September 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/iraq-five-years-after-tishreen-protests-impunity-reigns-supreme/>.

⁸ Sinan Mahmoud, "Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani Calls for Corruption-Free Rule and Widespread Change", *The National News*, 4 November 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2024/11/04/iraqs-grand-ayatollah-ali-al-sistani-calls-for-corruption-free-rule-and-widespread-change/>.

⁹ "Sistani: The (Not-So) Hidden Hand Behind Iraqi Politics", *Lowy Institute*, 14 January 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/sistani-not-so-hidden-hand-behind-iraqi-politics>; "Tooth and Nail: Elite Resistance Against Reform in Iraq", *Clingendael Institute*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/tooth-and-nail-elite-resistance-against-reform-iraq>.

¹⁰ See for instance: Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2012), 85; Kali Robinson, "How Much Influence Does Iran Have in Iraq?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-much-influence-does-iran-have-iraq>.

Theoretical Model

This thesis conceptualises identity as a structuring force that shapes inter-state relations, moving beyond essentialist or static understandings of collective identity. To address the central research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – this study develops a theoretical model that examines how a state's collective identity is formed through its interaction with a relevant 'other' and how this identity influences inter-state dynamics. While applied to the Iraq-Iran case, the model is designed for broader applicability, offering a framework for analysing inter-state relations structured by ideological opposition or enmity practices – such as Cold War-era US-Soviet dynamics – as well as cases where states share elements of religious, ethnic or ideological affinity.

At the core of this model is the self-other nexus, a processual dynamic whereby the self is constructed through its relationship, interactions and exchanges with a 'relevant other'. In the case of Iraq, Iran represents the significant other due to their shared Shia identity, while in other contexts, the 'relevant other' may be a state around which the self has built enmity practices. Understanding how a state constructs its identity through the self-other dynamic is crucial to assessing how this identity translates into inter-state relations.

Given the centrality of the self-other nexus in shaping state identity, the overarching research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – requires further specification. To fully address this inquiry, the question is broken down into two interrelated sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other, and how a state's collective identity can be described. These two dimensions are interdependent, as understanding how identity is shaped through the self-other dynamic is essential for developing a structured conceptualisation of a state's collective identity. This study argues that a state's identity is not a static entity, but is continuously produced and reproduced through the self-other nexus.

To systematically analyse this process, the model introduces three interrelated core constructs – Power, Myth and Security – which together constitute the foundation of a state's collective identity. These constructs are interwoven by the Symbolic Cluster (SC), which links key conceptual elements that underpin Power, Myth and Security: symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence. It is at the level of the SC that structuration occurs – the process through which identity, while fluid and contested, retains a degree of stability over time. By conceptualising identity as both processual and structured, this model moves beyond abstract relational approaches, providing an operational framework for examining how identity operates within inter-state interactions.

Power is conceptualised as relational, contested and embedded within structures of legitimacy and control. It is not only exercised through coercion or institutional dominance, but also through symbolic power, which legitimises state behaviour and shapes perceptions of political order. The sociological site where competition for power takes place is the 'field', a relational and intersubjective space characterised by struggle. Myth refers to any culturally embedded notion, trend or element that carries symbolic meaning and is recognised as distinctive by both members of a community and outsiders. Myths hold symbolic resonance within a given community; while individuals may contest or reject them, they still acknowledge their relevance. Myths are not static, but are continuously reshaped through the self-other nexus, often serving as instruments for political mobilisation and legitimacy. Security, in this framework, is not merely the preservation of state integrity, but an ontological necessity for identity formation, whereby states construct both internal and external threats to define and reinforce the boundaries of the self.

By introducing the self-other nexus as the fundamental axis of identity formation, this study demonstrates that identity is not merely a discursive construct, but a structuring force that actively shapes inter-state behaviour. The model also integrates structuration theory to account for the relative stability of identity over time, showing how social structures influence agency while being continuously reproduced through political and symbolic interactions. This framework allows for the analysis of both cooperation and competition within identity-based inter-state relations, making it

applicable beyond Iraq-Iran dynamics to other contexts where identity commonalities or ideological oppositions shape foreign policy and state behaviour.

Finally, this model is applied through what I have termed “empirical sites of observation”: agency clusters whose discourses and practices are relevant for the notion of identity under investigation. In this study, the selected empirical sites of observation are religious authority, political authority and non-state armed groups, which serve as key agency clusters whose interactions with Iran provide insights into how identity translates into inter-state dynamics. By systematically applying the constructs of Power, Myth and Security across these clusters, this study offers a comprehensive account of how identity operates as both a structuring force and a field of contestation in Iraq-Iran relations. This approach allows for answering the central research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – as well as its two interrelated sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other, and how a state’s collective identity can be described.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology that combines semi-structured interviews, literature analysis and primary source examination, including media articles and institutional reports. Between 2016 and 2017, as a research assistant at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, I conducted in-person interviews in both Arabic and English with key Iraqi political and religious figures in Iran (Tehran and Qom), Kuwait and Bahrain. Among the interviewees was Mohammad Qalibaf, former IRGC commander and a crucial conservative political leader, whom I met in May 2016 while he was serving as Mayor of Tehran. From 2019 to 2022, due to security concerns and instability in Iraq (including the presence of ISIS and broader geopolitical tensions), I conducted additional interviews via Zoom with interlocutors in Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala. This methodological approach allowed for the collection of direct insights from Iraqi elites while ensuring researcher safety.

In addition to interviews, this study draws on extensive literature from both theoretical and empirical scholarship, engaging with key debates in International Relations, Political Sociology and Middle Eastern Studies. The theoretical foundation,

discussed in Chapter 1 *Research Question & Its Place in Relation to Core Literature*, provides the analytical tools for assessing identity formation and inter-state relations, while the empirical literature contextualises Iraq's political landscape post-2003.

Furthermore, this research incorporates primary sources, including Arabic-language media articles and reports from the United Nations and other international institutions, to examine how identity discourse is constructed and disseminated in public and policy-oriented narratives.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured to systematically address the central research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – by first engaging with the relevant literature, then developing a theoretical model, and finally applying this model to selected empirical sites of observation. The final chapters assess the broader implications of this study's findings for both theory and practice in the study of state identity and inter-state relations.

Chapter 1 – *Research Question & Its Place in Relation to Core Literature* – provides a comprehensive review of the existing scholarship relevant to this study, both theoretical and empirical. It situates the research question within broader academic debates in International Relations, Political Sociology and Middle Eastern Studies, engaging with works on state identity, the self-other nexus, inter-state relations and post-2003 Iraq. For each work discussed, this chapter highlights its contributions to the field, its relevance to this study and the gaps that remain in the literature. By identifying these gaps, the chapter establishes the necessity for the theoretical model developed in the following chapter as well as the empirical analyses conducted in chapters dedicated to post-2003 Iraq.

Chapter 2 – *Constructing State's Collective Identity: A Model* – presents the theoretical framework that underpins this research. Building on the constructivist tradition, this model conceptualises state identity as a structured yet dynamic process shaped by the self-other nexus. It introduces the three core constructs – Power, Myth and Security – which define a state's collective identity and integrates them through the Symbolic Cluster (SC), the binding tie between the three as the interrelation

between symbolic capital/power, resonance and violence. The chapter also explains the structuration process that allows identity to retain relative continuity despite ongoing contestation and the processual nature of the self-other nexus. While the model is applied to the Iraq-Iran case, it is designed for broader applicability in studying inter-state relations shaped by identity commonalities or ideological opposition.

Chapter 3 – *Post-2003 Iraqi Religious Authority* – applies the model to the first empirical site of observation, investigating how Shia religious identity has shaped Iraq-Iran relations through the role of religious authority. It examines how Iraqi religious authority has been constructed through its self-other nexus with the Iranian religious establishment, analysing the exercise of Power within the religious field, the resonance of Myths in Shia discourse, and the role of Security in clerical responses to political instability. By focusing on Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's discourse and influence, this chapter explores how post-2003 religious authority has sought to assert its autonomy from political power while navigating Iran's institutionalised influence. The analysis ultimately assesses how Shia religious commonality has contributed to both contestation and dependency in Iraq-Iran relations, shaping the agency of religious elites and their engagement with the state.

Chapter 4 – *Post-2003 Iraqi Political Authority* – examines how Iraqi political identity has been constructed through its self-other nexus with Iranian political authority. It applies the model's core constructs – Power, Myth and Security – to analyse how political actors have navigated post-2003 governance, addressing the fragmentation of political authority, the symbolic competition within the Shia political sphere and the securitisation of state power. The chapter highlights how Iran's penetration into Iraq's political field has both shaped and been shaped by intra-Shia rivalry, leading to cycles of contestation and dependency. By assessing how different symbolic narratives have structured political legitimacy, this analysis evaluates how Shia political commonality has served as both a vehicle for Iranian influence and a source of unresolved internal competition.

Chapter 5 – *Post-2003 Iraqi Non-State Armed Groups* – investigates how Iraqi Shia militias have been constructed through their self-other nexus with the Iranian security and military apparatus. It examines the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) as

a case study, demonstrating how Iran-backed militias have embedded themselves in Iraq's security framework while facing ongoing resistance from competing factions. By applying the model's core constructs, the chapter explores how Power has been exercised within Iraq's military field, how the Myth-spectrum of resistance and shrine protection has been co-opted and contested, and how security discourses have framed both internal legitimacy and international interventions. The analysis ultimately assesses how Shia commonality has facilitated Iran's deep penetration into Iraq's security architecture while leaving unresolved symbolic tensions that continue to shape state and militia dynamics.

Chapter 6 – *Advancing the Study of State Identity: Theoretical and Empirical Contributions* – evaluates this study's broader impact on existing scholarship. It revisits the key authors and theories from Chapter 1, summarising their relevance to this research and demonstrating how this study builds upon and advances them. This chapter illustrates how the findings from Chapters 3–5 enrich existing debates on state identity by refining the understanding of the self-other nexus and its manifestations through Power, Myth and Security. In doing so, it highlights the conceptual and empirical contributions of this research to the study of inter-state relations in contested political environments.

Finally, the *Conclusion* provides a concise summary of the study's findings, reaffirming its contributions to International Relations, Political Sociology and Middle Eastern Studies. It reflects on the implications of conceptualising state identity as a structured yet dynamic force and highlights the broader applicability of the proposed model. In addition, it revisits the novel concepts introduced in this study, demonstrating how they refine existing theoretical frameworks and offer new avenues for analysing inter-state relations. The chapter also acknowledges the study's limitations and suggests potential directions for future research, particularly in applying the model to other cases where identity plays a central role in shaping foreign policy and domestic governance.

1. Research Question & Its Place in Relation to Core Literature

1.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to situate the central research question of this study – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – within the broader scholarly literature of International Relations (IR).

By engaging with the concept of Shiism, this research addresses the broader conceptual puzzle of *identity*, a complex and evolving topic examined across multiple disciplines, including historical sociology, sociology, anthropology, psychology and cultural studies.¹¹ These fields offer diverse theoretical insights into the formation, maintenance, and transformation of identities, emphasising the roles of social structures, cultural narratives and psychological processes. Within the field of IR, constructivism has been recognised as the most effective approach for analysing state identities,¹² as it integrates these interdisciplinary perspectives to explore the social construction of identities and the intersubjective processes that influence state behaviour.

The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how the research question of this study emerges from and contributes to existing debates and theoretical frameworks within IR. Additionally, it will outline how the constructivist theoretical model developed to achieve the study's analytical objectives, which will be detailed in the following chapter, *Constructing State's Collective Identity: A Model*, drawing upon insights from this wide range of disciplinary contributions.

Within this model, the central research question is broken down into two interrelated sub-questions: how the identity of the self is constructed through the identity of the other, and how to describe a state's collective identity (thus, the identity of the 'self' under investigation). Following the next chapter outlining the theoretical model, the subsequent chapters will apply this model to three case studies, presented

¹¹ Iver B. Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 2 (1996): 142.

¹² Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 163.

as agency clusters whose patterns of behaviour, discourse and interests are specifically linked to the notion of identity under investigation: post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, political authority and non-state militias.

To achieve this chapter's aim, the following sections will review and critically analyse the key literature that provides the foundation for addressing the main research question, its sub-questions and the empirical analyses to be conducted on the three selected agency clusters.

For each piece of selected literature, I will articulate its relevance to the research questions, highlight its contributions and limitations, and identify the specific gaps that this study aims to address. By mapping out how existing theories and findings inform and shape the inquiry into Shia commonality and its impact on Iraq-Iran relations, this chapter establishes the scholarly context for this study, thereby setting the stage for the theoretical and empirical analyses that follow.

In the following section, I shall review and analyse the works that form the theoretical foundation of this study. For each contribution, I shall highlight its relevance to this inquiry and identify the gaps that remain to be addressed.

First, I shall examine the works of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann, specifically their seminal articles "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics" (1992)¹³ and "Self and Other in International Relations" (1999).¹⁴ These contributions establish the constructivist framework on which this study's theoretical model is built. I shall then turn to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida,¹⁵ which provide critical insights into the self-other nexus, conceptualising it as a dialogical, intersubjective and non-hierarchical process that shapes identity formation over time.

¹³ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

¹⁴ Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 1999.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

Subsequently, I shall focus on those works that are crucial for the analysis of the core constructs of a state's collective identity: power dynamics (what I refer to as 'Power'), symbolic cultural and political notions (Myth), and security concerns (Security). These three dimensions, I argue, are constructed by the self-other nexus and constitute the main elements of a state's collective identity. Their interdependence is reinforced by their symbolic dimension, which constitutes the nexus binding them together – what I refer to as the 'Symbolic Cluster', comprising symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence. The analysis of these elements, I argue, is crucial to respond to the second sub-question – how to describe a state's collective identity – and ultimately answer the main research question: how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran.

For each of these constructs, I shall review the key theoretical contributions: Michel Foucault¹⁶ and Pierre Bourdieu¹⁷ for Power, Anthony D. Smith¹⁸ for Myth and Alexander Wendt's concept of institution,¹⁹ along with securitisation theories from both the Copenhagen School (Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, and Jaap de Wilde)²⁰ and the Paris School (Didier Bigo and Thierry Balzacq)²¹ for Security. Given that this study contributes to the theoretical debate by arguing that symbolic violence operates not only within domestic politics but also in the international arena, I shall review Michel Foucault's concept of 'bio-power',²² Johan Galtung's 'cultural violence',²³ and Giorgio Agamben's 'zone of indistinction' and 'homo sacer'²⁴ to establish a framework for its application in international relations. Finally, I shall analyse Anthony Giddens' theory

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); and Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

¹⁸ Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁹ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 391–425.

²⁰ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

²¹ Thierry Balzacq, ed., *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London: Routledge, 2011).

²² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge, Vol. 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

²³ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence", *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291–295.

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

of 'structuration',²⁵ which accounts for the relative stability of a state's collective identity despite the evolving dynamics of the self-other nexus.

The second part of this chapter will shift to the empirical literature that informs this study's analysis of three key agency clusters in post-2003 Iraq: religious authority, political authority and non-state armed groups. I shall review the works of Laurence Louër,²⁶ Caroleen Marji Sayej²⁷ and Harith Hasan al-Qarawee²⁸ for religious authority; Charles Tripp,²⁹ Toby Dodge³⁰ and Fanar Haddad³¹ for political authority; and Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour³² and Fanar Haddad³³ for non-state armed groups.

A concluding section will summarise the key insights drawn from this review and set the stage for the study's broader analysis.

1.2. Theoretical Approaches to State Identity & Inter-State Relations

Following the introductory section, where I laid out the main research question of this study – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – and its interrelated sub-questions – how the self is constructed through the other and how a state's collective identity can be described – I shall now begin reviewing the works of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann,³⁴ who provide the foundational

²⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge and Maiden: Polity Press, 1984).

²⁶ Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008).

²⁷ Caroleen Marji Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs: Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

²⁸ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja: Shii Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 481–497; Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", *Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief* 105 (2023); Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "The Subtle Power of Sistani", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 14 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80346>.

²⁹ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁰ Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2012); Toby Dodge, "'Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad': Explaining Hybrid Political Identities in Iraq", *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2018): 1381–1400.

³¹ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011).

³² Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future* (Beirut: The Carnegie Middle East Center, 2017).

³³ Fanar Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State", *The Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2018.

³⁴ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 391–425; Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 139–174.

basis for the constructivist model I developed to address these questions. I shall then move on to the works of other key scholars whose contributions have been instrumental in shaping the theoretical framework of this study. For each contribution, I will examine its significance in relation to this inquiry and highlight the unresolved issues it leaves open.

1.2.1. Constructivist Perspective on State Identity: Insights from Wendt & Neumann

In the following paragraphs, I shall review and analyse the works of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann, specifically their seminal articles “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics” (1992)³⁵ and “Self and Other in International Relations” (1999),³⁶ to establish the constructivist framework on which this study’s theoretical model is built. This framework is crucial for addressing the central research question – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – as well as its interrelated sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other, and how to describe a state’s collective identity. I shall highlight Wendt and Neumann’s relevant analyses and the theoretical gaps that remain to be filled.

In examining the core literature related to the research question of this study – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – the works of Wendt and Neumann provide a crucial theoretical foundation. Both scholars have significantly contributed to the constructivist approach in IR by focusing on the concepts of identity and the self-other nexus as central to understanding state behaviour.

In his ground-breaking article, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics”³⁷ Wendt challenges the deterministic assumptions of neorealism regarding anarchy and self-help in the international system. He argues that state behaviour is not dictated solely by the anarchic structure but is influenced by

³⁵ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It”, 391–425.

³⁶ Neumann, “Self and Other in International Relations”, 139–174.

³⁷ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It”, 391–425.

intersubjective understandings and the distribution of knowledge among states in the international arena.³⁸ According to Wendt, states' interests and actions are not predetermined but are shaped through processes of "defining situations", which draw on socially constructed knowledge of themselves and others.³⁹

This perspective introduces a pivotal insight for the study of collective identity: states' identities, which he describes as "inherently relational"⁴⁰ and "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self".⁴¹ They form the basis of state interests, which in turn form the basis of state's behaviour in the international arena.⁴² A state's collective identity is thus the ultimate base of its relations with other states. This constructivist view shifts the focus from material capabilities to the social construction of identities, emphasising that state behaviour in IR is rooted in these socially constructed identities and the expectations they generate.

Building on Wendt's insights, Iver Neumann, in his seminal article "Self and Other in International Relations",⁴³ further explores the importance of states' collective identities in understanding state behaviour in the international arena, specifically presenting the self-other nexus as fundamental to identity formation.

Neumann argues that the construction of a state's collective identity is a dynamic process deeply intertwined with its perceptions of significant others.⁴⁴ Drawing on social theories of identity from disciplines such as anthropology, psychology and sociology, Neumann suggests that IR can be understood as a series of self-other relations.⁴⁵ He advocates for moving from a "dialectical mode of analysis" to a "dialogical one",⁴⁶ which respects and incorporates differences, offering a more nuanced understanding of how identities are formed and maintained. The dialogical approach underscores the notion that identities, within this constructivist framework,

³⁸ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 399.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 397–398.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 397.

⁴³ Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 139–174

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 166–168.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

are not static entities but are instead processual – continuously evolving – and mutually constitutive.⁴⁷

Neumann emphasises that the self and the other are not isolated entities but are intricately linked, continuously merging and influencing each other.⁴⁸ States' collective identities are thus overlapping and multifaceted phenomena, where different notions of identity – such as religious, ethnic and political identities – are interdependent, both with each other and with the collective identities of other states.⁴⁹

Together, Wendt and Neumann provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the relational and intersubjective nature of state identities in IR. Wendt emphasises how a state's behaviour is shaped by its interests, which are, in turn, shaped by its identity.⁵⁰ Neumann, on the other hand, underscores the significance of the self-other nexus and the dialogical processes involved in identity formation.⁵¹ These perspectives offer a theoretical basis on the understanding of how Shia commonality – a shared religious identity – is mutually constructed by the two countries under investigation and, given that the primary focus is here on Iraq, of how Iraq's identity is shaped in relation to Iran. This shared identity plays a critical role in shaping each country's interests towards the other, which, like identity itself, are processual and continuously evolving through their interactions.

However, significant gaps remain and need to be addressed. The concept of a 'state's collective identity' is still a complex and elusive puzzle. How can we effectively delineate the intricacies of a state's collective identity? While much emphasis has been placed on the self-other nexus, a key challenge lies in tracing the actual construction of a state's collective identity and its evolving relationship with the 'other'. In other words, how does the construction of the self-other nexus work? How does collective identity effectively influence a state's behaviour by shaping its interests, and through which dynamic processes, patterns and underlying principles are these interactions governed?

⁴⁷ Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 166–174.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁰ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 397–399.

⁵¹ Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 166–174.

In the next subsection, I will review and analyse the contributions of other scholars who have significantly advanced my understanding of the self-other nexus and its operational dynamics, as elaborated in the theoretical model presented in the next chapter. This includes the philosophical insights of Emmanuel Levinas,⁵² Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist perspective⁵³ and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical theory.⁵⁴

1.2.2. Exploring the Self-Other Nexus: Insights from Levinas, Bakhtin, Derrida

Following the review of Wendt and Neumann's constructivist analysis, which underscores how a state's behaviour in IR is intricately linked to its collective identity and shaped by the dynamics of the self-other nexus, I shall now examine the contributions of authors whose work is crucial for the conceptualisation of the self-other nexus.

As previously noted, the precise mechanisms through which the mutual and processual construction of self and other operates have yet to be fully addressed. The works by Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Mikhail Bakhtin provide foundational perspectives that deepen the understanding of how state identities are constructed, interact and evolve over time along the self-other nexus. In the following paragraphs, I shall review their insights and subsequently identify the theoretical gaps that remain, particularly in relation to the research question – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – and its sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity.

1.2.2.1. Levinas and the Self's Relation with the Other

In *The Levinas Reader* (1989), Emmanuel Levinas explores the self-other relationship by initially engaging with Hegelian dialectics, where identity and self-consciousness are achieved through mutual recognition.⁵⁵ In Hegelian terms, this

⁵² Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*.

⁵³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

⁵⁴ Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*.

⁵⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 112.

process involves both self and other understanding themselves as simultaneously independent and dependent, culminating in a synthesis of identities. Levinas, however, diverges from this framework by introducing an ethical dimension, arguing that the self holds an inherent responsibility toward the other.⁵⁶ This responsibility is not rooted in a social contract or reciprocity, but is a fundamental, pre-existing ethical duty that arises simply from encountering the other.⁵⁷ This duty is asymmetrical and infinite, suggesting that the self's identity is shaped by its openness and vulnerability to the other, thereby transcending Hegelian notions of mutual recognition.⁵⁸

Although the ethical dimension is beyond this study's primary focus, Levinas' emphasis on identity formation through the other is crucial. By highlighting the elements of alterity and resemblance in the self's recognition of the other – “we recognise the other as resembling us, but exterior to us” –,⁵⁹ he shows how this recognition process allows the self to see itself as ‘self’, as “exteriority leads the subject back to itself”.⁶⁰ Self and other gain ontological significance through their relationship, and their identities are continuously shaped by their interaction.

Yet, how does this process of recognition operate within the self-other nexus? How can the interaction between the self and the other be characterised, and what patterns govern their mutual perception? To further investigate these questions, the perspectives of Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida offer valuable insights.

1.2.2.2. Bakhtin and Derrida: Dialogism & Non-Hierarchy in the Self-Other Nexus

In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986), Mikhail Bakhtin provides a framework for understanding language and communication through his theory of dialogism, which offers valuable insights into the self-other nexus in identity construction. Bakhtin challenges traditional, monologic views of language by

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy”, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 75–87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Séan Hand, preface to *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), vi.

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Time and the Other”, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 43.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

proposing that all language is inherently dialogic – shaped by interactions between speakers and listeners.⁶¹ For Bakhtin, every act of communication involves at least two participants, where meaning is co-constructed.⁶² All utterances are part of an ongoing dialogue, each shaped by previous exchanges and anticipating future responses.⁶³ This continuous, open-ended process of meaning-making relies on the presence of the ‘other’, highlighting the relational and dynamic nature of language.

Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology* (1976), presents a complementary perspective on the fluidity of meaning through his concepts of *différance* and deconstruction.⁶⁴ Such concepts also offer crucial insights on the inner mechanics of the self-other construction of collective identity. Derrida critiques the traditional metaphysical foundations of Western thought, particularly assumptions about language and meaning.⁶⁵ He introduces *différance*, combining the notions of “difference” and “deferral”.⁶⁶ He argues that words do not have a stable, fixed relationship to concepts; rather, meaning is always in flux and never fully present, deriving significance from differences between words.⁶⁷ This constant deferral of meaning suggests that language is a dynamic system where meaning evolves continually.⁶⁸

Derrida’s deconstruction further critiques the binary oppositions that underpin Western thought, such as speech/writing and presence/absence.⁶⁹ Deconstruction dismantles these binaries by demonstrating that the so-called inferior term is foundational to the superior one.⁷⁰ For instance, Derrida challenges the favouring of speech over writing, showing that writing, often deemed secondary, is crucial to meaning-making.⁷¹ This approach underscores the instability of meaning in language, emphasising its fluid, evolving nature.

⁶¹ Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 110–117.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 22–50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 50–64.

⁶⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 22–64.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 22–50.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Integrating Bakhtin's dialogism with Derrida's deconstruction enhances the understanding of the self-other nexus as a non-hierarchical, processual dynamic. Bakhtin's dialogic model positions the self-other relationship as one of continuous exchange, where meaning emerges dialogically when considering the interlocutors as the self and the other. Derrida's concept of *différance* further illustrates how identity formation avoids binary and hierarchical oppositions. Together, these perspectives suggest that the self-other nexus involves ongoing negotiation of meaning and identity.

Applying this framework to the research question – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – provides answers to the first sub-question (how the self is constructed through the other), but leaves gaps concerning the second sub-question: how to describe a state's collective identity. While the self-other nexus is dialogic and non-hierarchical, the challenge remains in defining the resulting identities. How does this theory apply to a state's collective identity, and how to describe the form that identity acquires?

1.2.3. Constructing State's Collective Identity: Power, Myth, Security & Symbolic Cluster

In the earlier sections, I reviewed works essential to understanding the dynamic, dialogical nature of the self-other nexus, which is key to addressing the first sub-question of this study: how the self is constructed through the other. To address the second sub-question – how to describe a state's collective identity – and comprehensively answer the main research question – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran –, it is necessary to delve into works and authors who have explored the core elements of a state's identity.

How to conceptualise such core elements? I argue that a state's collective identity, formed through its relationship with the other, is shaped by three key dimensions: power dynamics, symbolic cultural and political notions and security concerns. These three dimensions represent core constructs of the self-other nexus and represent the main components of a state's collective identity. I shall refer to them in my theoretical model, which will be presented in the next chapter, as Power, Myth

and Security. Their tying nexus – the binding link, the red thread that passes through them and keeps them interdependent and mutually constitutive – is their symbolic dimension: the interrelation between the crucial concepts of symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence – what I shall refer to as the ‘Symbolic Cluster’. It is thus through the investigation of these dimensions that addressing this study’s second sub-question – how to describe a state’s collective identity – is possible and, ultimately, the main research question of this study: how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran.

In the following sub-sections, I shall review the works of key authors who provide insights into these dimensions, highlighting the theoretical gaps that remain in relation to the research question. I shall begin with an exploration of power dynamics and symbolic capital through the perspectives of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

I shall move to Anthony D. Smith and his analysis of myths and symbolic resonance before subsequently reviewing the works of a number of authors whose theories are relevant to the investigation of security: Alexander Wendt’s concept of ‘institution’ and securitisation practices as conceptualised by the Copenhagen school (Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, and Jaap de Wilde) and the Paris school (Didier Bigo and Thierry Balzacq).

Arguing that symbolic violence can also be projected in the international arena – an original contribution of this study to the theoretical debate on symbolic violence – I shall then review key works that provide a robust framework for understanding its application in international relations: Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘bio-power’, John Galtung’s ‘cultural violence’ and Giorgio Agamben’s ‘zone of indistinction’ and ‘*homo sacer*’.

Finally, I shall analyse Anthony Giddens’s theory of ‘structuration’, which enables a state’s collective identity to maintain some stability over time despite the processual changes deriving from the self-other nexus. I shall then move to the second part of this chapter, focusing on the review of works which have been relevant for the analysis of the empirical facets of this study: the agency clusters of post-2003 Iraq’s religious authority, political authority and non-state militias.

1.2.3.1. Foucault & Bourdieu: Normalising & Repressive Power, Field & Symbolic Power

In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (1980)⁷² and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975),⁷³ Michel Foucault offers a transformative understanding of power. Moving beyond the conventional view of power as solely repressive or coercive, Foucault argues that power is inherently relational and pervasive; it characterises all social interactions, functions through various institutions, and is productive, capable of generating knowledge, norms and behaviours.⁷⁴

Foucault defines “repressive power” (RP) as the power that is visible through the application of force, punishment and control, typically manifesting in institutions like prisons, the legal system and the military.⁷⁵ RP is enforced through mechanisms designed to suppress or eliminate deviant behaviour by imposing penalties or threats.⁷⁶ However, Foucault contends that this form of power reveals a fundamental weakness: it relies on overt force to maintain order.⁷⁷

In contrast, “normalising power” (NP) operates more subtly and is not indicative of weakness.⁷⁸ NP shapes behaviour and consciousness by establishing norms and standards of what is considered ‘normal’.⁷⁹ Unlike RP, NP cannot be possessed; it is embodied by institutions or actors and is perpetuated by society as a whole, as individuals internalise and reproduce it through their actions.⁸⁰ Through institutions such as schools, hospitals, and psychiatric wards, NP produces ‘truths’ about acceptable or desirable behaviour, thereby regulating social conduct without overt coercion.⁸¹ NP is intrinsically linked to knowledge: power generates knowledge, and

⁷² Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 118–120.

⁷³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 23–25.

⁷⁴ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 118–120.

⁷⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 23–35.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208–226.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Gaventa, “Power after Lukes: An Overview of Theories of Power since Lukes and Their Application to Development”, *Institute of Development Studies*, https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/power_after_lukes.pdf.

⁸⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 23–35.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

knowledge reinforces power, each sustaining the other.⁸² Foucault describes the “regime of truth” (RT) as a context in which specific discourses of power are legitimised as ‘truth’ within a society.⁸³ In an RT, power and knowledge are fully intertwined; what is accepted as ‘true’ is produced by power relations, and this ‘truth’ serves to reinforce and maintain those relations.⁸⁴

While Foucault’s insights are enlightening, gaps remain when considering the complexities of state collective identity, its impact on inter-state relations and the specific case of Shia commonality in post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian relations. His framework does not fully account for contexts where multiple actors with competing claims to legitimacy coexist, complicating the distinction between RP and NP. How to describe the power dynamics that are at play when struggle and competition for power is prevalent? Moreover, how is this power distributed and embedded within the state’s infrastructures? How do these infrastructures support or contest various forms of power, and what role do they play in shaping the state’s collective identity?

Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘field’, ‘symbolic capital’, and ‘symbolic power’, as outlined in works like *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991) and *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), provide an essential framework for understanding power dynamics and its symbolic dimension. The ‘field’ refers to a structured social space where individuals and groups engage in competition to secure or maintain advantageous positions.⁸⁵ Each field has its own stakes and participants either seek to alter the power structure to their benefit or reinforce their dominance.⁸⁶ Society consists of various fields, each with its unique objectives and defining features, which are shaped by the type of ‘capital’ that is valued within that field.⁸⁷ Capital, in this sense, refers to the resources or assets that participants vie for within the competition.⁸⁸

⁸² Gaventa, “Power after Lukes”.

⁸³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 9.

⁸⁶ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 97.

⁸⁷ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 24.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

The most significant type of capital is the 'symbolic' one, which grants actors the ability to shape societal perceptions and power structures.⁸⁹ Symbolic capital is not purely material; it involves social recognition, legitimacy and authority, and enables individuals or groups to assert 'symbolic power'.⁹⁰ This power allows them to influence social and cultural hierarchies, impose certain worldviews, and shape societal norms and communication.⁹¹

Bourdieu's field theory provides a valuable lens for examining how power competition plays out within social systems. This approach is especially useful for analysing the Iraqi political landscape, where multiple actors – political, religious, and foreign – compete to shape the dominant narrative putting forward divergent symbolic visions for the country and its future.

However, Bourdieu's framework has certain limitations when applied to the study of Shia commonality and its impact on inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran. His work primarily focuses on internal cultural capital within national contexts, without fully addressing the political and religious transnational forces that shape power relations. Moreover, his theory does not account for how external actors, such as Iran, interact with local and national forces within these fields. A key question remains: how does symbolic capital operate in such complex, multi-layered and transnational fields?

1.2.3.2. Anthony D. Smith & Ethno-Symbolism: Insights and Gaps in Understanding Myth

Following the analysis of Foucault and Bourdieu's theories on power dynamics and its symbolic dimension, I shall move now to review Anthony D. Smith's insights on cultural myths and symbolic resonance, highlighting their relevance to this study's inquiry on a state's identity and its impact on inter-state relations, and the theoretical gaps that remain.

⁸⁹ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 148.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Anthony D. Smith's *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (2009) provides a foundational framework for understanding how myths, symbols and traditions shape a state's collective identity. Central to his theory is the idea that collective identity is deeply rooted in historical memories and myths of common ancestry that bind ethnic communities over time.⁹² Smith argues that these myths are not fictional tales, but lived experiences, connecting the shared history of a community by virtue of their strong symbolic resonance.⁹³ Through such myths, nations establish a sense of continuity and belonging, which is crucial for understanding national consciousness and identity.⁹⁴

Smith's "ethno-symbolism" stands in contrast to modernist theories of nationalism, which view nationalism as a relatively recent phenomenon tied to industrialisation and state formation.⁹⁵ Instead, ethno-symbolism highlights the long-standing cultural and symbolic foundations of national identity. Smith focuses on how national identities are built through enduring myths, traditions and symbols that have persisted across generations. These myths, in his view, help to create a cohesive narrative that links the past to the present, reinforcing a shared identity.⁹⁶

This perspective is highly relevant to this study's inquiry into how a state's collective identity is constructed and described. Smith's focus on symbolic resonance – how certain myths and symbols resonate across a community –⁹⁷ helps explain how culturally and politically specific notions become symbolically meaningful, even if contested. The endurance and emotional resonance of these myths make them powerful tools for collective identity formation, as they are recognised and internalised by the community, even when not universally accepted.

However, Smith's framework presents several key limitations that this study seeks to address. One is the static and somewhat predetermined nature with which Smith appears to treat national myths. His emphasis on "ethnic continuity"⁹⁸ and

⁹² Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 25–31.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

⁹⁶ Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 25–31.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

historical depth overlooks the processual dynamics of identity formation, particularly when seen as constructs of the self-other nexus, where identities and symbolic meanings are constantly renegotiated. How do these myths evolve and transform in response to political shifts or external influences? Moreover, Smith does not adequately explore the political manipulation of myths. In volatile political environments like post-2003 Iraq, myths related to Shia identity and nationalism have been reshaped by political leaders to advance specific state visions. Equally important is the role of external actors, such as Iran, in shaping these myths. How are myths reconstructed to generate symbolic capital and legitimise power in multi-layered, competitive fields? And how are new narratives constructed to achieve political leverage? Finally, when considering the construction of a state's collective identity, should the concept of 'myth' be expanded beyond the idea of "ethnic continuity" and "myths of common ancestry"? How can a broader understanding of myth be conceptualised – one that encompasses any cultural or political material imbued with symbolic meaning and which is framed in constructivist terms? These questions are critical for understanding how cultural and political elements, imbued with a symbolic repertoire, may indeed constitute a crucial dimension of a state's collective identity, together with power dynamics and security concerns, and have an impact on a state's relations with other states.

1.2.3.3. Security: A Core Concern in IR

Following the analyses of the self-other nexus, the construction of power dynamics and cultural and political notions imbued with a symbolic repertoire (i.e. 'myths'), I shall now focus on what I consider as the third crucial dimension of state's collective identity: security and symbolic violence.

Security is a pivotal theoretical concern in IR literature, as it is fundamentally linked to a state's pursuit of interests and its efforts to maintain stability over time. States continuously seek to secure their interests, often framing other states or non-state actors as threats to their interests as they manifest at a specific point in time. Adopting a constructivist approach, this study conceptualises security as encompassing more than just military threats. It extends to political, social and

economic dimensions, forming a non-static multi-faceted framework intertwined with the construction of intersubjective meanings.

In the following sub-sections, I shall review the works of authors which are relevant for this conceptualisation of security, highlighting their relevance for this study's inquiry on a state's collective identity and its impact on inter-state relations, and then identifying the gaps that are to be addressed.

1.2.3.3.1. Symbolic Violence & Its Projection onto the International Arena: Bio-Power, Cultural Violence, Zone of Indistinction and *Homo sacer*

According to Bourdieu, once symbolic power is acquired within a certain field of competition, it enables actors to wield 'symbolic violence', a form of domination that is not perceived as coercive or illegitimate by those subjected to it.⁹⁹ Symbolic violence is subtle and often goes unrecognised as such because it operates through the internalisation of norms and hierarchies by society.¹⁰⁰ It is perceived as a necessary and legitimate natural expression of an established order.¹⁰¹

Symbolic violence is a crucial concept that is intertwined with power dynamics and, since Bourdieu's formulation, it has been commonly discussed within the context of the domestic social environment. However, how is symbolic violence projected across international borders? I argue that symbolic violence can also be projected in the international arena, and some crucial works within the current literature offer a robust framework to explain symbolic violence in IR.

The concept of 'bio-power' by Michel Foucault is an enlightening starting point. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault postulates how, even though an optimised society is formed and reproduced on the bio-political notion of fostering life, states do not rule out violence against those classified as a threat to the life and the well-being of a governed society. The narrative of defence goes from 'sovereign who must be defended', to a society, a population,

⁹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 127.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

who must be defended,¹⁰² with wars being waged “on behalf of the existence of everyone”.¹⁰³

To make violence against other states “look and even feel right – or at least not wrong”¹⁰⁴ – and to be, thus, symbolic –, states draw on the ‘cultural violence’ that is present within society. Johan Galtung conceptualises “cultural violence” as any aspect of culture which is distinctive to a community and can be used to legitimise violence against others on the basis of ideology, religion and so on.¹⁰⁵ Cultural violence is the legitimiser of both ‘direct’ violence – the one exercised by an actor and sanctioned by society –,¹⁰⁶ and ‘structural’ violence – the one built on social structures, i.e. social injustice.¹⁰⁷

Finally, Giorgio Agamben’s concepts of ‘zone of indistinction’ and ‘homo sacer’ represent interesting frameworks to conceptualise the international arena and whoever inhabits such a space when states project symbolic violence onto other states. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben theorises the zone of indistinction as the situs that embodies the ‘sovereign state of exception’, a threshold between a normal situation and chaos, where the laws that regulate the domestic environment are suspended, but rules are still existent.¹⁰⁸ The ‘other’ that inhabits this zone is the ‘*homo sacer*’, a man whose bare life is stripped of relevance, devoid of value, and not a subject of ordinary laws otherwise valid outside the zone of indistinction.¹⁰⁹

How can these concepts be assembled together to build a fully-fledged theoretical framework that conceptualises and explains symbolic violence as projected in the international arena? Building on the above-described theoretical contributions, my work will fully develop the projection of symbolic violence within IR as relevant to security as a crucial dimension of a state’s collective identity impacting inter-state

¹⁰² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 136–138.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰⁴ Galtung, “Cultural Violence”, 291.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁰⁷ Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, 171.

¹⁰⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

relations. Investigating the construction of post-2003 Iraq's symbolic violence in IR can enlighten us regarding the role played by Shia identity in such a construction as well as the possible role played by Iran.

1.2.3.3.2. Securitisation: The Copenhagen and Paris Schools

Securitisation theories have been extensively debated in the field of International Relations, offering a critical framework for analysing how security threats are socially constructed. These theories underscore the intersubjective processes through which dangers are framed, not only in relation to external actors but also within the self, revealing how internal and external threats shape a collectivity's identity and behaviour.

In *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (1998), the Copenhagen School, led by Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan and Jaap de Wilde, introduces securitisation as a speech act, where issues are elevated to existential threats, justifying extraordinary measures.¹¹⁰ This process enables securitising actors to frame referent objects as threatened, bypassing normal political procedures to act in the name of security.¹¹¹

In contrast, the Paris School, led by scholars like Didier Bigo and Thierry Balzacq, emphasises how securitisation happens not only through speech acts but also through mundane practices like surveillance, border controls and risk management: everyday bureaucratic measures that generate insecurity, and the governmentality of unease.¹¹²

Focusing on the case of post-2003 Iraq, some questions on securitisation arise and require further theoretical elaboration. As I shall elaborate in this study, post-2003 Iraq's political authority is not considered legitimate by Iraqi citizens, as it responds to its own rules, norms and values, which are not shared by other sections of Iraqi

¹¹⁰ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 24.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24–26.

¹¹² Thierry Balzacq et al., "Forum: What Kind of Theory – if any – is Securitization?", *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2015): 1–41; and Didier Bigo, "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no. 1 (2002): 63–92.

society. How does the securitisation process unfold in such a scenario? Considering that Shia commonality is at the centre of this study's investigation, does Shiism play a role in a supposed post-2003 Iraqi securitisation process? Does Iranian political authority play a role and, if so, how? In a multi-layered political environment like post-2003 Iraq, where various groups hold differing levels of symbolic power, how do competing securitisation narratives coexist, and how are they legitimised?

1.2.3.3.3. Security and Collective Knowledge: the 'Institution'

In "Anarchy is What States Make of It" (1992), Alexander Wendt defines an 'institution' as "a relatively stable set or 'structure' of identities and interests"¹¹³ that guides state behaviour in the international system. Institutions represent collective knowledge about how the system operates and are experienced as real and objective, even though they may not always be codified in formal rules.¹¹⁴ They function beyond individual actors, shaping and constraining state actions while being continually reproduced through social interaction.¹¹⁵

Wendt's concept of 'institution' appears as ground-breaking, and it opens up questions that are highly relevant to this study's enquiry in relation to security. I argue that Iran's isolation from the international community represents an institution in the contemporary international arena. Considering the final aim of this study – how Shia commonality impacts Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations –, how does such an institution influence Iraq's behaviour towards Iran? How to frame Shia commonality within such an institution? How to conceptualise Iraqi and Iranian intersubjective meanings around security, threat and danger in post-2003? Does Shia commonality play any role within security? Considering the final aim of this study – how Shia commonality impacts Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations –, how to frame Shia commonality within this institution?

1.2.3.4. Structuration Theory

¹¹³ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 399.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In the previous sections, I reviewed works that provide insights into the three dimensions of power dynamics, myth, and security concerns as the fundamental constructs of a state's collective identity as conceptualised here. Before moving on to the review of key authors on the empirical facets of this study, that is the agency clusters of Iraq's religious authority, political authority, and non-state militias, I shall now conclude this section on the core literature on theoretical approaches to state identity and inter-state relations with a sub-section on the structuration process, which ensures a state's collective identity some stability over time despite the processual changes of the self-other nexus.

In *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1984), Anthony Giddens argues that social structures are not external forces imposed on individuals, but are both the medium and the outcome of human action.¹¹⁶ This concept – the “duality of structure” (DS) – highlights the dynamic interaction between agency and structure, where individuals operate within pre-existing rules and resources, while simultaneously reproducing or altering those structures through their actions.¹¹⁷

For Giddens, structures exist as “rules and resources” that guide human behaviour, and these are internalised by actors through repeated social practices.¹¹⁸ However, these structures are not static; they are continuously reconstituted through the process of structuration.¹¹⁹ This dynamic interaction offers valuable insights into how collective identities can maintain coherence over time despite evolving external circumstances and internal contestations.

In this study's analysis, focused on how a notion of identity, namely Shia commonality, impact post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran, the DS appears as a valid framework to explain how, despite the processual changes deriving from the self-other nexus, a state's collective identity maintains some stability over time. How

¹¹⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 1984), 65–68.

¹¹⁷ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 58.

¹¹⁸ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 67.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

is it possible to understand the persistence of collective identity in volatile socio-political contexts, such as post-2003 Iraq, where political elites often adopt practices and uphold values that diverge from those of the wider population? Does Iran play any role in the construction of the duality of structure in post-2003 Iraq and, if so, how? Moreover, how does the symbolic dimension of the interrelation between symbolic power/resonance influence the structuration process? These questions provide the basis for this study's broader analytical focus.

1.3. Reviewing Empirical Foundations: Insights on Post-2003 Iraqi Agency Clusters

Having reviewed the theoretical literature central to this study, I shall now turn to the empirical dimension, focusing on works that have informed the case studies underpinning my analysis: post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, political authority and non-state militias. I have selected these agency clusters as their patterns of behaviour, discourse and interests are intricately tied to the Shia notion of identity. Thus, their analysis is informative in regard to this study's research question – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – and its interrelated sub-questions – how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity.

In the following sub-section, I shall focus on post-2003 Iraqi religious authority and review the works of Laurence Loüer, Caroleen Marji Sayej and Harith Hasan al-Qarawee. I shall then move to political authority and review the works of Charles Tripp, Toby Dodge and Fanar Haddad, to finally conclude with a section on the authors who have been crucial for the analysis of the agency cluster of non-state armed groups: Faleh A. Jabar, Renad Mansour and Fanar Haddad. As in the previous section, for each of these pieces of work, I shall highlight its relevance for this study's inquiry and identify the gaps that are to be addressed.

1.3.1. Post-2003 Iraqi Religious Authority: Insights from Laurence Loüer, Caroleen Marji Sayej and Harith Hasan al-Qarawee

In the following lines, I shall review the works of Laurence Loüer – *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (2008)¹²⁰ –, Caroleen Marji Sayej – *Patriotic Ayatollahs. Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (2018)¹²¹ –, and Harith Hasan al-Qarawee – the article “The ‘Formal’ Marja: Shii Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq” (2019)¹²² in addition to his consultancy reports (2023).¹²³

While highlighting how their contributions inform this study’s enquiry, I shall also underline the gaps that are to be addressed to fully answer the main research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – and its two sub-questions. In order to analyse post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, these sub-questions have been formulated in accordance with the agency cluster under examination: how the post-2003 Iraqi religious authority self is constructed through the Iranian religious establishment as the ‘other’; and how to describe Iraqi state’s collective identity in the post-regime environment as deriving from the agency of its Shia religious authority.

In *Transnational Shia Politics*, Loüer offers a comprehensive analysis of Shia religious and political networks spanning Iraq, Iran and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain). Her work highlights the transnational nature of these networks and the intricate interplay between religious doctrines, political movements and governance. It provides valuable insights for this study’s investigation into Shia commonality and its impact on post-2003 Iraqi–Iranian inter-state relations in two key ways.

On the one hand, Loüer delves deeply into the evolution of the *marjaiyya* doctrine, tracing its historical role in shaping both spiritual and political guidance within Shia communities.¹²⁴ This analysis offers a critical context for understanding the post-2003 role of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who embodies Iraq’s religious authority.

¹²⁰ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*.

¹²¹ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*.

¹²² Al-Qarawee, “The ‘Formal’ Marja: Shii Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq”.

¹²³ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, “Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq”, *Middle East Brief* no. 105 (2023), Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University; and “The Subtle Power of Sistani”, *Diwan* (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80346>.

¹²⁴ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 68–60.

Loüer's work illuminates Sistani's influence not only on Iraq's religious and political stances but also on its broader ideological direction, particularly in navigating the challenges of a rapidly evolving political landscape.

On the other hand, Loüer traces the historical self-other nexus between the Iraqi *hawzat* of Najaf and Kerbala and the Iranian centres of Qom and Tehran, highlighting their exchanges from the 10th century to the early 2000s.¹²⁵ She illustrates how differing clerical approaches emerged, with Iraqi clerics traditionally maintaining independence from political authority, while Iranian clergy integrated into political structures under the Safavids.¹²⁶ Loüer also underscores shared advocacies, such as resistance to British occupation in Iraq in the 1920s and Iran in the 1890s,¹²⁷ illuminating historical precedents for Sistani's anti-occupation stance.

While Loüer's work offers invaluable context, a focused analysis of post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, particularly as embodied by Sistani, remains unexplored. Her study raises crucial questions about the shifting dynamics between Najaf and Qom amidst fragmented Iraqi politics and Iranian involvement. How have mutual influences evolved in the face of post-2003 competing against symbolic power within Iraq? These unresolved questions lie at the heart of this study's investigation into Shia commonality and its impact on Iraq-Iran relations.

In *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, Sayej explores how Sistani emerged as a pivotal figure in Iraq's post-2003 state-building process. She examines his steadfast defence of Iraq's unity and independence, opposing American occupation, Iranian interference, and sectarian threats like al-Qaeda.¹²⁸ Sayej outlines Sistani's key ideological stances, including his advocacy for the *hawza's* independence, his rejection of militias, his commitment to social and political order, and his emphasis on a united Iraq that includes all ethnic and religious identities.¹²⁹ She also highlights his view of religious authority as accountable leadership that serves the people.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 69–99, 243–264.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79–82.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80–82.

¹²⁸ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 40–99.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 127–163.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40–60.

Sayej's analysis sheds light on Sistani's navigation of Iraq's complex political and social challenges, including its relations with Iran. However, certain critical questions remain. How has the dialogical exchange between Iraqi and Iranian clerical circles unfolded? While Sayej references attempts by the Iranian clergy to influence their Iraqi counterparts, the mechanisms and extent of this influence are not fully explored. Moreover, Sistani's 2014 fatwa against ISIS, which led to the formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and bolstered Iranian-backed militias, raises questions about his stance on militias and foreign interference. How can this apparent contradiction be reconciled with his ideological emphasis on independence and unity? These gaps provide fertile ground for further inquiry into Sistani's role and its implications for Iraq-Iran relations.

Harith Hasan's "The 'Formal' Marja: Shi'i Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq" and his consultancy briefings¹³¹ offer essential insights into Sistani's role in shaping Iraq's post-2003 political dynamics. Hasan highlights Sistani's extraconstitutional authority,¹³² his unparalleled influence within Iraqi clerical circles, his critiques of political authority, opposition to sectarianism under Nouri al-Maliki, rejection of corruption and resistance to Iranian interference.¹³³

Hasan examines how US post-invasion policies, emphasising Iraq's ethno-sectarian divisions, positioned Sistani as the de facto leader of the Shia community, making him a key interlocutor during Iraq's turbulent reconstruction.¹³⁴ He contrasts Sistani's pragmatic approach – anchored in Iraqi traditions and advocating clerical independence from political authority – with Iran's theocratic model, which integrates clerical leadership into governance.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", *Middle East Brief* no. 105 (2023), Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University; and "The Subtle Power of Sistani", *Diwan* (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80346>.

¹³² Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja".

¹³³ Al-Qarawee, "The Subtle Power of Sistani".

¹³⁴ Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja", 484.

¹³⁵ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 2–3.

Three key divergences between Sistani and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei are central to Hasan's analysis. First, while both supported Shia empowerment, Sistani prioritised order and opposed radicalism, while Iran fostered a wide network of Shia parties and militias to expand its influence.¹³⁶ Second, Sistani's opposition to Maliki's authoritarianism and sectarianism led him to publicly pressure for alternative leadership, contrasting Iran's support for Maliki until 2014.¹³⁷ Third, although Sistani's 2014 fatwa against ISIS facilitated the formation of the PMF, he remained cautious about militias, unlike Khamenei, who openly backed them.¹³⁸

Hasan's work is pivotal for understanding Sistani's ideological stance and its divergence from Iranian strategies, particularly concerning religious authority and political engagement. Nonetheless, questions persist regarding the nuanced dynamics of the Iraqi-Iranian religious circles' self-other nexus and how Sistani's ideology has factually shaped Iraq's relations with Iran amid post-2003 political instability. These gaps frame critical areas of inquiry for this study.

1.3.2. Post-2003 Iraqi Political Authority: Insights from Charles Tripp, Toby Dodge & Fanar Haddad

Following the review of three pivotal works on post-2003 Iraqi religious authority that have significantly informed this study's inquiry, I shall now turn to the agency cluster of post-2003 Iraqi political authority. This section will review Charles Tripp's *A History of Iraq* (third edition, 2007),¹³⁹ Toby Dodge's *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (2013)¹⁴⁰ and his article "'Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad': Explaining Hybrid Political Identities in Iraq" (2018)¹⁴¹ and Fanar Haddad's *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (2011).¹⁴²

As with the previous section, I will highlight how these contributions inform this study's inquiry, while identifying the gaps they leave in addressing the main research

¹³⁶ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 5.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*.

¹⁴⁰ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*.

¹⁴¹ Dodge, "'Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad'".

¹⁴² Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*.

question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – and its two interrelated sub-questions: how the post-2003 Iraqi political self is constructed in relation to Iranian political authority as the ‘other’, and how Iraqi political collective identity can be described in the post-regime environment.

Charles Tripp’s *A History of Iraq* is widely regarded as an authoritative and indispensable source for understanding Iraq’s historical trajectory from the Ottoman Empire to modern times. Tripp provides a comprehensive account of the rise and fall of the monarchy, the republican era and the Baathist regime, offering invaluable insights into the socio-political dynamics that have shaped the country over the centuries. In the third edition, which extends his analysis to 2007, Tripp examines intra-Shia political rivalries and divisions, despite the empowerment of the ‘Shia bloc’ following the 2005 elections, as well as the strategic efforts to secure Iranian patronage.¹⁴³ This focus is particularly relevant to this study’s analysis of Iraqi-Iranian relations and the role of Shia commonality, providing an essential foundation for further inquiry.

While Tripp offers an exceptional overview of Iraq’s post-2003 political landscape and Iran’s role in the period, key questions remain unaddressed. How have internal divisions within the Shia political sphere influenced the construction of Iraqi political identity? What dynamics underpin the Iraqi political self-other relationship with Iranian political authority? These questions are central to this study, which seeks to examine how Shia commonality has shaped Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations in the volatile post-invasion context.

Toby Dodge’s work provides a crucial foundation for understanding the post-2003 Iraqi political landscape and its evolution into a hybrid system of governance, shaped by competing factions and external influences. His book, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, offers a comprehensive analysis of Iraq’s political field after the US invasion, detailing the complex relationships between Shia political actors, their respective militias, and their alliances with Iran¹⁴⁴ (particularly relevant for this study’s

¹⁴³ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 252–386.

¹⁴⁴ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 53–74.

analysis are the sections on Moqtada al-Sadr, Nouri al-Maliki, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and their ties with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Qassem Soleimani).¹⁴⁵

However, while this volume is an invaluable resource for understanding the early post-invasion years, it does not fully address how these political dynamics evolved beyond Maliki's tenure. Moreover, although Dodge acknowledges Iranian influence, his analysis does not delve deeply into the Iraq-Iran self-other nexus as it pertains to political authority. How can Iraq's state collective identity be described as deriving from its political authority at the time of writing in 2025? How has this dynamic shaped Iraq's political landscape? How has Shia commonality been mobilised to strengthen these relations? These questions remain central to this study's investigation of Shia commonality in Iraqi-Iranian relations and are still to be addressed.

In "Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad": Explaining Hybrid Political Identities in Iraq", Dodge applies Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework to Iraq's political landscape, offering a sophisticated analysis of the competition between different symbolic visions. He explores how post-2003 Iraq's fragmented political field has been shaped by divergent historical narratives and, consequently, how symbolic capital remains contested among different political groups.¹⁴⁶ Considering that this study adopts Bourdieu's theory, Dodge's work is a useful starting point for understanding the different symbolic visions at play in post-2003 Iraq.

However, Dodge's application of Bourdieu does not explore Iran's role in shaping these competing symbolic fields, nor does it consider Shia commonality as a crucial factor in strengthening these relations. How has Iran contributed to Iraq's contested symbolic landscape? How has the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus shaped Iraq's political forces and, ultimately, its state collective identity as derived from political authority? How has Shia commonality influenced these Iraqi-Iranian dynamics? These

¹⁴⁵ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 181–198.

¹⁴⁶ Dodge, "Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad", 31–34.

questions, central to this study's analysis of Iraqi-Iranian relations, remain open for further exploration.

Finally, Fanar Haddad's *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* provides a critical analysis of the post-2003 competing sectarian narratives of national identity. Haddad argues that both Sunni and Shia political discourses claim to be the true embodiment of Iraqi identity, resulting in a form of 'antagonistic unity', where national belonging is asserted through sectarian exclusivity.¹⁴⁷ His work is particularly valuable for this study, as it cogently illustrates how divergent symbolic visions have shaped Iraq's post-2003 political landscape. Additionally, it offers valuable insights into the historical narratives, poetry, and songs that form the cultural material sustaining these sectarian identities.¹⁴⁸

Haddad's emphasis on competing historical interpretations, as well as his use of cultural sources, is crucial for this study's conceptualisation of 'myth', as any symbolically imbued cultural or political trend embedded in the collective imaginary. Moreover, his analysis sheds light on two central opposing symbolic visions for Iraq: the Sunni and the Shia perspectives. However, his work does not fully explore the role of external actors, particularly Iran, in shaping these competing narratives. How has the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus influenced or reinforced sectarian myths in Iraq? To what extent has Shia commonality contributed to aligning or fragmenting these visions of unity? These questions, central to this study's analysis, remain to be explored.

1.3.3. Post-2003 Iraqi Non-State Militias: Insights from Faleh A. Jabar, Renad Mansour & Fanar Haddad

Following the review of key works on post-2003 Iraqi religious and political authorities, I shall now conclude this literature review by turning to the agency cluster of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups. This section examines Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour's work, who co-authored *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future* (2017), and Fanar Haddad's *Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State*.

¹⁴⁷ Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 25–29.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 156–157, 159–160.

For my analysis of non-state militias in the international arena, the concept of institution, as put forward by Alexander Wendt (“Anarchy is What States Make of It”, 1992), and previous authors who have contributed to the theorisation of symbolic violence in international relations, has been crucial. However, as they have already been discussed, they will not be reviewed again.

As with the previous sections, I will highlight how these contributions inform this study’s inquiry while identifying gaps in addressing the main research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – and its two interrelated sub-questions, formulated according to the agency cluster under examination (non-state militias): how post-2003 Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups, as the ‘self’, are constructed through the Iranian security and military apparatus, as the relevant ‘other’; and how to describe the identity of Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups in the post-regime environment (‘identity’ as in: their ideological and behavioural outlook).

Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour’s *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future* (2017) provides a critical foundation for understanding Iraq’s fragmented security apparatus and the role of non-state militias in shaping the post-2003 landscape. Their detailed analysis of the PMF’s structure, internal divisions, and evolving role within Iraq’s security framework has been instrumental in selecting the PMF as an exemplary case for examining non-state militias as an agency cluster relevant to this study’s investigation of Shia commonality and its impact on Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations.

Jabar and Mansour highlight the PMF’s factionalism, categorising groups based on their allegiance to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Iraqi politician Muqtada al-Sadr.¹⁴⁹ They also trace the PMF’s institutionalisation under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi,¹⁵⁰ offering valuable insight into the broader Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus in shaping Iraq’s security

¹⁴⁹ Jabar and Mansour, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future*, 12–14.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 20–22.

environment. Their work underscores the dominance, within the PMF, of Iranian-backed factions, which are militarily superior and better equipped than other PMF components. As such, it serves as an essential foundation for understanding the relationship between non-state armed groups and Iraqi state security forces, as well as Iran's role in this dynamic.

However, further research is needed to fully examine the interaction between Iranian-backed factions and other PMF groups, particularly regarding the role of Shia commonality in shaping their internal dynamics and external alliances. How is Shiism framed within the PMF? Does it function as a unifying force that fosters cooperation among its factions, or does it instead reinforce internal power struggles? Moreover, does Shia commonality within the PMF translate into a reciprocal Iraqi-Iranian political alignment, or is it leveraged asymmetrically to advance the strategic interests of one state over the other? These questions remain central to understanding the complexities of Shia commonality in Iraqi-Iranian relations.

Fanar Haddad's *Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State*, also, provides a crucial analysis of the PMF, particularly regarding its status as a hybrid actor. The PMF embodies hybridity in multiple ways: it operates both as a state-affiliated and a non-state entity, comprises Iraqi and non-Iraqi factions, and serves diverging interests, primarily those of Iran.¹⁵¹ As such, Haddad positions it as a paradigmatic example of hybridisation in post-2003 Iraq. His work offers a detailed examination of the PMF's internal composition, shedding light on its factionalism and the varying levels of strength among its different groups.¹⁵² More importantly, Haddad emphasises how bargaining and accommodation, rather than outright conflict, define the relationships between Iraqi factions and the more dominant, well-equipped Iranian-backed militias.¹⁵³ While these groups often prioritise Tehran's strategic interests, sometimes at Iraq's expense, their military capabilities and resources render them indispensable, particularly in major security operations such as the fight against ISIS.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Haddad, *Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units*, 40–43.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38–40.

Haddad's work is particularly valuable for this study as it situates the PMF within Iraq's broader security and political framework, illustrating the complex interplay between domestic factionalism and external influences. However, further research is needed to expand on these insights and systematically analyse how the PMF's ideological and behavioural outlook has been shaped through the mutual and dialogical exchange that defines the self-other nexus.

Additionally, how has Shiism functioned within this hybrid security structure? Has it acted as a unifying factor, or has it been leveraged strategically to consolidate power? A comprehensive investigation into the role of Shia identity within the PMF – whether as a tool for fostering internal cooperation or as an instrument to serve distinct political interests – remains an essential area for further study.

1.4. Conclusion

This chapter has established the scholarly foundation of this study, situating its central research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran – within broader International Relations (IR) literature. By engaging with constructivist approaches to state identity and inter-state relations, it has demonstrated how this inquiry contributes to theoretical debates on identity formation, the self-other nexus and the role of symbolic structures in shaping political behaviour.

The chapter began by outlining the study's research question and its two interrelated sub-questions – how the self is constructed through the other and how a state's collective identity can be described – before proceeding to a structured review of the key theoretical works that inform this inquiry.

The first section examined the constructivist contributions of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann, whose work provided the conceptual foundation for understanding identity as a relational construct that influences inter-state behaviour. This framework was further refined by the insights of Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida, whose theories underscored the dialogical and non-hierarchical nature of identity formation. However, despite their contributions, these perspectives leave open

questions regarding the precise mechanisms by which states' identities are shaped and projected onto inter-state relations.

To address the second sub-question – how to describe a state's collective identity – the chapter introduced a theoretical model structured around three interdependent dimensions: Power, Myth and Security, bound together through their symbolic dimension, conceptualised as the Symbolic Cluster. These concepts will be further developed in the next chapter, where this study's theoretical model will be introduced.

The review of the authors who may represent good starting points for analysing Power, Myth, Security and the Symbolic Cluster, began engaging with Michel Foucault's concepts of repressive and normalising power and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of field, symbolic capital and symbolic power. While these perspectives offer valuable tools for analysing power structures, they do not fully account for contexts in which multiple actors with competing claims to legitimacy operate simultaneously, particularly in post-2003 Iraq, where state and non-state actors overlap. Similarly, Bourdieu's framework, though effective in conceptualising domestic power struggles, does not sufficiently address the transnational dimensions of power, particularly the influence of external actors such as Iran in shaping Iraq's political field.

The analysis then shifted to Myth, drawing on Anthony D. Smith's conceptualisation of symbolic resonance and historical narratives in shaping national identity. While Smith's approach highlights the role of enduring myths in constructing collective identity, his account remains overly static, overlooking the contested and processual nature of symbolic narratives, particularly in politically volatile environments such as post-2003 Iraq, where myths are exploited to serve competing political agendas.

The final dimension of the model, Security, was explored through securitisation theories from the Copenhagen and Paris Schools, as well as the conceptualisation of symbolic violence by Foucault, Johan Galtung and Giorgio Agamben. While securitisation theories offer essential insights into how states frame security concerns, they do not fully explain how competing securitisation narratives operate

simultaneously, particularly in fragmented political environments like post-2003 Iraq, where multiple actors – including Iran – construct divergent security discourses.

Furthermore, the role of symbolic violence in the international arena remains underexplored and requires a fully developed theoretical framework.

The chapter's section focusing on this study's theoretical foundation concluded with a review of the structuration theory, as developed by Anthony Giddens. Structuration theory explains how state identity maintains stability despite the continuously processual nature of the self-other nexus. While identities evolve through interaction, social structures both constrain and enable agency, shaping long-term patterns. In post-2003 Iraq, further research is needed to explore how symbolic capital and power dynamics sustain or transform Iraq's identity in relation to Iran.

Finally, the chapter transitioned from theoretical foundations to empirical literature, identifying the three agency clusters that will be analysed in the following sections: religious authority (Laurence Loüer, Caroleen Marji Sayej and Harith Hasan al-Qarawee), political authority (Charles Tripp, Toby Dodge and Fanar Haddad), and non-state militias (Faleh A. Jabar, Renad Mansour and Fanar Haddad). Each of these clusters represents a distinct yet interrelated dimension of Shiism, as the notion of identity which will be analysed in this study in relation to post-2003 Iraq and its inter-state relations with Iran.

While the reviewed literature provides critical insights into Iraq's post-2003 landscape, it also reveals gaps in understanding how Shia commonality is framed and operationalised within Iraqi-Iranian relations, particularly in political, security and ideological discourses.

By bridging these theoretical and empirical insights, this study advances a constructivist model that integrates the symbolic, political, and security dimensions of state identity, offering a more nuanced understanding of Iraqi-Iranian inter-state dynamics shaped by Shiism as a shared notion of identity. The next chapter will present this model in detail.

2. Constructing State's Collective Identity: A Model

2.1. Introduction

This study's main research question – how Shia commonality impacts on the inter-state relations of post-2003 Iraq and Iran – revolves around a notion of identity: Shiism. To comprehensively delve into this query, it is thus necessary to design a theoretical framework that scrutinises the impact of a state's collective identity on its inter-state relations.

This chapter is going to present a constructivist, theoretically driven, conceptual model, which I have built to fulfil this analytical aim.

In the following introductory sub-sections, I will first discuss the insights of two prominent authors, Iver Neumann and Alexander Wendt, which serve as the cornerstone of this model. Their invaluable contributions to the field of international relations (IR) in relation to collective identity and its impact on IR will be presented, in order to identify the gap that my model aims to address.

I will then break down the central question underlying this model into two interconnected sub-questions (how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity). I will also underline how collective identities are constructed around different identity notions. By concentrating on one specific notion of identity, the analysis of the interplay among diverse identity notions goes beyond the scope of this model. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of identity and focusing on one single identity notion, this model provides valuable insights into understanding its conceptualisation and impact evaluation. I will then theoretically define 'a state's otherness' and the concept of 'state'.

Subsequently, an overview of the model will be provided, accompanied by a figure designed to facilitate the reader through the different notions and arguments that the chapter will present. The introductory sub-sections will conclude by underscoring the model's relevance within the current literature and acknowledging the various authors whose insights have influenced its development.

In the sections that follow the introduction, I will analyse each of the model's notions to comprehensively address the interconnected sub-questions.

After conceptualising a state's collective identity in its construction through the other, I will then present how to apply the model in order to tackle the main research question: how a state's collective identity impacts on its inter-state relations. While designed for the empirical case of post-2003 Iraq and Iran, this model is, in fact, thought to be applicable to any case involving a relevant 'other'.

A concluding section will recapitulate this chapter's key points bringing attention to the research questions and their corresponding answers.

2.1.1. Collective Identity & Inter-State Relations. A Gap to Be Filled

In the next paragraphs, I shall present the insights of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann on the study of collective identity within the discipline of IR. I shall discuss Wendt's theoretical perspective on identity as the foundation for states' interests, and Neumann's emphasis on the self-other nexus as critical to state's collective identity formation. Having underscored their theoretical perspectives, I shall then delineate the gap that my model intends to fill in relation to a state's collective identity and its impact on the state's behaviour.

Alexander Wendt has introduced a pivotal insight for the study of collective identity in the discipline of IR: he has posited that the behaviour of states is profoundly influenced by their intersubjective understandings and expectations of the international arena,¹⁵⁵ in conjunction with the "distribution of knowledge"¹⁵⁶ that shapes their self-conceptions and perceptions of others.

States' interests are not pre-determined but are instead formulated through a process of "defining situations".¹⁵⁷ This process draws upon states' intersubjective and socially constructed knowledge of themselves and others, as well as the resulting expectations. Consequently, states interpret and respond to their encounters based on these self-conceptions and perceptions.

¹⁵⁵ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 391–425, 397.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 398.

Against this constructivist background, Wendt thus argues that identities, which he describes as being “inherently relational”¹⁵⁸ and “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self”, are “the basis of interests”.¹⁵⁹

As Iver Neumann has emphasised, through the above perspectives, Wendt has “firmly and unequivocally shifted the focus on collective identity from the periphery to the core of the [IR] discipline”.¹⁶⁰ Neumann’s contribution, in fact, also serves as a fundamental point of reference for a theoretical framework on a state’s collective identity in the international context.

Neumann has drawn upon the insights from social theories of collective identity to formulate his framework of “international relations as self/other relations”.¹⁶¹ His exploration has encompassed a spectrum of theories, including the ethnographic, psychological, and Continental philosophical approaches to identity formation. Notably, he has delved into what he calls the “Eastern excursion” of theorising, which significantly informs his shift “from a dialectical mode of analysis to a *dialogical* one that respects and incorporates difference”.¹⁶²

Translating these theoretical insights into the realm of IR, Neumann highlights the *self-other nexus* as the foundational element. His assertion is that self and other are not isolated, static entities, but rather intricately intertwined:¹⁶³ “self and other are not only mutually constitutive entities, but also necessarily unbounded. The self and the other merge into one another”.¹⁶⁴

Directing attention towards the construction and maintenance of social boundaries, Neumann finally stresses how “Collective identities are overlapping and multifaceted phenomena which must not be reified and studied in isolation from one

¹⁵⁸ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It”, 397.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 397–398.

¹⁶⁰ Iver B. Neumann, “Self and Other in International Relations”, *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 2 (1996): 139–174, 163.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 139. In the ‘Eastern excursion’, he analysis the insights of authors like Michael Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas who, as will be later examined later, have importantly enriched this model as well.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 166–168.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

another”.¹⁶⁵ This encapsulates his stance on understanding collective identities as dynamic and interdependent constructs.

Wendt and Neumann contribute to a theoretical framework which highlights the *relational* and *intersubjective* nature of state’s collective identity. Whereas Wendt emphasises how a state’s IR behaviour is rooted in *interests*, which are shaped by identity, Neumann emphasises the importance of the *self-other nexus* and a *dialogical* approach for understanding its formation. These perspectives are critical when exploring how collective identity influences a state’s behaviour in international relations.

However, the term ‘state’s collective identity’ remains a conceptual puzzle. How do we delineate its intricacies? Amid the emphasis on the self-other nexus, the challenge lies in tracing the actual construction of a state’s collective identity and its relation with the ‘other’. Equally essential is comprehending the mechanics of its impact on state behaviour – uncovering its dynamic processes, patterns, and underlying rules. These pressing questions persist unanswered, and the field of international relations stands to gain from a comprehensive theoretical perspective that addresses them.

This chapter introduces a constructivist model designed to bridge these theoretical gaps and directly tackle the challenges of conceptualisation and impact assessment. By presenting a systematic framework, this model strives to shed light on the construction of a state’s collective identity, its interplay with the ‘other’, and its impact on state behaviour within the realm of international relations.

2.1.2. Sub-Questions & the Concept of ‘State’

In this sub-section, I shall first present the research sub-questions that underline my theoretical model. In order to fulfil my study’s research aims, the main question – how a state’s collective identity impacts on its inter-state relations –,

¹⁶⁵ Neumann, “Self and Other in International Relations”, 139.

requires to be broken down into two interrelated sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity.

Building on Neumann's insights on collective identity as "multifaceted phenomena",¹⁶⁶ I shall then discuss how state's collective identity takes on form through a range of identity notions, encompassing ethnicity, politics and religion. I shall, thus, clarify how the forthcoming model does not delve into the interplay among diverse identity notions and how, while focusing on a single identity notion, it is still insightful in conceptualising identity and its influence on a state's IR behaviour. I will finally present how the state's 'otherness' and 'states' are theoretically framed.

As discussed earlier, analysing how Shia commonality impacts on post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran necessitates addressing the following enquiry: how does a state's collective identity impact its IR behaviour?

The model I will present in the following sections aims to comprehensively address this investigation. To pursue this objective, and considering the acknowledged centrality of the self-other nexus discussed above, the main research question needs to be broken down into two interconnected questions: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity.

The two sub-questions are interrelated because, as it will be later thoroughly explained, I argue that a state's collective identity is constructed *through* the self-other nexus, and a state's collective identity can be conceptualised as consisting of three mutually constitutive core-constructs: Power, Myth and Security. The self-other nexus, as the founding dynamic of collective identity's construction, is behind their formation. Describing a state's collective identity thus means also analysing how the self is constructed through the other.

As Neumann has cogently described, collective identities are "multifaceted phenomena".¹⁶⁷ States, in fact, are constructed around different identity notions: amongst others, ethnic, political and religious. Moreover, a single identity notion can manifest at multiple levels: Shiism, for instance, intertwines the religious and political

¹⁶⁶ Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 139, 167.

¹⁶⁷ Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", 139, 167.

dimensions. The 'multifaceted nature' of collective identity thus regards both the interplay among diverse identity notion and one single notion of identity itself.

While this forthcoming model does not delve into the interaction among different identity notions within a state's collective identity, its focus on a single identity notion remains adept at conceptualising identity and its influence on a state's behaviour in international relations.

The acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of a state's collective identity in fact serves as a foundational pillar for a comprehensive understanding. By concentrating on one specific notion of identity, this model offers insights into its conceptualisation and impact assessment.

In addressing these research aims, it is also crucial to define the state's "otherness". Given the relevance of the self-other nexus, the 'other' cannot be regarded as a neutral entity; it necessitates a thorough theoretical assessment. Consequently, the forthcoming model defines the 'other' as the state's 'significant' or 'relevant' other'. The term 'significant other' refers to another state with which it shares an important element of commonality, such as Iran for Iraq, or one around which the self has built enmity discourse practices, such as the Soviet Union for the US in the Cold War or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for Iran and Iraq. This study will apply the model to a case that falls into the relevant other's first category but, when appropriate to this study's analysis, some references to the second will be given (looking at the Popular Mobilisation Forces – PMF discourse and practice towards ISIS, for instance).

Before providing an overall account of the model and then highlighting its relevance within the current literature, a final remark on how the state is conceptualised is necessary.

The state is a collectivity of individuals whose constitutive features are primarily an organisational apparatus of governance and secondly a desire to preserve the self.¹⁶⁸ The state, as a collectivity, is also internally differentiated: they are constituted of different ethnic, religious, political groups, etc.

¹⁶⁸ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 402.

The organisational apparatus implies any inter-subjectively recognised entities which constitute society: not only institutions but also, for instance, social movements or non-state militias. Such entities may be real, as in constituting actual institutions or groups, or *perceived* as such. Therefore, perceived social hierarchies are to be considered as an essential component of this ‘organisational apparatus’. Actors may hold different roles within society at the same time (a state’s army official may also be clandestinely plotting a *coup d’état*), each of them having its own weight within the society’s organisational apparatus.

The desire to preserve the self does not in any way imply realistic assumptions about a state’s behaviour in a context of anarchy. States act on the basis of interests as they perceive them at a specific point in time: “structure [so anarchy and the distribution of power] has no existence or causal powers apart from process [interaction and learning] [...] Anarchy is what states make of it”.¹⁶⁹ The processual nature of interests – they change over time, as do a state’s interests – is based on the processual nature of identity which, as will be later explored in depth, is driven by the self-other nexus.

2.2. Overall Account of the Model

I shall now provide an overview of the proposed model. The following account is not exhaustive; rather, it is designed to guide the reader toward the forthcoming sections, which will analyse each notion of the model in detail. Finally, a figure will be presented to highlight the key points.

This proposed model is conceived to address the following enquiry: how a state’s collective identity impacts on its inter-state relations with a significant other. This main investigation is broken into two interrelated sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe collective identity.

This model identifies three conceptual blocks as the cores of a state’s collective identity: Power, Myth and Security. The tying link between the three is the symbolic cluster (SC).

¹⁶⁹ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It”, 395.

As social constructs, Power, Myth, Security and the SC are discursive; that is to say, they manifest themselves as narratives, shape the behaviour of its principal actors and, ultimately, a state's behaviour in the domestic and international arenas.

They are constantly subject to change as they are constructed following the dynamic of the 'self-other nexus'. The self-other nexus is the fundamental axis along which collective identity manifests and develops. It is a dialogical and inter-subjective process, whereby the self becomes constructed *through* the other, with 'self' and 'other' being identified either outside or within the same community. A thorough analysis of the self-other nexus provides an initial answer to the first sub-question (how the self is constructed through the other). However, positing that the self-other nexus is behind the formation of collective identity's core-constructs, a close examination of the latter addresses the second sub-question (how to describe collective identity) and offers a full answer to the first.

Power is relational, repressive, normalising, productive, subversive and always contested, even in a case of 'regime of truth'.¹⁷⁰ The latter is constituted when Power is normalised, embedded in the shared knowledge that regulates the society's understanding and is thus internalised by all society actors.¹⁷¹ The sociological site where the competition for Power takes place is the 'field', a relational and intersubjective *situs* characterised by struggle.¹⁷² 'Symbolic capital' gives actors the ability to achieve 'symbolic power', that is the ability to legitimise power relations, to shape and legitimise perceptions of the social order.¹⁷³

Myth is any culturally embedded notion, trend and element which is imbued with a symbolic repertoire (i.e. symbolic figures and meanings). Myths are identified as distinctive to that community by both its members and the outsiders.¹⁷⁴ They hold

¹⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1975), 3–71.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² David Swartz, *Culture and Power. The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 9.

¹⁷³ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 148.

¹⁷⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism. A Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge), 25.

symbolic resonance; that is, they have the ability to resonate among the people regardless of how the individuals feel towards them.

Indeed, people may even refute them, but they will still recognise them as belonging to their community. As constructs, they change over time and may be thus manipulated and exploited by community's leaders to mobilise the masses.¹⁷⁵

Security takes the form of perceptions of preservation of the self (peace and stability) or danger to the self (threat). 'Symbolic violence', that is violence that is perceived as legitimate and necessary,¹⁷⁶ is enacted by a state's actors if symbolic power is acquired; otherwise, repressive violence is perpetrated.

As danger is ontologically necessary for a state's collective identity, a 'dangerous other' is also necessary and may be also constructed within the self. In such a case, securitisation practices are put into place. People's responses to the securitising actor's moves may lead to the coexistence of repressive and symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence may be projected onto the international arena. Symbolic violence in IR does not require the acquisition of symbolic power in the domestic political field, since the field of its construction and projection is, in fact, the international one. In such a case, Power draws on violence's 'cultural' manifestation,¹⁷⁷ which is deeply symbolically embedded in the minds of its subjects. When symbolic violence is exerted within IR, the international arena is conceived as a 'zone of indistinction', where the laws that regulate the domestic environment are suspended but rules still exist.¹⁷⁸ The 'other' that inhabits this zone is the '*homo sacer*', who is not a subject of ordinary laws which are otherwise valid outside the zone of indistinction.¹⁷⁹ The status of *homo sacer* is attributed to states and individuals who are affected by wars, embargos, and isolation from the international community.

¹⁷⁵ Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 21.

¹⁷⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 127.

¹⁷⁷ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence", *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291–305, 291–295.

¹⁷⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 21.

¹⁷⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 138.

The structure of 'institution' indicates collective knowledge on how the international arena works, such as, in current times, self-help in a context of anarchy or a state's sovereignty.¹⁸⁰ I argue that the isolation of Iran from the international community also represents an institution.

The binding tie between the three core-constructs and thus the ultimate core of a state's collective identity is the symbolic cluster: that is symbols, in their interrelation of symbolic power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence.

Constructs develop into social structures: they do not 'transform' into something different, but they acquire 'structuration' features by becoming collectively 'known' by society actors. Social structures are, in fact, collective knowledge on 'how society works'.¹⁸¹ They may or may not be codified in formal rules or norms.¹⁸²

The relationship between agency and structures is regulated by the "duality of structure": action is influenced and constrained by structures which, in turn, are reproduced by agency; actors can operate within the context of rules produced by social structures or outside it. In both cases, they will have an impact on the structures and the structures will have an impact on them (even if they operate outside its 'constraints').¹⁸³

This model does not dig into the different types of structures;¹⁸⁴ it integrates the structuration process as one that gives identity some degree of stability over time. Despite the processual changes brought about by the self-other nexus, in fact, social structures impact on the agency in a way that makes it interact with the other following some relative consistency; a coherence that follows the duality of structure.

The above theorisation fully answers the two interconnected sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity. To address how state's collective identity impacts on inter-state relations with

¹⁸⁰ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 399.

¹⁸¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 66.

¹⁸² Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 399.

¹⁸³ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 65–69.

¹⁸⁴ The social structures as identified by Anthony Giddens in 'signification', 'legitimation' and 'domination' go beyond the scope of this work and will not be integrated into this model (Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 68–73).

a relevant other, it is necessary to identify the ‘empirical sites of observation’: a state’s agency clusters whose patterns of behaviour, discourse and interests are specifically linked to the notion of identity under investigation. By applying the model on the selected empirical sites of observation – in this study’s case: Iraqi religious authority, political authority and non-state military groups –, it is thus possible to define the state’s interests towards the relevant other as impacted by its collective identity and ultimately its behaviour. The application of the model consists in analysing the three core-constructs, the tying link and the structuration process on each of the empirical sites of observation.

2.2.1. Model’s Relevance Within the Current Literature

This model represents a significant stride in advancing the understanding of state collective identity within the realm of international relations. Its primary objective is to confront the challenges of a state’s collective identity’s conceptualization and impact assessment.

Building on the theoretical groundwork laid by Neumann and Wendt, this model delves into the self-other nexus process, drawing inspiration from the insights of Georg W.F. Hegel¹⁸⁵ and Emmanuel Levinas on alterity,¹⁸⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘dialogism’,¹⁸⁷ and Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of ‘deconstruction’.¹⁸⁸

This model takes shape within a comprehensive constructivist framework, enriched by the contributions of the ethno-symbolist school. Within this framework, the core-constructs of state collective identity are identified as Power, Myth, and Security, with the Symbolic cluster – symbols, in their interrelation of symbolic power, resonance and violence – as the tying link between the three.

¹⁸⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁸⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

¹⁸⁷ See for instance: Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

¹⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

The understanding of Power is deeply intertwined with Michel Foucault's insights on power and internalised social hierarchies,¹⁸⁹ along with Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, symbolic power and violence.¹⁹⁰ A re-working of ethno-symbolist theories¹⁹¹ in constructivist terms leads to a novel understanding of 'Myth'. The notion of Security draws from Wendt's emphasis on the intersubjective approach,¹⁹² Bourdieu's conceptualisations, and insights from the Paris School¹⁹³ and the Copenhagen School¹⁹⁴ of security studies. The latter, in fact, are enriched in this model by Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence and, through analysis of potential responses to securitising actors, the coexistence of repressive and symbolic violence within securitization practices is envisioned. Moreover, by merging Foucault's 'bio-politics',¹⁹⁵ John Galtung's cultural violence,¹⁹⁶ and Giorgio Agamben's 'zone of indistinction' and *homo sacer*,¹⁹⁷ the concept of symbolic violence is also applied to the international arena.

The concept of the Symbolic cluster finds its foundation in Bourdieu's notions of symbolic power and violence, ethno-symbolist perspectives on symbolic resonance, and, most crucially, a constructivist theory of symbols influenced by Anthony Giddens.¹⁹⁸ Finally, Giddens' notion of structuration is integrated to elucidate the relative stability of collective identity over time. This framework further clarifies how the self and the other, without fully merging into an indistinguishable identity, remain distinct while tightly interconnected.

¹⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

¹⁹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); and Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁹¹ Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*.

¹⁹² Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It".

¹⁹³ Thierry Balzacq, ed., *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁹⁴ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

¹⁹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, Vol. 1, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

¹⁹⁶ Galtung, "Cultural Violence".

¹⁹⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

¹⁹⁸ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge & Maiden: Polity Press, 1984).

2.3. The Self-Other Nexus

In the following section, I will illustrate the theoretical notion of the self-other nexus as an intersubjective, dialogical and non-hierarchical process which binds the self to the other and gives both ontological meaning.

In their behaviour as states, it may happen that one of the two terms pursues the interest of keeping the other in a dependent position, using identity as the vehicle for this aim. This does not imply, however, that self and other are essentially binary and hierarchical oppositions as, in the self-other nexus notion, their *relation* is at the centre.

The sub-section that follows will provide empirical examples from the case of Iraqi religious authority and political authority in relation to the other Iran.

2.3.1. An Intersubjective, Dialogical & Non-Hierarchical Process

The self-other nexus is the relational process that is behind the construction of collective identity's constitutive elements. As a process, the construction of this relation – the drawing, so to speak, of the self-other nexus – is constantly subject to development and, depending on historical contingencies, takes different turns.

This interaction is *intersubjective*: through their interaction, self and other “recognise themselves as mutually recognising one another”.¹⁹⁹

“Each is for the other the middle term through which each mediates itself”.²⁰⁰ By identifying elements of *alterity* and *resemblance* in the other, the self recognises the other as ‘other’ – “we recognise the other as *resembling* us, but *exterior* to us” –²⁰¹ and, simultaneously, it ‘sees’, recognises itself as ‘self’, “for exteriority leads the subject back to itself”.²⁰² Self and other are thus inextricable bound to each other, as they acquire ontological meaning in their relationship. Their collective identities form and take place *in*, and through, their interaction.

¹⁹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁰¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Time and the Other,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 43. (The italics in the text is the author's).

²⁰² *Ibid.*

The self-other nexus should be conceived as a *dialogue*: the discursive word cannot be separate from a subject who utters it in addressing another subject.²⁰³ For a dialogue to take place – and meaning to arise – self and other *need* each other.

As the relation is at the centre, no element is above the other; the self-other nexus is thus *non-hierarchical*. Self and the other are not binary and hierarchical oppositions with one term being primary, the origin, and the other being secondary and derivative.²⁰⁴ In empirical terms, freezing self and other into static entities that place one above the other would signify conceiving Shia identity as a static given, which came into being at some point in time in either Iraq or Iran. This would reflect a very essentialist and static conception of identity.

The self-other nexus process is one of establishing “*difference*”²⁰⁵, “*although [difference] does not exist*”.²⁰⁶ It ‘does not exist’ as an ontologically prior form; rather, it emerges through the interaction process. It is not essentially existent, as “the appearing and functioning of difference presupposes an originary synthesis”.²⁰⁷ However, difference, as conceptualised within the self-other interaction, “permits the articulation of signs amongst themselves within the same abstract order”.²⁰⁸ That is, it is through this process of establishing ‘difference’ that subjects have a sense of themselves and the other; ‘the abstract order’, however, is the ‘same’: for both self and other, it is their *relation*, their nexus.

The above depiction of the self-other nexus does not negate the possibility that one of the two terms may pursue the interest of keeping the other in a dependent role.

As seen, a state’s behaviour toward other states is based on interests, and interests are based on identity. In the case of a behaviour which reflects the interest of maintaining the other’s as subaltern, the mutual recognition of ‘resemblance’ and ‘difference’ unfolds in a manner that leads to an identity construction characterised by hierarchical interaction. Since the self-other nexus shapes the construction of Power,

²⁰³ Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 110–117.

²⁰⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 22–50.

²⁰⁵ In referring to this process, Derrida refers to “*différance*”, rather than “difference”. It has been translated into English although in the translation of his volume *Of Grammatology* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it has been kept in the original French form.

²⁰⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 62. (The italics is the author’s).

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 62–63. (The italics is in the original text).

Myth and Security, the three will consequently encompass features stemming from this hierarchical reliance.

This does not signify that, in this case, self and other will be *essentially* hierarchical oppositions with one relying on the other. Self and other, in fact, exist as intertwined entities, each contributing to the other's ontological significance, even in their hierarchical disposition.

In the following sub-section, empirical examples from the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian case will be given. Iraqi religious authority will be presented as an example of the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus as an intersubjective, dialogical and non-hierarchical relation. Iraqi political authority and its relation with Iran will then serve as an illustration of how this relation may also manifest with one term pursuing the interest of keeping the other in a dependent role. In such a case, as I shall illustrate, identity will be instrumental to this aim.

2.3.2. Iraq, Iran & the Self-Other Nexus

Post-2003 Iraqi religious authority stands as a notable example of the self-other nexus process marked by the acknowledgment of alterity and resemblance. In effect, Iraqi and Iranian Shia clergy have engaged in a dynamic dialogue, wherein historical circumstances have created new opportunities for reciprocal observation.

This process dates back to the 16th century and has continued since 2003. When the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) in Iran was established, Shiism became the Iranian state religion and Iran a crucial centre of Shia learning together with the Mesopotamian shrine cities (Najaf and Karbala).²⁰⁹

These two 'poles' – Iran and Iraq – have produced theological knowledge for centuries, looking at each other as important points of reference, with the prominence in the Shia world shifting from one to the other at different times. The different political circumstances of the two countries (Iraq was at the time part of the Ottoman Empire) resulted in different strategies to deal with political authority).²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Laurence Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: HURST Publishers, 2008), 70.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69–82.

This process has continued since 2003 and the dominant version of post-2003 Iraqi Shiism has emerged and acquired full ontological existence. An important distinction between the two schools – one which empirically demonstrates the self-other nexus theoretical notion – is the level of intervention into political matters from the side of the clerics.

The current Najafi school, embodied in the teachings of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, is one that gives clerical advice and guidance to political leaders without direct intervention. The clergy encourages political authority in the direction they believe it is the most advisable to follow, but do not explicitly act as if they were holding political authority.²¹¹ It is thus distinct from the Iranian school of Qom, embodied by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's teachings and his model of the *velayat e-faqih*, where the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the head of state and the highest political and religious authority of Iran.

All major clerics in Najaf have tended to follow Sistani's posture towards politics and the model of *velayat e-faqih* is not taken into consideration; yet, other Najafi ayatollahs have at times expressed positions that recalled the Iranian model.

Sistani was extremely critical of Maliki's first and second governments, for instance, but, in accordance with his general approach to political intervention, did not explicitly advise against voting for him when he ran for a third term in 2014. He just urged Iraqis to vote, and vote wisely.²¹²

By contrast, Ayatollah Bashir Hussein al-Najafi issued a fatwa that called on the public "not to elect any party that has even one single minister in the government",²¹³ warning that "boycotting the elections would usher in new dictatorship" and "allow corrupt officials to retain power".²¹⁴ These speeches brought about extensive discussions amongst Iraqi clerics and local commentators. Sistani's

²¹¹ Caroleen Marji Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs. Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018), 70–89.

²¹² Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 123.

²¹³ BBC Monitoring Middle East, April 11, 2013, quoted in Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 124.

²¹⁴ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 124.

position ultimately prevailed, with Iraqi religious authority providing guidance but not substantially interfering in the political unfolding.²¹⁵

Sistani is highly respected and, at the time of writing, it could be safely argued that he 'leads' the Najafi *hawza*. Considering that he does not hold an official leading role, however, Ayatollah Najafi's posture could have, in fact, prevailed. Examining the dynamics that led to Sistani's prominence over Najafi sheds light on the theoretical construct of the self-other nexus as presented in this model.

Sistani's position lay on a long historical Iraqi tradition; in the religious circles, it was thus perceived as truly *Iraqi*. Ayatollah Najafi's posture, conversely, was associated with the Iranian school and thus identified in its 'alterity'.²¹⁶ The recognition of Sistani's discourse as 'Iraqi', and of Najafi's as 'other' unfolded *simultaneously*. As the self-other nexus instructs, the Iraqi self has identified itself as 'self' *through* the identification of the other as 'other'.

As the interviews I have conducted with Iranian and Iraqi clerics show, this should not lead us to assume the existence of a theological struggle between Qom and Najaf. If there have been attempts from the Iranian clerical circles to influence Sistani and Najaf, that is to be understood in political terms, not religious, given that the Iranian clergy holds institutional power.

It makes no historical sense to hierarchically order the two schools or to suppose some sense of superiority or pre-eminence of one school over the other in the clerical circles. There is, rather, solid awareness of the different historical and socio-political circumstances of the two countries and, also, of the century-long tradition of Shia Islam with its different interpretations and ramifications. "The Iranian model of clerical authority would not work in Iraq, the appropriate conditions are not present",²¹⁷ as I was told by an Iranian senior cleric I met in Qom in 2016.

On the other hand, Iraqi political authority and its interaction with Iran offers a compelling example of how the self-other nexus can manifest as one state

²¹⁵ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs* 125.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124–126.

²¹⁷ Iranian cleric, interview with the author, Qom, Iran, February 2016.

successfully maintaining the other in a dependent role without fundamentally altering the inherently non-hierarchical connection between the two nexus components.

To illustrate both dimensions, namely the strategic aim of keeping the other in a dependent capacity and the self-other nexus as a non-hierarchical dynamic, the example of the political leader Moqtada al-Sadr will be explored. Sadr serves as a significant illustration of how Shia Iraqi political authority has been dependent on Iran, and of how Shiism has been instrumental for this aim. Simultaneously, the populist shifts of Sadr's political discourse over the years are also empirical manifestation of the self-other as theoretically described.

Moqtada al-Sadr emerged during the post-Saddam era, stepping into the power vacuum created by the 2003–2007 civil war.²¹⁸ This period witnessed fierce competition among various militias vying for control, encompassing Shia and other ethno-sectarian factions. Sadr, at the forefront with his Mahdi Army,²¹⁹ strategically aligned with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for military assistance. His close ties to Qassem Soleimani, the commander of IRGC's Quds Force, underscored this collaboration.²²⁰

In the chaotic post-invasion years, in fact, Iran, as the other, engaged with Iraq through military support to its Shia counterparts. Its final interest was to maintain Iraq in a dependent position, ensuring strategic depth and an advantage in its transnational struggle (with militias in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen).²²¹ Capitalising on Shia commonality served as a means to this end.

Iraqi Shia groups, as the self, aimed at winning the power-competition and capitalised on Iranian help. Since those initial years, Iran has intervened whenever Iraq's political landscape did not align with its interests, occasionally even resorting to direct military action on Iraqi soil.²²²

²¹⁸ Toby Dodge, *Iraq. From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 66.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62–69.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

²²¹ See for instance: Barbara Slavin, "Mullahs, Money, and Militias: How Iran Exerts Its Influence in the Middle East," United States Institute of Peace report, June 1, 2008, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2008/06/mullahs-money-and-militias-how-iran-exerts-its-influence-middle-east>.

²²² Following the October 2021 elections and the stalemate that derived from it (the government could not be formed), for instance, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi escaped unharmed from an assassination attempt by armed drones on 31 October. The attack was unclaimed but was widely

Consequently, despite holding governmental authority since the post-invasion elections of 2005,²²³ Iraqi Shia groups have been plagued by internal disputes and governance challenges, leading to persistent political crises since 2003.²²⁴ Iran has consistently fuelled Iraq's instability, leveraging its role as an external patron.

As a result of this self-other nexus, the trajectory of Iraqi political identity has been defined by internal conflict and fragmentation.

Whereas the above explains how states may behave pursuing interests that entail a hierarchized position with the other, Sadr's political discourse and its shifts over the years offer interesting reflections on the self-other nexus as a non-hierarchical process. What would be called Sadr's 'political opportunism', in fact, appears as a subtler dynamic in theoretical terms. Different historical contingencies lead to different perceptions of the other by virtue of a different self's perception, with the two terms – perception of the other and perception of the self – being entangled and non-hierarchical: it is virtually impossible to establish which one precedes the other.

As earlier described, Sadr relied on Iran during the first post-invasion years. Moreover, with his Mahdi Army, sectarian crimes were committed. The Mahdi Army has been defined "the most destructive non-state organisation",²²⁵ whose "ultimate aim [...] was to drastically reduce the numbers of Sunni residents in Baghdad".²²⁶

Despite the reliance on Iran remaining constant and Iranian-backed militiamen entering Iraqi politics, the frequent social unrest with the people demanding the end of sectarian policies and Iranian interference have led to shifts in the Iraqi political debate in more recent years. Capitalising on the demonstrators' frustration and, also, competing for government with overtly Iranian-backed Shia parties, Sadr has thus adopted a cross-sectarian, anti-Iran discourse, especially since the 2014–2018 Haider

attributed to the pro-Iran militia groups, because of the use, also, of drone technology. (John Davison and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraqi PM Safe After Drone Attack on Residence, Military Says," *Reuters*, 7 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/drone-attack-targets-iraq-pm-who-escapes-unhurt-iraq-military-2021-11-07/>. Accessed June 2022.)

²²³ Dodge, *Iraq. From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 65.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

al-Abadi government and in the run-up to the 2018 elections.²²⁷ In the 2019 protests, for instance, he initially backed the street protests (before turning violent against them), and joined the unrest with the slogan “Iran out”.²²⁸

In July 2022, when Sadr supporters stormed the parliament with similar slogans, Ismail Kousari, a former IRGC high-ranking commander, said in interview with the Iranian ISNA news agency, “Muqtada al-Sadr must determine his position, which is one day with Saudi Arabia, one day with this country and another day with that country”.²²⁹ Prior to Kousari’s statement, Kayhan newspaper, an Iranian conservative media outlet, had criticised Sadr’s behaviour describing him as “anti-unity”.²³⁰

As earlier described, these shifts in both the ‘self’ – embodied here in Sadr – and the other – Iran, show how the self-other nexus is a process (and as such constantly subject to change) and, even when the relation between the two is confrontational, it holds dialogical and non-hierarchical features. Self and other are entangled and evolve in their construction one *through* the other. Neither self nor other are ‘prior’; the intersubjective relation, in fact, is at the centre.

2.4. The Core-Constructs of State’s Collective Identity: Power, Myth & Security

This model identifies three core-constructs of state’s collective identity: Power, Myth and Security. As social constructs, Power, Myth and Security are *discursive*, that is they manifest themselves as narratives, but they also shape actors’ behaviour and, ultimately, the state’s behaviour in the domestic and international arenas.

²²⁷ Renad Mansour and Christine van den Toorn, “The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?,” London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Report, July 2018, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf.

²²⁸ Ali Mousawi Khalkhali, “Muqtada al-Sadr Complicates Iranian Moves in Iraq,” *Al Monitor*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/muqtada-al-sadr-complicates-iranian-moves-iraq>, Accessed August 2023.

²²⁹ ISNA, “Kousari: Muqtada al-Sadr Bayad Vaziyat-e Khod Ra Roshan Konad” (“Kousari: Muqtada al-Sadr Must Clarify His Position”), August 20, 2022, <https://www.isna.ir/news/1401051007816/>. Accessed August 2023). Kousari was referring to 2017 Sadr’s trip to Saudi Arabia in 2017 and his meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The trip was received by Tehran with great suspicion. (*The National*, “Moqtada al-Sadr Received by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman,” July 30, 2017, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/moqtada-al-sadr-received-by-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-1.615503>. Accessed August 2023).

²³⁰ Khalkhali, “Muqtada al-Sadr Complicates Iranian Moves in Iraq”.

All actors of society are involved in the construction process. The interaction of society actors follows the processual dynamic of the self-other nexus. As the fundamental axis through which collective identity manifests itself and develops, the self-other nexus happens towards the other but also within the self, meaning towards and from the members of the same community.

The tying nexus between the three cores is what I call the 'Symbolic cluster': that is, symbols in the interrelation of symbolic capital/power (two components of the same notion), symbolic resonance and symbolic violence. Symbolic power, resonance and violence are crucial concepts for each of the three constructs. Setting boundaries between the three constructs and also between the components of the Symbolic cluster is difficult; they are, in fact, mutually constitutive. It is, however, necessary for explanatory purposes.

In the following sub-sections, Power, Myth and Security will be conceptually described (the order holds no relevance; the three are equally crucial). The concepts of symbolic capital/power, resonance and violence will be also analysed highlighting their relevance in relation to each of the cores. The Symbolic Cluster will be observed in the next section.

The earlier analysis of the self-other nexus has represented a crucial step in addressing the first sub-question underlying this model: how the self gets constructed through the other. This section's description of the core-constructs of a state's collective identity will address the second sub-question: how to describe a state's collective identity. Arguing that identity is constructed through the other, looking at how this identity manifests itself will also provide further answers to the first sub-question. Having added further comprehensive arguments on a state's collective identity in the section on the Symbolic Cluster, I will then move on to present how to investigate the impacts of collective identity on inter-state relations.

2.4.1. Power

In the following sub-sections, I shall describe the core-construct of Power. I shall illustrate how Power is inherently relational, repressive, normalising, productive,

subversive and always contested, even in a case of 'regime of truth'. In such a case, Power, being productive, will also produce discourses of resistance. I shall also describe the concepts of 'field' and of symbolic capital and power. Examples of the Iraqi-Iranian case will be given.

2.4.1.1. Repressive Power, Normalising Power & Regime of Truth

Power is normalising and repressive, productive and subversive. It is inherently relational, as it binds the rulers to the ruled and *vice versa* and – being a social construct constantly renegotiated – it is always contested (and in this contestation it may become subversive).

Repressive Power (RP) reflects weakness by whoever embodies it: RP needs incarceration, torture and military intervention to be respected.²³¹ Normalising Power (NP), conversely, shapes actors' beliefs and consciousness and produces what people believe to be 'true', 'right', 'good'; it produces *norms* and the *knowledge* of these norms.²³² By producing knowledge, it forms social realities that influence people's conduct and symbolically penetrate into their understanding of things. It does not need to repress, because people will abide to it without being aware of it.²³³

When the conduct that is formed by the power-knowledge nexus becomes normalised and embedded in cultural norms, Power is *everywhere*; it is internalised by all society actors, *transcends* whoever is wielding it, it is present as an everyday, socialised and embodied phenomenon.²³⁴ In this case, it constitutes a 'regime of truth' (RT).²³⁵

A good RT Iraqi example is represented by Sistani's religious teachings in Najafi religious circles. Sistani does not need to force anyone. His push for Iraqi

²³¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 23–35.

²³² Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208–226.

²³³ Jonathan Gaventa, "Power after Lukes: An Overview of Theories of Power since Lukes and Their Application to Development", *Institute of Development Studies*, https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/power_after_lukes.pdf.

²³⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 23–35.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

nationalism and the rejection of foreign meddling and intervention, for instance, which has not been concretely challenged by other clerics, is deeply embedded into Iraqi consciousness; it is an important trend of Iraq's political identity and precedes 2003 and Sistani's rise. Sistani, in fact, belongs to an important tradition of Shia clerics supporting Iraqi nationalism against foreign occupiers; one supreme example, the 'Revolution of 1920' was led by Mohammed Taqi Shirazi, who was a Karbala *mujtahid*.²³⁶

Sistani's power-knowledge transcends himself: he has himself interiorised this vision as the right path for Iraq, and he now reaffirms it by presenting it as such and behaving accordingly.

RT and NP should not lead to the assumption that Power can be uncontested. Power is an embodied construct, not a possessed instrument of domination, and requires a fully relational perspective to be conceptually grasped. It is a social dynamic of recognition and contestation; a *relational* force which arises from the continuous competition between society's actors.

It is this constant struggle which makes Power *productive*: when it is NP in a RT context, it produces rituals of truth, norms and even narratives of resistances to Power itself; when it is RP, it creates coercive measures and even the weakening or complete destruction of an established political system (acquiring subversive features).

2.4.1.2. The Field, Symbolic Capital & Symbolic Power

The sociological site where the competition for Power takes place is the 'field'. The field is a relational and intersubjective *situs* characterised by competition and struggle;²³⁷ whoever enters the field aims either to change the field to their own advantage or maintain the advantaged position.²³⁸

²³⁶ The "Revolution of 1920" is one of the most important episodes in the collective memory of Iraqis. An army of tribal leaders, young clerics and sons of clerics, led by Mohammed Taqi Shirazi, succeeded in ousting the British in only a few days. Before the British finally defeated the insurgents and imposed the formation of an Iraqi state, an independent government in Karbala had been declared. Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La Formation de l'Irak Contemporain: Le Rôle Politique des Ulémas Chiïtes à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la création de l'État Irakien* (Paris: CNRS, 1991), 403–413.

²³⁷ Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 9.

²³⁸ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 97.

Society is comprised of fields of different nature, with the nature of the field being defined by the 'capital': that is, what is at stake, what the actors are competing for.²³⁹ Fields boundaries are not fixed and they may interlink,²⁴⁰ as what the actors are competing for is defined by what the actors *mean* to compete for, and this may change or go in different directions, thus creating other fields.

The most crucial capital is the *symbolic* one, which may be fought potentially in any field. Symbolic capital enables acquisition of 'symbolic power:' the ability to legitimise power relations, to shape and legitimise perceptions of the social order.²⁴¹ It is the power to establish social and cultural hierarchies, to determine the collectivity's principles, visions, their meaning construction and society communication. In a RT, whoever embodies Power fully possesses symbolic capital.

Certain symbolic visions and narratives may constitute a RT in one field but not in one other. This is the case of Sistani's school of Shia thought, which constitutes a RT in the religious field, but not in the political field. As influential as Sistani's guidance may have been and as although his authority may have been recognised by virtually all political actors, his symbolic vision for Iraq is not symbolically shared in the political field. The Fatah Alliance, for instance, does not follow Sistani: it receives IRGC funding and training and has religious allegiance to Qom-based Grand Ayatollah Kadhimi Husayini al-Haeri and Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran.²⁴²

Due to the above-described Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, the post-2003 Iraqi political field is one where no group has acquired symbolic power at the time of writing in 2023. Indeed, to pursue its aim, Iran has penetrated the Iraqi field as an *exogenous* and *subversive* actor and has continued acting as an external patron fuelling Iraqi instability. Its Iraqi Shia counterparts have, thus, not been enabled to achieve symbolic power. In such scenarios, collective identity (political, in this case) will be defined in terms of the struggle.

²³⁹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 24.

²⁴⁰ Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 121.

²⁴¹ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 148.

²⁴² See for instance: Simona Foltyn, "Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces During the 2022 Post-Election Crisis," *London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Centre Paper*, no. 65 (April 2023).

2.4.2. Myth

The following sub-sections will illustrate the construct of 'Myth' as here conceptualised: any culturally embedded notion, trend and element which is imbued with a symbolic repertoire and thus holding symbolic resonance. I will show how Myths evolve over time as constructed by the self-other nexus and may therefore be manipulated for political purposes. Examples from the case of the post-2003 Iraqi political field will be given.

2.4.2.1. The Concept of 'Myth'

The concept of 'Myth' tends to be associated with fictional stories which are embedded in people's culture and usually lead back to common ancestry. I put forward a very different understanding: they constitute 'Myths', all of those culturally embedded notions, trends and elements which are imbued with a 'symbolic repertoire', that is, symbolic figures and meaning.

By being permeated by a symbolic repertoire, they hold 'symbolic resonance': that is, they have the ability to resonate among the people regardless of how the individuals feel towards them; people may even refute them, but they will still recognise them as belonging to their community.

Myths are identified as distinctive of that community by both its members and the outsiders²⁴³ and tend to endure over time. As constructs formed by the self-other nexus, they evolve over time and they may be manipulated and exploited by community's leaders to mobilise the masses.²⁴⁴ Iraqi nationalism and the refusal to accept foreign meddling, as well as the Iranian imperial projection of itself are, in this sense, 'Myths'.

Sistani's rejection of foreign intervention represents an important political trend of the history of modern Iraq. The reason why Sistani's political advice has been so

²⁴³ Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 25.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

crucial is that Iraqi nationalism is a political trend which holds symbolic elements that have had a resonance in Iraq's collective identity: it represents an Iraqi Myth.

Similarly, Iran's understanding of foreign policy is one that lies in the imperial past of the country. The 1979 Constitution stipulated that Khomeini was the Supreme Leader of the Iranians but also of all Muslims; the Iranian Revolution was not confined to the frontiers of a particular national territory, but rather it was an Islamic revolution in the sense that it was the first step of a process concerning the whole *dar al-Islam*, the territories inhabited by the Muslims.²⁴⁵ This notion has had such a long-lasting grip on Iran's politics because it comprises symbolic elements that have the ability to resonate within the Iranian collective imaginary. As my interviews in Iran have clearly showed, even those who do not support the Islamic Republic share the ambitions of being recognised as a nation whose cultural and historical impact goes beyond its national boundaries.

Myths, whether of imperial glory, common ancestry, perception of the other that acquires mythical colour, resonate emotionally, and people may feel that they are symbols of their nation's grandeur. To other members of the same community, they may also be just symbols of belonging, they may be disguised, or even rejected.

Despite not feeling represented by it, people will, however, recognise it as a Myth of their *own* country, their *own* people. That Myth will communicate something to them. They will be aware that others of their own national and/or ethnic identity relate to it in some way. Regardless of their position to that Myth, they will all 'understand' it as cultural heritage of common belonging.

2.4.2.2. Articulation of Myth Narratives for Political Purposes

As constructs formed by the self-other nexus, Myths are grounded in history: they evolve over time and may be manipulated for political purposes. In order to gain political success and mobilise the masses around a 'proposed' national project,

²⁴⁵ Farhang Rahajee, *Islamic Values and Worldview. Khomeini on Man, the State and International Politics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).

community leaders may 'intercept' those symbolic elements that have some 'prior resonance' among the people.²⁴⁶

By articulating the symbolic material into narratives that serve political purposes, however, political actors may also construct 'new' Myths, as in forging the symbolic material in a way that serves the political purposes of that given historical time.

If leaders do intercept collective Myths, however, they will not necessarily succeed in constituting a RT in their field. For this to happen they need to create discourses which have the ability to 'absorb' competing narratives. That is to say, they need to create discourses that combine different Myths which resonate with different people and formulate them into narratives which unite them (the Myths and the people).

In the post-2003 Iraqi political field, the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has constructed three Myths where Shia exclusiveness has been emphasised: the Iraqist nationalist vision imbued with an exclusivist Shia assertion; the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces; and the 'Shrine protection narrative'. As the chapters on political authority and non-state armed groups will describe, all of these Myths have important historical references which actually precede the post-regime environment. This element of Shia assertiveness is inherently belligerent and at the expense of the other sections of Iraqi society. Such Myths fuel Iraqi instability and social unrest; they cannot contribute to the establishment of a regime of truth.

2.4.3. Security

In the following sections, I shall present the third core-construct: Security. I shall initially discuss its ontological necessity for a state's collective identity, which also entails the necessity of 'danger'. I shall then discuss how 'symbolic-interactionism' provides fruitful insights on how states make sense of the 'situations' which they encounter in the international arena. I shall also present the concept of 'symbolic violence' and argue that it can also be projected in the international arena.

²⁴⁶ Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, 31.

Subsequently, I shall discuss securitisation practices and show how analysing people's responses to the securitising actor's moves offers insights on the possible coexistence of repressive and symbolic violence. Finally, I will present the structure of 'institution': collective knowledge on how the international arena works. Examples from the Iraqi case will be given.

2.4.3.1. The Ontological Necessity of the 'Other' & the Construction of Intersubjective Meanings

Security takes the form of perceptions of preservation of the self (peace and stability) or danger to the self (threat), which are articulated into discursive narratives and result in action and/or relatively stable practices.

By virtue of the self-other nexus, Security is ontologically necessary for collective identity: for the process of recognition and construction of boundaries which define both the self and the other, the two terms of the recognition *must* exist. That is the ontological necessity of preserving the self, and countering any threat that may obstruct a state's interests as they manifest at a specific point in time. Security being ontologically necessary for the self, *danger* is also present; there cannot be preservation of self, if there is no other to preserve the self from.

A state's behaviour in the international arena is based on state's interests, and a state's interests are based on its identity. Considering, however, the processual nature of identity as constructed by self-other nexus, this does not mean that actors "[...] have a 'portfolio of interests that they carry around independent of social context'.²⁴⁷ Rather, interests are defined "in the process of defining *situations*";²⁴⁸ that is, the self makes sense of the situations that are encountered through the *intersubjective construction of meanings*, which consequently shapes its perceptions of either stability or threat.

The construction of intersubjective meanings rests on three premises: self and other act toward the situations they encounter on the basis of the meanings that they attribute to them; such a meaning derives from the social interaction (in this model

²⁴⁷ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," 398.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

theorisation, the self-other nexus); and that these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process.²⁴⁹

In unprecedented situations, the construction of intersubjective meanings will most probably happen by mirroring the practices of significant others over time (the “looking glass-self”).²⁵⁰ An example of this may be the Iraqi response to the January 3, 2020 US strike, which killed the Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. In that incident, the Iraqi government voted to expel U.S. troops from its territory in the immediate aftermath of the strike,²⁵¹ following what would have been the most probable reaction of a significant other, namely Iran, in a similar situation.

In the case of ‘new’ situations with unknown others, differently, a process of “signalling, interpreting, and responding”²⁵² will take place. That is, the self will try to make sense of the other’s actions on the basis of its own ability to understand, abilities that are shaped by its own identity and have thus evolved through the encounters with other alters and will continue to evolve on the basis of the other’s behaviour.

2.4.3.2. Symbolic Violence as Crucial to Security

If actors in a field’s competition acquire symbolic power, they will also be in a position to exert ‘symbolic violence’: the violence that is not perceived as illegitimate by society actors but, rather, as the expression of a needed established order and hierarchy.²⁵³ Symbolic violence “presents itself as the most economical mode of domination because it best corresponds to the economy of the system”.²⁵⁴ It is “gentle, invisible violence, unrecognised as such, chosen as much as undergone”.²⁵⁵ It is experienced by society actors as the expression of a needed established order and

²⁴⁹ Herbert Blumer, “The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism,” in *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 2.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 404.

²⁵¹ Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Launches Airstrikes on Iranian-Backed Forces in Iraq and Syria,” *New York Times*, 30 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/29/world/middleeast/us-airstrikes-iran-iraq-syria.html>. Accessed May 2022.

²⁵² Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It,” 405.

²⁵³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 127.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

hierarchy, whereby laws, for instance, must be respected and, if violated, punished accordingly.

Symbolic violence is crucial to Security because the ability to exert it – or the lack of such ability – will shape the forms through which whoever embodies Power, whether normalising or repressive, ensures Security against threats (which, as earlier seen, are ontologically necessary for the self). In the Iraqi political field where no group has acquired symbolic power, for instance, the violence that has been exercised has been ‘repressive’: “the overt violence of the usurer or the ruthless master”,²⁵⁶ one that is perceived as ruthless and illegitimate.

Conversely, in the case of the Sistani’s school of thought symbolic violence has been embodied in the ability that it has had to ‘absorb’ different formulations without repressively silencing them. Other Najafi Ayatollahs have never lost the right to express their positions; they have just become irrelevant. Without needing to resort to repressive violence, Sistani’s take on a number of issues has virtually become the ‘dominant’ one in the Najafi environment.

Any identity’s elements, both symbolic violence and capital are constructs, and as such, they evolve over time by virtue of the self-other nexus dynamic. This signifies that symbolic violence, at a certain point in time, may become repressive. If, for instance, some laws which have been traditionally enacted as symbolic violence are frequently broken by a variety of society actors, this may indicate a perception of violence which has become (or is becoming) repressive.

2.4.3.3. Symbolic Violence in IR: Bio-Power, Cultural Violence, Zone of Indistinction & Homo Sacer

Sociology literature on symbolic violence tends to see it as a notion that pertains to one given society within the boundaries of domestic politics.²⁵⁷ I argue, however, that it can also be projected in the international arena. The enactment of symbolic

²⁵⁶ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 24.

²⁵⁷ See for instance: Samuel Chris, “Symbolic Violence and Collective Identity: Pierre Bourdieu and the Ethics of Resistance,” *Social Movement Studies* 12, no. 4 (2013): 397–413.

violence in the IR domain does not require the acquisition of symbolic power in the domestic political field; the field where it is perpetrated is, in fact, international. The construction of symbolic violence in the international arena follows the dynamics described below.

Power as a sovereign state needs the other, that is other states, to make itself be perceived by its subjects as legitimate and necessary. That is, Power needs to construct a threat which it can defend the people from.

Even though an optimised society is formed and reproduced on the bio-political notion of fostering life, Power does not rule out violence against those classified as a threat to the life and the well-being of a governed society.²⁵⁸ Indeed, it *needs* to have such threats, in order to be symbolically perceived as necessary in its hierarchical position. The narrative of defence goes from ‘sovereign who must be defended’, to a society, a population, who must be defended,²⁵⁹ with wars being waged “on behalf of the existence of everyone”.²⁶⁰

To make violence against other states “look and even feel right – or at least not wrong”²⁶¹ – and to be, thus, *symbolic* –, Power ‘builds on’ the violence that is present in society. It draws on its *cultural* manifestation, which is deeply symbolically embedded into the subjects’ minds.

‘Cultural’ violence is any aspect of culture which is distinctive to a community and can be used to legitimise violence against other states on the basis of ideology, religion, a state’s interests at a specific point in time, and so on.²⁶² Cultural violence is the legitimiser of both ‘direct’ violence – the one exercised by an actor and sanctioned by society –,²⁶³ and ‘structural’ violence – the one built on social structures, i.e. social injustice.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 136–138.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁶¹ Galtung, “Cultural Violence”, 291.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.* 294.

²⁶⁴ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191, 171.

The construction of symbolic violence and, also, of its cultural manifestation, may occupy a long time span,²⁶⁵ but not necessarily. Abrupt changes may occur, due to historical circumstances that quickly modify the social environment. When the other acts in a way that forces the self to adapt, for instance a declaration of war or a violation of a state's sovereignty, and does so suddenly, this is a case of collective *trauma*.²⁶⁶

Traumas cause a relatively sudden construction of aggressive discourses around the other which, in a fairly short period of time, may become symbolic violence. Such discourses may manifest into practice with an immediate aggressive response to the attack and also, with time, evolve into discourses of danger around the other. The cultural manifestation of such symbolic violence will most probably hold constitutive elements that existed somewhat prior to the trauma itself.

Sistani's so-called 'religious fatwa' of June 2014 is a good example. In response to ISIS' further gains in the province of Diyala, northeast of Baghdad, Sistani called to arms all those "citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists, defending their country and their people and their holy places".²⁶⁷ Given Sistani's authority, his fatwa soon resulted in the formation of the PMF, with many of its Shia militias being Iranian-backed and a number of new militias being formed with Iranian help. This resulted in further Iranian penetration into the Iraqi armed forces and Iranian empowerment within the Iraqi political field.²⁶⁸

The June 2014 fatwa represented a huge shift in Sistani's discourse: until then, he had always been very much against the use of militias and a vocal advocate for Iraqi independence from foreign actors.²⁶⁹ The rise of ISIS, however, had been a collective trauma.

²⁶⁵ Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 294.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁶⁷ *Al Jazeera*, "Iraq Cleric Issues Call to Arms Against ISIL", 14 June 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/6/14/iraq-cleric-issues-call-to-arms-against-isil>. Accessed May 2023.

²⁶⁸ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq," *Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief* 105 (2023): 1–8, 4.

²⁶⁹ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 57.

The cultural material for such symbolic violence had been present in post-2003 Iraq since the immediate post-invasion. The 2003–2007 civil war had already deeply wounded the country and Iranian militias had been present in the territory ever since.

When wars are declared and symbolic violence is exerted within IR, the international arena is conceived as a ‘zone of indistinction’, where the laws that regulate the domestic environment are suspended, but rules are still existent.²⁷⁰ The zone of indistinction is the *situs* that embodies the ‘sovereign state of exception’, a threshold between a normal situation and chaos, in which the rules still exist but the law is suspended.²⁷¹ The ‘other’ that inhabits this zone is the ‘*homo sacer*’, a man whose bare life is stripped of relevance, devoid of value, not a subject of ordinary laws otherwise valid outside the zone of indistinction.²⁷² The *homo sacer* is not subject to human or divine law: ending its life is not prosecuted by the human law that regulates domestic societies, nor in any way pertaining to a legislative threshold which is superior to human law.²⁷³

I argue that the status of *homo sacer* can be attributed not only to the actual individuals who are affected by wars, but also to states, which, as ‘others’, are bound to the self by a relation which is not regulated by ordinary law, and yet it is lawfully permitted. “The sovereign exception [...] is the presupposition of the juridical reference in the form of its suspension”.²⁷⁴

Symbolic violence against other states and its reduction to zone of indistinction and *homo sacer* takes different forms: not only wars, but also declaration of embargos, isolation from the international community, and so on.

2.4.3.4. The Construction of the Other Within the Self: Securitisation Processes

The construction of the other in Security terms happens towards other states but also within the self, so within society. Since states are internally differentiated,

²⁷⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 21.

²⁷¹ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1979), 19.

²⁷² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 138.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 83

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

Power may present some section of society as a menacing other; one which poses an existential threat to the collectivity and against which violence is symbolically justified. This is a 'securitisation process'.

The modalities through which the 'securitising actor' (whoever embodies Power and aims at presenting some society's group as a threat) frame a 'referent object' (the supposed other) as an existential threat for the 'referent subject' (the people for whom the threat narrative is constructed) are different.

In one possible scenario, the securitising actor contextually mobilises "heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.)"²⁷⁵ through an "assemblage of practices":²⁷⁶ mundane, routinised, banal bureaucratic practices of security professional or governmental security technologies (such as surveillance, risk management, or prevention) which create a sense of insecurity.²⁷⁷ Through every-day practices which create a sense of constant risk, some cultural symbolic material presenting a collectivity's group as a threat thus spreads in society, and the other within the self is constructed.

In parallel or alternative to this, the threat can be constructed through a (series of) speech act(s). That is, the supposed threatening other is 'created' through discourses which present it as such to the population.²⁷⁸ If violence against the supposed threat become to be perceived as legitimate and necessary (that is, violence become symbolic), the securitisation process has been successful; in this case, people will even accept threat-countering exceptional measures which have negative repercussions on the whole population.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Thierry Balzacq, "A Theory of Securitization," in *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, ed. Thierry Balzacq (London: Routledge, 2011), 3.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Didier Bigo, "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no. 1 (2002): 63–92; Jef Huysmans, "What's in an Act? On Security Speech Acts and Little Security Nothings," *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4–5 (2011): 371–383; Thierry Balzacq, Stefano Guazzini, Michael C. Williams, Ole Wæver, and Heikki Paromaki, "Forum: What Kind of Theory – if any – is Securitisation?," *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2015): 1–41.

²⁷⁸ Buzan, et al, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 24.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

Analysing people's responses to the securitising actor's moves can offer interesting insights on the possible coexistence of repressive and symbolic violence.

In the case of the securitising actor taking exceptional measures to counter the supposed threat, two responses are possible. In one case, people accept the exceptional measures; they do so, not because they are 'buying' the securitising actor's narrative, but because they feel they have no choice, or that it is not worth fighting against, or that refuting the narrative could have negative repercussions. In this scenario, securitisation is *repressive* violence and the securitising actor embodies repressive power.

In another case, a section of the people has not ascribed to the securitising dynamic but accepts it nonetheless, whereas another one *does* accept the threat-narrative. For such people, speech acts or securitising practices have the ability of becoming symbolic, and this because of prior prejudices, ideologies, and other cultural materials with symbolic value. In such a scenario, a coexistence of repressive and symbolic violence unfolds.

I argue that the post-2003 Iraqi case is one where securitisation practices have not been enacted. Due to the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, in fact, those groups who have embodied Power since the first 2005 post-invasion elections until the time of writing have come to constitute a social system on their own. As I shall illustrate in the next section on structuration, the Iraqi political elites respond to their own rules, norms and values, which are not shared by other sections of Iraqi society. Corruption and repressive violence represent the main instruments through which they achieve a place in government. They have thus lost their popular constituency and they have not even resorted to it.

At times of political crises and social unrest, however, populist practices have been adopted. I would argue that such circumstances have offered empirical examples of the earlier-described coexistence of repressive and symbolic violence.

In the 2019 Iraqi protests, for instance, massive repressive violence was perpetrated against the demonstrators. Simultaneously, however, Moqtada al-Sadr resorted to symbolic violence with his followers.

Sadr had initially backed the protests, and his supporters had been amongst the demonstrators. However, when the political circumstances changed in Sadr's favour, and he had thus the opportunity to formulate an electorate law which was advantageous to him, he needed the unrest to end.²⁸⁰ Addressing his followers, he urged for the need to take action against the "saboteurs" and "infiltrators"²⁸¹ who were hiding in the Iraqi streets. Capitalising on a crucial Iraqi Myth with strong symbolic value (the refusal to accept foreign interference), he claimed that the US had been involved, and the independence of Iraq was in danger. "Clear[ing] the streets"²⁸² was thus necessary, and he ordered his supporters to do so. All the demonstrators who were not supporting him were turned into a security threat, and his securitising exceptional measure (clearing the streets) was successful.

For those who bought his narrative and proceeded as ordered, the exceptional measure was legitimate and necessary. As my interviews show, Sadr's supporters' fear of foreign intervention is real and, in their views, measures must be taken. Symbolic violence was exerted on them, while on all the others, the violence was repressive.

2.4.3.5. The 'Institution'

The linkage between a state's behaviour in the international arena and a state's interests, rooted in identity, does not imply a static imposition of identity. Instead, interests are defined through the intersubjective construction of meanings which are attributed to the situations encountered.²⁸³ Sometimes situations are unprecedented, and thus states have to construct their meanings, or, conversely, they may be interpreted and lead to action following an 'institution', meaning "a relatively stable set or 'structure' of identities and interests".²⁸⁴

Institutions are collective conceptions of how the international system works; they do not exist apart from what actors collectively 'know'. "This does not mean that

²⁸⁰ International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box," *Middle East Report* 223, July 26, 2022, 1–25, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," 398.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 399.

institutions are not real or objective, that they are ‘nothing but beliefs’”.²⁸⁵ As collective knowledge, they are experienced as ontological entities which are “over and beyond the individuals who ‘happen to’ embody them at the moment”.²⁸⁶ They are tied to the actors’ identities and are thus inter-subjective.

Institutions may or may not be codified in formal rules or norms²⁸⁷ and are more or less coercive.²⁸⁸ The significant influence they exert on actors’ agency is attributed to their ‘knowledge’. This collective knowledge is understood to be mutually recognised among international system actors, creating a shared understanding that holds prominence over any individual actor.²⁸⁹

Institutions are no natural given, and the process of institutionalisation is one of “internalising new identities and interests”²⁹⁰ and affecting behaviour. Self-help in a context of anarchy, for instance, or sovereignty, are institutions.²⁹¹

As I shall discuss in the chapter on militias, I argue that the isolation of Iran from the international community is an institution. Due to the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, the isolation of Iran from the international community has had important implications on the Iraqi state’s ability to play a significant role in the regional and international arenas.

2.5. The Tying Nexus: The Symbolic Cluster & Structuration

In the earlier section on the core-constructs of state’s collective identity, I have addressed the two interrelated sub-questions of this study: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state’s collective identity.

Before moving on to tackle the main investigation that underlines this model – how a state’s collective identity (or a notion of it) impacts on the inter-state relations –

²⁸⁵ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It,” 398.

²⁸⁶ Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 58.

²⁸⁷ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It,” 399.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

, which will allow me to answer how Shia commonality impacts on post-2003 Iraqi relations with Iran, two final elements on the core-constructs need to be addressed. Those are the tying link between Power, Myth and Security – what I call the ‘Symbolic Cluster’ –, and the structuration process, which gives collective identity some degree of stability over time despite the self-other nexus processual changes.

These two elements are intertwined and, following the depiction of the three core-constructs, enable the formulation of a final, comprehensive argument on a state’s collective identity.

In the next sub-section, I shall focus on the Symbolic Cluster and provide a figure that visually represents a state’s collective identity. I shall then discuss structuration, giving examples from the post-2003 Iraqi case.

2.5.1. The Symbolic Cluster

The tying nexus between the three core-constructs of state’s collective identity, the binding link, the red thread that passes through them and keeps them interdependent and mutually constitutive, is what I call the ‘Symbolic Cluster’: that is, symbols in their interrelation between the crucial concepts of symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence.

In the previous sections, the centrality of these concepts has become evident. What has been just indirectly touched upon and needs further clarification is that their importance stems from the fundamental role that symbols hold in shaping society’s understanding and attribution of meaning. In the next lines, I will introduce a constructivist theoretical framework pertaining to symbols.

People act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of the *meanings* that the objects have for them.²⁹² By looking a bit closer at this construction of symbolic meaning,

²⁹² Blumer, “The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism,” 2.

“The field of signs, the grids of meaning, are created by the ordered nature of differences which comprise codes [...] we understand *the relational character of the codes that generate meaning to be located in the ordering of social practices*, in the very capacity to ‘go on’ in the multiplicity of contexts of social activity”.²⁹³

In the domain of meaning and understanding, ‘the ordered nature of differences’ should be understood as Derrida’s *différance*: “the spacing of the signifier”,²⁹⁴ “the spacing that alone makes the utterance possible”.²⁹⁵ Considering ‘utterance’ as social communication that makes the understanding possible, the ‘ordered nature of differences’ are the intertwined elements that constitute symbolic codes.

“Symbols coagulate the ‘surpluses of meaning’ implied in the polyvalent character of signs; they conjoin those intersections of codes which are especially rich in diverse forms of meaning association, operating along the axes of metaphor and metonymy”.²⁹⁶

Symbols represent the inner ‘cement’ that guarantees the distinction between that ‘society material’ which is collectively shared and that which is not.

In fact, if symbolic power is acquired and consequently symbolic violence is enacted, those society actors who embody Power have the ability to manipulate that “production of common sense”,²⁹⁷ which is the interiorised understanding of ‘society material’ ’s: hierarchies, regulations, how and why they must be respected, and how they contribute to keep society together.

Myths and practices – rituals, for instance, but also modalities of action (a certain way of doing politics: elections in a democratic system of governance or the issue of fatwas in the Shia world) – are understood and acknowledged as constitutive of the community. This acknowledgment is not necessarily a conscious, cognitive process.

²⁹³ Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 71, (the italics is the author’s).

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71–72.

²⁹⁷ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 239.

Considering Power, Myth and Security as the core-constructs of a state's collective identity, the Symbolic cluster as the intersection between the three should thus be understood as *its ultimate core*. A good visual representation of this intersection, and of state's collective identity as a whole, is as can be seen here:

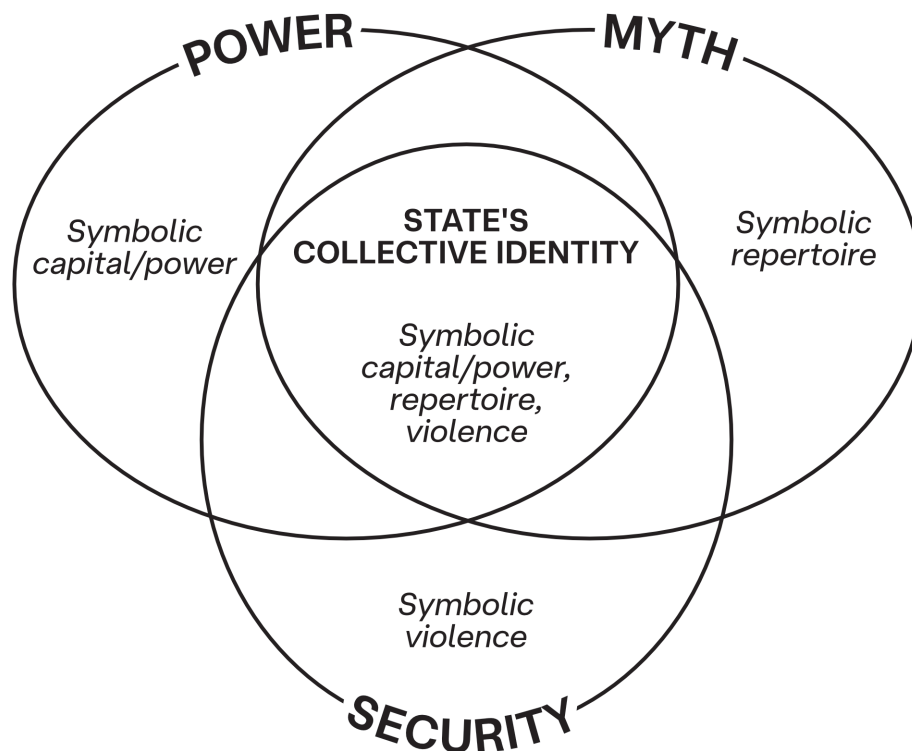


Figure 1. State's collective identity.

In the post-2003 Iraqi political field, the earlier-described Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, has resulted in an unresolved symbolic competition around different symbolic understandings of what Iraq is and should be. In the immediate post-invasion, different groups joined the struggle to fill the power-vacuum left by the Saddam's fall. Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, secular and minority groups' parties as well as different groups from the same ethno-religious community "came up with very different versions of Iraq to tell and who believed they had the right and the power to make their versions the new

reality”.²⁹⁸ With Iran representing as an exogenous and subversive actor, despite the Shia groups emerging as dominant since the first 2005 elections until the time of writing, the symbolic competition has not been resolved. A struggle around those “principles of vision and division”²⁹⁹, which gives the collectivity “a unique vision of its identity and an identical vision of its unity”,³⁰⁰ has continued, thus fragmenting the collectively shared idea of political self.

In the religious field, conversely, the symbolic understanding of the Iraqi Shia ‘religious self’ has emerged as embodied in the teachings of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. In fact, his school of thought has been deeply embedded into Iraqi collective understanding of what the role of Shia religious authority should be, how it should interact with the political elite, on what Myths its guidance is built upon and so on.

The self-other nexus with the Iranian *hawza* has played out very differently to the above case. The Iranian clergy, holding institutional power, also represent a potential vehicle of Iranian interests; however, the Iraqi Shia school of religious thought is so symbolically cohesive and engraved in its core-issues’ attribution of meaning that it has evolved in post-2003 Iraq as a unified self even in its developments. As the chapter on religious authority will illustrate, when Sistani changed his discourse around militias, for instance, enabling the establishment of the PMF in 2014, such a shift has not been symbolically understood by society actors as ‘alien’ to Iraqi religious identity.

2.5.2. The Structuration Process

In the above sub-section, I have presented the interrelation of symbolic power, resonance and violence – the Symbolic Cluster – as the tying link between the three core-constructs of a state’s collective identity. I have argued how constituting the intersection between the three, it can be considered as the ultimate core of a state’s identity. Focusing on this core, a final consideration on a state’s collective identity before moving to its impact on the inter-state relations with a relevant other can be made: that is, the structuration process.

²⁹⁸ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 317.

²⁹⁹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 224.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

As earlier highlighted, these two final elements are intertwined and allow the formulation of a final, comprehensive argument on a state's collective identity. Following the analyses of the self-other nexus and the constructs of Power, Myth and Security, the two sub-questions that underline the investigation of this model – how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe state's collective identity – are thus fully addressed.

In the next section I shall present the structuration process as integrated into this model and present my argument for the post-2003 Iraqi case. In the following section, I shall move on to focus on the main question: how a state's collective impacts the inter-state relations with the relevant other Iran.

As described when analysing 'institution', which represents a structure pertaining to the international arena, social structures are collective knowledge on 'how society works'. This does not mean that they are "not real not real or objective, that they are 'nothing but' beliefs".³⁰¹ As collective knowledge, they are experienced as ontological entities which are "over and beyond the individuals who 'happen to' embody them at the moment".³⁰²

Constructs permeate social structures; they develop into them: they do not 'transform' into something different but, rather, they acquire 'structuration' features by becoming collectively 'known' by society actors. Such a knowledge may not be fully conscious, as the single individual may not possess it as such, but, interacting with other members of society, will 'learn' the behaviour and perception that results from it. Social structures manifest themselves in society as recurring patterns of behaviour and perception. As for institutions, they are not necessarily codified in formal rules or norms; laws and more objective 'rules' or patterned, recognisable behaviour, in fact, rather than 'being' the structures, they *embody* them.

The relationship between agency and structures is regulated by the "duality of structure".³⁰³ That is a dynamic relation whereby action is influenced and constrained

³⁰¹ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", p. 399.

³⁰² Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 58.

³⁰³ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 65–68.

by structures, which in turn are reproduced by agency; actors can operate within the context of rules produced by social structures or outside it. In both cases, they will have an impact on the structures and the structures will have an impact on them (even if they operate outside its 'constraints').³⁰⁴

As structuration is in essence the core-constructs' process of acquiring structuration features, structural changes are ultimately caused by the self-other nexus. The latter, in fact, is the founding dynamic of a state's collective identity: being behind the construction of Power, Myth and Security, it is also the inner mechanics behind the formation of social structures.

This model does not dig into the different social structures and the actual process of constructs-structuration development.³⁰⁵ A thorough analysis of structures would go beyond the scope of this model, which aims at examining the construction of the self through the other and the impact that the resulting constructs have on relations with the other.

The reason why it is integrated into the model as a further axis of the development of constructs is precisely that, due to the duality of structure, the structuration process is what gives a state's collective identity a certain degree of stability over time. Self and other are inextricably bound to each other, but they do not evolve into one, common identity, which would be unrecognisable and indistinguishable from its members and outsiders. Despite the processual changes brought about by the self-other nexus, in fact, social structures impact on the agency in a way that makes it interact with the other following some relative consistency; a coherence that, over time, will also evolve, simultaneously maintaining the features which are perceived by its members and outsiders as pertaining to their collective self.

Considering the structuration of post-2003 Iraqi constructs of Power, Myth and Security, I argue that the Iraqi social system is fragmented. Political authority, in fact, has come to constitute a social system on its own. That is, if one considers Iraqi politics

³⁰⁴ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 65–68.

³⁰⁵ Giddens identifies three different structures: 'signification', 'legitimation' and 'domination'. (Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 65–74). This work does not delve into them and they will be thus not analysed further.

and its militias, it will encounter collective knowledge on 'how the world works' (rules, norms and values) which differs from the rest of Iraqi society (religious authority, civil society, all those actors who do not constitute the political elite).

Due to the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, Iraqi Shia actors have acquired norms and rules (corruption and the reliance on the Iranian patron), which they collectively 'know' as the actual mechanics of politics. However, they are not shared by the rest of Iraqi society which, refusing to accept them, have persistently demanded for change.

The case of the Tishreen movement parties – those parties that were established from civil society following the 2019–2020 protests – is quite significant in this regard. When they were participating in the protests, the Tishreen movement actors' symbolic capital was all centred around the refusal of Iran as an external patron and corruption and violence as the main instruments to achieve governmental power.³⁰⁶ Yet, once they entered the political field following the October 2021 elections, they found it very difficult to organise themselves outside the corrupt Iraqi political framework,³⁰⁷ and they have been tainted by resignation and infighting.³⁰⁸

This is a cogent example of the duality of structure (DS) in a fragmented social system. Still outside the political field, the Tishreen movement actors responded to different rules, norms and values. Once they accessed it, the political field's structures impacted on their agency.

The very same DS principle, however, raises hopes for the future. As the duality of structure instructs, the impact between structure and agency is mutual. As disjointed from Iraqi society the political field may be at the time of writing, Iraqi civil society demands change. With some of its members accessing the field, the possibility that, with time, change will be enacted should be considered.

³⁰⁶ Taif al-Khudary, "The Fragmentation of Iraq's 'Protest Parties' Attests to the Muhasasa System's Resilience," London School of Economics (LSE) Commentary, June 7, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/06/07/the-fragmentation-of-iraqs-protest-parties-attests-to-the-muhasasa-systems-resilience/>. Accessed June 2022.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

2.6. Collective Identity & Its Impact on Inter-State Relations with a Relevant Other

Following the analysis of the intersubjective relation between self and other, along with the core-constructs of Power, Myth and Security, their Symbolic Cluster interlinkage and the structuration process, the model has effectively addressed the two underlying sub-questions: the construction of the self through the other and the description of state's collective identity.

The focal enquiry of this study – how a state's collective identity impacts on inter-state relations with a relevant other and, in this study's case, how Shia commonality shapes the relations between post-2003 Iraq and its relevant other Iran – has also been pursued.

The model has, in fact, led to the conclusion that collective identity, as formed in its core-constructs by the self-other nexus, defines a state's behaviour and discourses towards the other. The attainment of symbolic power (or the lack of it) defines how Power is enacted and how it behaves and constructs its discourses towards the other. Equally, the resonance of Myth(s) on the population influences how the other is perceived and thus shapes behaviour and discourses towards it. Additionally, whether symbolic or repressive violence is enacted and how the other is constructed within Security, also shape the relations with the other and whether violence is perpetrated against it, be it symbolic or repressive. The Symbolic Cluster and the structuration process, in their structured construction of symbolic understandings and attribution of meaning within society, also define how the other is understood and the meaning that is attributing to it, thus shaping the resulting behaviour and discourses around it.

Given the internal differentiation of states and the multifaceted nature of a notion of identity, the coexistence of various agency clusters within society cannot be dismissed. Agency clusters constitutes the different state's facets, and each of them has its own self-other nexus dynamics, resulting in disparate interests and distinct constructs of Power, Myth, and Security.

Their interests, behaviour and narratives towards the other, as constructed by their identity, merge into the overall state's action and discourse. Thus, to reach a

comprehensive understanding of a state's collective identity and its impact on the inter-state relations with the other, a close examination of each of them is necessary.

To pursue this aim, I argue that it is necessary to identify what I term the 'empirical sites of observation': clusters of agency characterised by behavioural patterns, discourse, and interests that are closely associated with the scrutinised notion of identity.

In the next sub-section, I will elucidate the concept of 'empirical sites of observation'. Following that, I will explain how to apply the model to each site and, ultimately, how to use this framework for future cases.

2.6.1. Empirical Sites of Observation

States are internally differentiated, meaning that within each state diverse groups, interests, and components contribute to the overall state's functioning and behaviour. These different groups also embody the complex facets of a single notion of identity: Shiism, for instance, encompasses religious, political and military dimensions, each contributing to its multifaceted nature.

In order to comprehensively address the impact that a notion of identity has on the inter-state relations with a relevant other, I argue that it is essential to identify what I call the 'empirical sites of observation': agency clusters whose patterns of behaviour, discourse and interests are specifically linked to the notion of identity under investigation. Each of these sites has its own self-other nexus dynamic to be investigated, with resulting distinct Power, Myth and Security constructs to be analysed.

The agency behind the construction of the self-other nexus and consequent identity's cores is not limited to the main actors constituting the different empirical sites of observation. As underlined when the core-constructs of Power, Myth and Security were presented, in fact, all actors of society are involved in the construction process. In society, actors interact intersubjectively with other subjects, and their behaviour and discourse are shaped by such interactions. While focusing on a given agency cluster, comprehensive arguments regarding their factual agency within the state's interests,

rooted in identity, cannot dismiss their intersubjective interactions with other sections of society. This aspect will thus be explored for each empirical site of observation.

In this study's case, the empirical sites of observation that will be addressed are post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, political authority and non-state militias. The reason behind their selection lies in the role that such agency clusters have played in the history of Shiism and, specifically, in post-2003 Iraq.

The formation of the Shia clerical class dates back to the 10th century, when Shia scholars tended to gather in territories under benevolent powers,³⁰⁹ with a centralisation of religious authority taking place in the 19th century, with the formation of the '*hawza ailmīyya*' (in Arabic, 'the territory of learning').³¹⁰ This term referred to the community of learning in one specific place: one will for example speak of the *hawza* of Najaf or the *hawza* of Qom; this is still the case at the time of writing.³¹¹

Religious authority as centred around the different *hawzat* (plural of '*hawza*', in Arabic) has been crucial for the development of Shia religious thought ever since. In the post-2003 Iraqi context, the role of religious authority has been crucial, especially considering the challenges that the country has been facing and the active role of guidance that Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has played.

The political activities of Shia groups have spanned a wide range of historical periods and contexts, evolving alongside the development of Shiism itself. From its inception, Shia Islam has not only been a religious belief system, but has also held significant political implications due to its unique theological and historical foundations.³¹² The first modern Shia political party was established in Iraq in the late 1950s,³¹³ but the involvement of the Shia clerical class in politics dates back to much earlier, particularly to the Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501–1722).³¹⁴

³⁰⁹ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 70.

³¹⁰ Meir Litvak, *Shii Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq. The Ulema of Najaf and Karbala* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² See for instance: Moolan Momen, *An Introduction to Shii Islam. The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 1–60.

³¹³ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 83.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

After decades of repression under the Baathist regime, Iraqi Shia parties have played an essential role in the political unfolding, embodying political authority since the first post-invasion 2005 elections until the time of writing.

Finally, the history of Shia military interventions dates back to the early centuries of Islam; the battle of Karbala (680), in which Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, was killed by the Umayyad forces, is one of the most pivotal events in Shia history.³¹⁵

Post-2003 Iraq has seen the emergence of various Shia non-state militias that have played active roles in shaping the country's political and security landscape. These militias have been associated with different political factions and ideologies, contributing to complex dynamics within the Iraqi state and its relations with Iran.

2.6.2. Application of the Model

In the following explanation, I shall illustrate how the model can be applied to answer the main research question that has underlined its construction: how a state's collective identity impacts on the inter-state relations with a relevant other.

After selecting the relevant empirical sites of observation, the self-other nexus within the agency cluster under examination and its significant other will be first analysed. The 'other' will be identified within the corresponding agency cluster. For instance, in the case of post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, the Iranian religious authority will be considered. Similarly, for political authority, the focus will be on the Iranian political establishment; and for non-state militias, the Iranian armed groups (such as the IRGS, Quds Forces and other Iranian armed groups).

This analysis will lead to a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies that shape identity construction in relation to the specific dimension represented by the scrutinised agency cluster (in this case, the religious, political and military levels of Shiism). By gaining insights into the cluster's interests towards the relevant other, it

³¹⁵ Momen, *An Introduction to Shii Islam*, 28–33.

will be possible to delve into an examination of the core-constructs: Power, Myth and Security.

Analysis of these constructs will involve identifying the key attributes that define each one and how they interact with the relevant other. When analysing Power, it will be essential to assess whether symbolic power has been acquired, who the involved actors are – and what the role of the other is –, and the intended outcomes. Similarly, assessing the symbolic resonance of Myth(s) for the relevant agency cluster will entail exploring the role of the other in shaping its impact on the population. Determining whether symbolic or repressive violence has been enacted in Security will also require a close examination of the other's role in the perpetuation of such violence. Additionally, through a comprehensive exploration of the Symbolic Cluster and the constructs' structuration process, a thorough understanding of the agency cluster's constructed identity and the other's role within this framework will be achieved.

These analyses will address the two interrelated research sub-questions that underline this model: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity. Such questions will be articulated according to the agency cluster under examination. In the case of post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, for instance, the aim will be to identify how the religious self has been constructed through the relevant other as embodied by the Iranian religious establishment. The religious dimension of the notion of identity under scrutiny will be also described.

Following this, by highlighting the key points that have emerged from the analysis of each of the notion's model, and focusing on how the notion of identity under scrutiny has been instrumental for the intended aims, final arguments on how the agency cluster's collective identity has impacted its relations with its counterparts will be presented.

Through the application of the model to each of the selected empirical sites of observation, a comprehensive answer to the main research question underlying this study and this model – how a state's collective identity impacts on inter-state relations with a relevant other – will finally be provided.

2.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the constructivist, theoretically driven, conceptual model, which I have developed in order to answer the research question underlying this study: how Shia commonality impacts on the inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran.

Revolving around a notion of identity, this enquiry requires the addressing of a broader question, which has represented the backbone of the proposed model: how a state's collective identity impacts on the inter-state relations with a relevant other. This main enquiry has been broken down into two interrelated sub-questions: how the self is constructed through the other and how to describe a state's collective identity.

Against the theoretical background of Wendt and Neumann who have highlighted the relational and intersubjective nature of a state's collective identity, with a state's IR behaviour based on interests, rooted in identity, and the dialogical relation of the self-other nexus as crucial for the formation of its identity, this model has been conceived to enrich the current literature addressing persistent questions on the topic. 'A state's collective identity' and its mechanics of impact on a state's behaviour are still a conceptual puzzle.

The intersubjective, dialogical and non-hierarchical self-other relation has been conceptualised as the founding dynamic of collective identity. As the relation develops depending on historical contingencies, identity is a non-fixed process. The complex web of power relations and the symbolic meanings that are attributed to discourses and power hierarchies shape how society actors conceive themselves and the other. While adopting a constructivist frame by theorising collective identity as constituted by three core-constructs, the emphasis on the symbolic meanings that are attributed to them, places knowledge and collective understanding as potent drivers which are above the conscious agents.

The frame of core-constructs, symbolic meanings and collective knowledge has been conceived as a tool to analyse any collective identity notions and the impact they have with any relevant other. Despite going beyond the scope of this study, application of this frame on the case of two states which have built enmity discourses and

practices would represent an interesting subject for future research. The elements of alterity in the other can, in fact, be emphasised for political purposes. In such a case, the supposed divergent identity will represent a strong vehicle for enmity practices and discourses. The logic behind it, however, would still be responding to the foundational pillar of this model: self and other are inextricable bound to each other, and define themselves in defining the other as such.³¹⁶

³¹⁶ David Campbell, for instance in his monograph *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, offers an analysis of US foreign policy as a complex interplay of discourse and political actions, spanning from the era of Cortes to the Gulf War. Campbell provides a comprehensive examination of how foreign policy, particularly in its emphasis on border maintenance, serves as a significant practice in shaping identity. Additionally, he highlights the internal consequences stemming from this policy approach. David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1992). His work lays a valuable foundation for future studies seeking to apply the model developed in this research.

3. Post-2003 Iraqi Religious Authority

3.1. Introduction

Following the conceptualisation of this study's model on a state's collective identity and its impact on the inter-state relations with a relevant other, this chapter will focus on the first selected empirical site of observation: post-2003 Iraqi religious authority.

The model will be applied as illustrated in the previous chapter. The two interconnected sub-questions that have been presented as crucial to address the final enquiry will be formulated in accordance with the empirical site of observation under scrutiny. They will be thus articulated: how the post-2003 Iraqi religious authority self is constructed through the Iranian religious establishment as the 'other'; and how to describe Iraqi state's collective identity in the post-regime environment as deriving from the agency of its Shia religious authority. This will enable a comprehensive answer to this study's main enquiry – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran.

Before proceeding, it is essential to clarify a conceptual distinction. The notion of 'religious collective identity' can be inherently ambiguous, as 'religious identity' may pertain to individual belief, communal affiliation, or doctrinal interpretation. However, in this chapter, the term refers specifically to the state's collective identity as it emerges from the agency of religious authority. Consequently, it will be employed in this precise sense throughout the discussion.

In the introductory sub-sections, I shall present post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, presenting the Najafi *hawza* and clarifying which actors I am referring to when I discuss the Iraqi 'religious establishment'. Subsequently, I shall discuss the figure of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, whose school of Shia thought embodies post-2003 Iraqi religious authority. I shall describe his clerical background, the particular post-invasion circumstances which led him to emerge as a critical mediator actor with the US forces and, finally, the key points that characterise his interests, discourse and practices, and upon which the model will be applied.

I shall then proceed to an analysis of what I consider the founding dynamic of a state's identity construction: the self-other nexus. I shall provide a historical account from the 10th century to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, demonstrating how historical developments influenced the self-other nexus. Specifically, I shall highlight how different governments have shaped the clergy's responses and how this led to a pattern of nationalisation between the *hawzat* of Najaf and Qom.

In the post-2003 environment, I shall argue how post-2003 Iraqi religious authority has been characterised by Sistani's prominence within the Najafi clerical circles and the influence of the Iranian religious establishment. While the Iraq-Iran self-other nexus has influenced religious authority in the political sphere, it has not diminished Sistani's social leadership and the independence of the Iraqi *hawza* from political authority.

This argument will be articulated by first delving into Sistani's 'pragmatic' approach to political authority, emphasising how it has emerged amongst other perspectives within the Najafi *hawza* which recalled the Iranian model. Second, I shall discuss how since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iranian religious establishment has held a crucial institutional position and, in the post-regime environment, this has signified pursuing Iranian state interests towards Iraq: maintaining Iraq's dependency for regional advantages. Sistani's June 2014 fatwa against ISIS, leading to the formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), has reflected Sistani's adjustment of his anti-militias stance and adaptation to the Iraqi political reality.

Following my model, the self-other nexus constructs the three cores of the state's collective identity: Power, Myth and Security, with the Symbolic Cluster – the interrelation between symbolic capital/power (two related aspects of a fundamental concept linked to Power), symbolic resonance and symbolic violence – constituting the binding tie between the three.

In the dedicated sections, I shall thus argue how, due to the specificities of the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus as relevant to religious authority, Sistani's approach has embodied normalising Power in the religious field while it is still being contested in the

political one; how the Myths that have been central to Sistani's discourse appear as holding strong symbolic resonance within Iraqi collectivity and, yet, they have not been translated into corresponding political action; and how Sistani's stance on pivotal issues regarding Security has passed through a process of transformation, as the self-other nexus has created a political landscape where Sistani's approach has not been fully applicable.

This political reality is also the result of the self-other nexus as it has unfolded in regard to political authority, which will be the focus of the following chapter. Given the institutional role played by the Iranian religious establishment, drawing strict boundaries between the two dimensions – the religious and the political – is a hard if not impossible task.

In the section on the Symbolic Cluster, I shall illustrate how Iraqi social structures appear fragmented, with the Iraqi political elite having come to constitute a social system on its own, with its own rules, norms and values, which are not shared by the rest of Iraqi society. Such fragmentation explains the apparent contradiction of Sistani's discourse. Despite having led the way to the establishment of PMF, knowing that it would have empowered Iranian-backed militias, Sistani has, in fact, continued to denounce Iranian interference and militia violence, siding with the people when they protested against these issues.

Having these analyses enabled me to provide full answers to the two sub-questions of this chapter, I shall then proceed to tackle the main investigation of this chapter: how Shia religious commonality impacts on the Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations. I shall thus argue how, despite Sistani's efforts in putting forward his symbolic vision for the country, and how such a vision is deeply embedded into the Iraqi collectivity, currently in 2025, he has not fully succeeded in shaping the political landscape in accordance with his understanding of the country. In contrast, the Iranian state, whose interests are also pursued by its religious authority, has succeeded in maintaining Iraq in a dependent position. A concluding section will recapitulate this chapter's main arguments.

To conclude this introductory section, following the previous chapter's visual representation of the state's collective identity, I shall now present a corresponding

depiction as it emerges from the agency of religious authority. Similar visual representations will be provided in the subsequent chapters on the other empirical sites of observation: political authority and non-state militias. This will serve as a conceptual map, guiding the chapter's analysis and structuring its key themes.

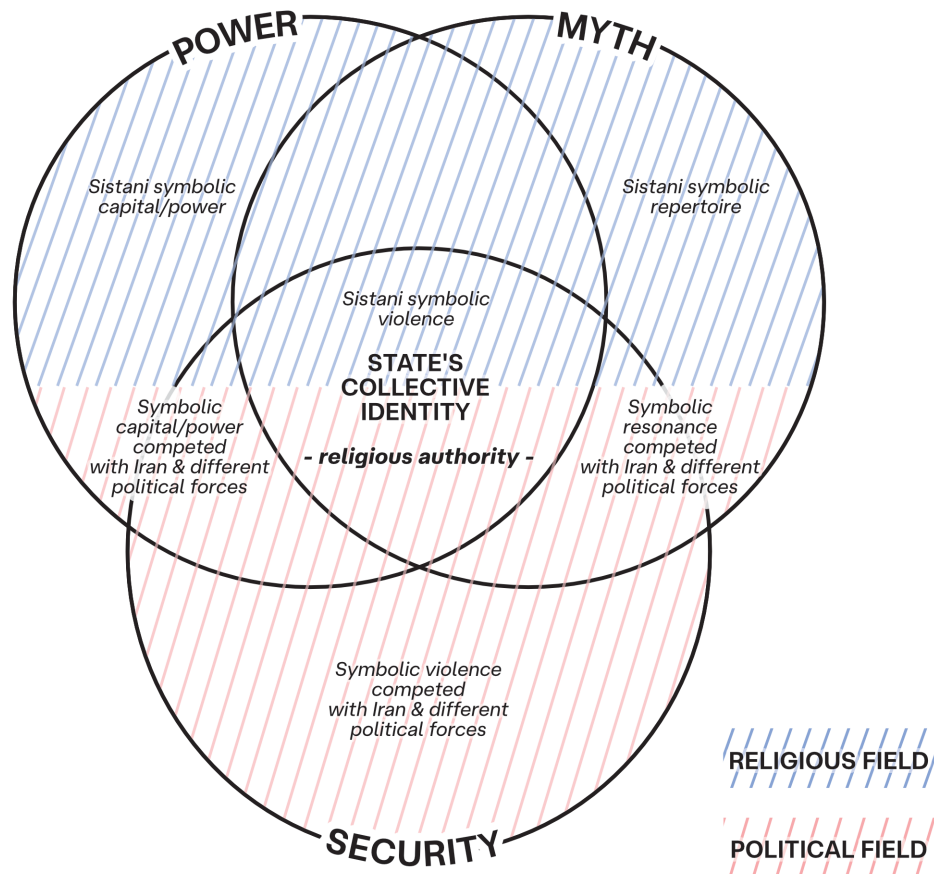


Figure 2. Conceptual Map of Religious Authority and State's Collective Identity

3.1.1. Post-2003 Iraqi Religious Authority: The Najafi Hawza

In 2005, Najaf's local authorities inaugurated a new street which would connect the city with its international airport. It was named after Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian Revolution. The decision sparked acute controversy: whereas some defended the choice, given the paramount role that Imam Khomeini had played in the history of Shiism, many among Shia clerics, Iraqi nationalists and Shia liberals criticised it. It would not do justice to Najaf's local identity and to its status in Shia

Islam, they argued, and it would only underscore the widely held belief that Iraq, since 2003, has been politically and culturally dominated by Iran.³¹⁷

With the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Najafi *hawza*, the Shia centre of religious learning, has regained the prominent role that it used to hold before the 1980s and Baath repression. During the regime, the *hawza* was closed, academic publications halted, the pilgrimage to the holy shrines of Najaf and Karbala forbidden.³¹⁸ Only a few hundred students were in Najaf at the time of the US invasion.³¹⁹ Yet, at the time of writing in 2025, Najaf is one of the most relevant learning centres in the whole Shia world, and four grand ayatollahs are based there: Ali Sistani, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayyad and Bashir Hussein al-Najafi. Moreover, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has perhaps the largest following of any living ayatollah.³²⁰

In the civil war that broke out in the immediate post-invasion period (2003–2007), with the US forces occupying the country, a number of armed groups fighting to fill the power-vacuum, and the Iraqi state yet to be fully reconstructed, Sistani emerged as a key player in the state-building process. He also rose amongst the Najafi *hawza* and the other Grand Ayatollahs based there since 2003.³²¹ In this analysis of post-2003 Iraqi religious authority as relevant to the examination of the construction of the state's religious collective identity, it is precisely the Najafi *hawza* and its clergy which will be examined.

³¹⁷ Ahmed Waheed, "Sharia al-Khomeini Yutheer Jadal fil Najaf", *Al-Hayat*, February 22, 2015, quoted in Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", *Middle East Brief* 105 (January 2017): 4.

³¹⁸ Laurence Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: HURST Publishers, 2008), 87.

³¹⁹ Antonella Caruso, "Sayyid Ali Husayn Sistani: Revitalising the Najaf Marjaiyya in Post-2003 Iraq", *LAMEDINA Institute for International Dialogue Paper*, December 2020, 2, https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/documents_cidob/sayyid_ali_husayn_sistani_revitalising_the_najaf_marja_iyya_in_post_2003_iraq.

³²⁰ Estimates on the number of adherents of any particular ayatollah are made by the collection of religious taxes and the organisation of Shia pilgrimages; there is no other method, as the decision is personal and the networks are transnational (one Shia worshipper in Lebanon may follow an Ayatollah in Iran, Iraq or anywhere else in the world). By these counts, nearly 80 per cent of all Shias follow Sistani. Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy Focus* 59 (2006): 6, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/last-marja-sistani-and-end-traditional-religious-authority-shiism>.

³²¹ Caroleen Marji Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs. Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018), 101, 114, 120.

In Shiism, in fact, a clerical background does not necessarily entail belonging to what can be considered as the *situs* of religious authority. Many clerics are so politically active as to be considered political actors, and in many cases they have not been in line with the school of religious thought which the Najafi *hawza* embodies at a specific time in history. Moqtada al-Sadr, for instance, is a Shia cleric, but his crucial role in post-2003 Iraq concerns the political dimension, rather than the religious one.

Discussing the 2019 protests and the relation between civil society and religious establishment, Geneive Abdo has made a distinction between “corrupt political clerics” and “the clerics who are guardians of the faith”, who were believed by the activists to “work in the interest of Iraqi society”.³²²

In the 2019 protests, in fact, there were highly politically active clerics of whom Iraqi activists were highly suspicious.³²³ Including them in the Iraqi religious authority would lead to inaccurate conclusions regarding the role played by the post-2003 Iraqi clerical establishment. Some 2021 polls showed how Sistani and the grand ayatollahs of Najaf were revered by the Iraqis, whereas some individuals coming from the clerical class were seen with distrust.³²⁴

“Shia religious symbolism has come to define some of the demonstrations. [...] Does this religious symbolism make Iraqi demonstrators religious, or are they secular oriented, as they often describe themselves? This question is irrelevant [...] Whether or not the protesters are religious, they have appreciated the support from the clerics. There is one caveat: many of the protest leaders who were interviewed for this paper drew a distinction between the corrupt political clerics, as they call them, and the clerics who are guardians of the faith, who they believe work in the interest of Iraqi society”.³²⁵

³²² Geneive Abdo, “The Long Game in Iraq: Shia Clerics, Activists Find Common Cause To Confront the State”, *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* Issue Paper 2 (17 May 2021): 13, <https://agsiw.org/the-long-game-in-iraq-shia-clerics-activists-find-common-cause-to-confront-the-state/>. Accessed October 2023.

³²³ One example amongst others, the cleric Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, very active during the protests, was perceived by the people as belonging of the political establishment, not as a representative of the clerical authority. In fact, he had participated in the drafting of the 2005 constitution, arguing that Islamic law should take precedence over civil law. Edward Wong, “Clerics Want Islamic Law Written into Iraq Constitution”, *The Seattle Times*, 6 February 2005, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/clerics-want-islamic-law-written-into-iraq-constitution/>. Accessed October 2023.

³²⁴ Abdo, “The Long Game”, 8.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

As this chapter will thoroughly examine, post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, embodied in the Sistani's Shia school of thought, has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's social and political landscape. Civil society has greatly relied on this authority for guidance. In the following sub-section, the factors contributing to Sistani's prominence will be explored.

3.1.2. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani

This introduction to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani will include an overview of his clerical background leading up to the invasion and the unique circumstances that propelled him into the position of the primary interlocutor with US forces. Subsequently, I shall present the key points of his teachings and guidance upon which my model will be applied in order to analyse the contribution to the Iraqi state's collective identity made by its religious authority and the impact it has had on relations with Iran.

The expectation that Shia religious leaders would guide matters of faith and wield significant influence in governance and societal affairs is deeply rooted in centuries of tradition and theological scholarship. This tradition has shaped the influential role that religious leaders play in both religious and political realms.³²⁶

In post-2003 Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, along with the Shia school of thought he represents, has emerged as a moral compass. His influence has extended beyond the Shia worshippers to encompass the Shia political parties that have held sway in the country's political landscape. His fatwas and statements have supported or legitimised crucial choices and courses of actions: amongst several examples, it was he who guided the difficult transition from the US occupation to the first national elections in 2005, acting as a tactful political mediator despite his staunch opposition to the invasion and occupation.³²⁷ It was he who led to the Dawa party no-confidence vote for Maliki in 2014 and thus to the election of a new prime minister after years of public discontent due to Maliki's authoritarian turn.³²⁸ With his June 2014 fatwa, he

³²⁶ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 76.

³²⁷ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs. Nationalism*, 41–69.

³²⁸ Loveday Morris, "A Letter from Sistani Turned the Tide Against Iraq's Leader", *The Washington Post*, 13 August 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/a-letter-from-sistani-turned-the->

called on Iraqis to join the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leading to the PMF establishment.³²⁹

All Shia parties have looked at him as a moral guide and, at times of crisis, as the ultimate source of informal authority.³³⁰ Media outlets have often referred to him as “the most influential political figure in Iraq”.³³¹ On several occasions of social unrest, he called for reforms, denounced the government’s corruption and sectarian policies, and sided with the people against the violence towards the demonstrators.³³²

His rise can be attributed to the prestige he had gained in the previous decade and the unique opportunities presented in the immediate post-invasion period. Moreover, the school of Shia thought he has put forward has been recognised as truly ‘Iraqi’, as it lies on the traditional Najafi approach. While this last point will be analysed in the section on the self-other nexus, I will delve into the other factors in the following paragraphs.

Sistani had been granted the title of ‘Grand Ayatollah’ over a decade before the US invasion.³³³ When he returned to Iraq in 2003, his *marjaiyya* was already one of the most followed in the Shia world.³³⁴ The ‘*marjaiyya*’ (community, in Arabic) is the group of believers who abide by the teachings and interpretations of Shia Islam of one *marja* (pl. *maraji*), a senior living *mujtahid*.³³⁵

According to the *marjaiyya al-taqlid* doctrine (the source of emulation), the *mujtahid* is a Shia cleric who has reached the level of *ijtihad*: sufficiently wide knowledge to formulate independent interpretations of the religious law.³³⁶ By this

[tide-against-iraqs-leader/2014/08/13/3b3426cf-60ee-4856-ad26-d01a9c6cc9c3_story.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/08/13/3b3426cf-60ee-4856-ad26-d01a9c6cc9c3_story.html). Accessed October 2023.

³²⁹ Al-Qarawee, “Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq”, 4.

³³⁰ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, “The Subtle Power of Sistani”, *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 14 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80346>.

³³¹ See for instance: Susan Sachs, “The Cleric Spoiling U.S. Plans”, *The New York Times*, 18 January 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/18/weekinreview/the-cleric-spoiling-us-plans.html>. Accessed 6 June 2023; Larry Kaplow, “Iraq’s Most Influential Man Gets Pulled Back Into Politics”, *NPR*, 24 June 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/06/24/325169087/iraqs-most-influential-man-gets-pulled-back-into-politics>. Accessed June 2023; and Martin Chulov, “Shia Leaders in Two Countries Struggle for Control over Iraqi State”, *The Guardian*, 15 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/15/shia-leaders-iraq-iran-ayatollah-ali-sistani>. Accessed June 2023.

³³² Abdo, “The Long Game,” 6–10.

³³³ Caruso, “Sayyid Ali Husayn,” 3.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Löüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 76.

³³⁶ Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, “The Institutionalisation of the Marja-i Taqlid in the Nineteenth Century Shiite Community”, *The Muslim World* 83, no. 3–4 (July–October 1994): 295–299.

doctrine, ordinary believers and clerics who are not *mujtahid* must follow the opinions of one living *marja* on a wide range of issues, from religious law to ritualistic issues, from men and women's physiology to political matters.³³⁷ The society of the *ulema* can then confer on the *marja* the hierarchical titles of grand ayatollah (for the most learned), ayatollah, *hujjat al-Islam*, sheikh.³³⁸

Both the recognition of the status of *marja* and of 'ayatollah' are a matter of religious knowledge as well as social weight; they do not imply any formal procedure or official elections, but rather follow a long process of mobilisation, which involves clerics, wealthy laity and ordinary believers.³³⁹

Given the length of this process and the number of factors involved, it often happens that a living *marja* chooses one of his students to succeed him after his death.³⁴⁰ This is what happened to Sistani, who was granted the title of 'grand ayatollah' upon his mentor's death, Grand Ayatollah Abu l-Qasim al-Khui.³⁴¹ When al-Khui died in 1992, not only was Sistani recognised as a 'grand ayatollah', but he also inherited his vast international network of religious endowments and charity organisations.³⁴²

This important legacy further expanded his financial resources and contributed to his prestige, which he had started to build in the very early 1990s.

³³⁷ Moussavi, "The Institutionalisation of the Marja-i Taqlid in the Nineteenth Century Shiite Community", 297.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 295–299.

³³⁹ This process involves different stages. First, the candidate needs to affirm himself within the *hawza*: he must provide certificates attesting his ability to practice *ijtihad*, have a high number students attending his classes, and publish his lectures. Then, besides being recognised as pious and upright man, he must establish bonds with the lay environment through religious and charitable activities. For this, he needs economic supporters: merchant and landowner notabilities whose funding allows him to carry on his charity endeavours. Finally, he must have reached a venerable age: he must have published a treaty of religious behaviour (*risala amaliyya*) in which he lays out his views on a number of legal matters, and he must have waited for the death of a senior *marja*. Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 77–79.

³⁴⁰ Lots of speculation has surrounded Sistani (94 years old at the time of writing in 2025), whose successor is not clear. Geneive Abdo, "After Sistani: Is There a Successor to Continue His Legacy?", *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 28, 2022, <https://agsiw.org/after-sistani-is-there-a-successor-to-continue-his-legacy/>. Accessed October 2023.

³⁴¹ Caruso, "Sayyid Ali Husayn Sistani", 2.

³⁴² Babak Rahimi, *Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Baathist Iraq* (Washington DC: United State Institute of Peace, 2007), 8.

It was then, in fact, that he started to develop his *marjaiyya*.³⁴³ Following his incarceration after the Shia uprisings against Saddam Hussein in 1991,³⁴⁴ he had withdrawn from public life in Iraq and moved to the Shia learning of Qom, in Iran, where his moral guidance had attracted many believers, as the generous donations pouring to Qom and, from 2003, to Najaf, show.³⁴⁵ According to Vali Nasr, during the years in Qom his reputation of pious *marja* grew stronger and stronger. It contrasted with the perceived corruption of Iranian clerics,³⁴⁶ and that is why he was more popular amid the ordinary worshippers than amongst the eminent Iranian clerics.³⁴⁷

In addition to his pre-existing prestige in 2003, specific post-invasion circumstances propelled him into a pivotal role in the country's post-conflict reconstruction. Indeed, the US forces occupying the country treated Sistani as the *de facto* leader of the Shia community.³⁴⁸ Against the backdrop of civil war and anti-occupation resistance, Sistani was seen as the only interlocutor they could communicate with.

The US assumption regarding Iraqi society was one that stressed its multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian 'nature'. In the chaotic context of the post invasion, they thus looked for representatives from ethnic and sectarian communities with the intent of arranging a post-regime political settlement which would reflect the ethno-sectarian 'complexities' of Iraqi society, which was divided, in their narrative, between Sunnis, Shias and Kurds.³⁴⁹

Putting aside the complexities regarding the issue of sectarian tensions (which will be analysed in the next chapter on political authority), the sectarian configuration of formal authority was not common in Iraq. Despite the civil war having quickly acquired a sectarian sentiment, as it will be discussed later, sectarianism was officially treated as a retrograde ideology and, unlike Kurdish parties which stressed their

³⁴³ Rahimi, *Ayatollah Sistani*, 4-8.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival. How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future* (London and New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 170.

³⁴⁶ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, 221.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

³⁴⁸ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal Marja': Shii Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 46, no. 3 (2019): 481–497.

³⁴⁹ Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal Marja'", 484–485.

Kurdishness in their names and slogans, Shia and Sunni parties would avoid explicit sectarian labelling.³⁵⁰

Besides the absence of explicitly 'Shia' parties, the country was in a state of chaos, embroiled in a civil war where armed factions were reluctant to engage with the US.³⁵¹ This does not signify that Sistani's role in the subsequent years should be attributed to the US occupying forces, nor should it imply any intentional influence from their side. Rather, Sistani's skilful and pragmatic mediation abilities coincided with US interests in identifying a Shia representative and potential interlocutor.

As proposed by my model, to fully comprehend the pivotal role of post-2003 Iraqi religious authority embodied by Sistani, in acting as a pragmatic mediator among various components of Iraqi society (Shia parties, armed factions, and civil society) and, ultimately, in contributing to the Iraqi state's collective identity and its impact on the relations with Iran, it is essential to analyse Sistani's interests, discourses, and practices. In the following sections, I will present the key points of Sistani's teachings and guidance. This list will serve as a framework to systematically visualise the conceptual material upon which my model will be applied.

- Religious authority's *pragmatic* approach with respect to political authority.

In contrast to the Iranian model, which is characterised by ideological underpinnings and the institutionalisation of theocratic rule, Sistani's approach to post-2003 political authority aligns with the Najafi Shia clerical tradition. In this tradition, religious authority is exercised pragmatically to achieve various objectives, whether political, religious, or others.³⁵² Rather than categorising the Iranian Shia clerical school as 'active' and the Iraqi school as 'quiet',³⁵³ a more meaningful distinction lies in labelling them as 'ideological' and 'pragmatic' approaches.

- Defence of the *hawza* as an institution and of the established and institutionalised proceedings to validate religious authority.

³⁵⁰ Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal Marja'", 485.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 2.

³⁵³ See for instance: Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslim* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

This commitment revolves around the preservation of the *hawza* as an institution and the established, institutionalised procedures for confirming religious authority. It encompasses the protection of scholarly traditions, their hierarchical criteria, and associated mechanisms. Furthermore, it involves safeguarding the *hawza*'s autonomy from political authorities, allowing religious leaders to pragmatically collaborate with governmental bodies to advance their objectives without undue constraints.

- Defence of social and political order.

Sistani issued fatwas and decrees on the importance of the rule of law, condemning the illegality of militias and looting, and advocating for respect for the government.³⁵⁴ His consistent message has been to work *within* the established system rather than against it.³⁵⁵

Given the behaviour of the post-2003 political class, he has thus taken a strong stance against corruption. For instance, following the 2018 parliamentary election, when the government formation process faltered, resulting in chaos and political deadlock, Sistani called for a “new, competent, transparent courageous and honest”³⁵⁶ prime minister. He stressed that this new leader should not have held a previous government position. Otherwise, he warned, the “*marjaiyya* will continue to boycott government officials and will remain the voice of the deprived and the defender of their rights”.³⁵⁷

- Political and religious authorities should pursue the *independence* of a *united Iraq* against foreign forces.

This ideological posture towards foreign interference has been apparent on several occasions: in his mediation with the US forces following the invasion and also in the subsequent years, when he often issued fatwas against Iranian foreign interference and the dangers that Iranian-backed Shia militias would pose to the country's stability. This posture will be analysed in the section on Myth, showing that

³⁵⁴ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs.*, 15–40.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Al-Qarawee, “The Subtle Power of Sistani”.

it holds important historical references and strong symbolic resonance. It represents, in fact, a pivotal Iraqi Myth.

- Religious authority's social leadership.

In its highest form, religious authority serves the interests of the *people* and remains accountable to them. Ayatollahs' political attitudes are inspired by their roles as *social* leaders rather than strictly political ones.³⁵⁸ In the face of the recurring social and political upheavals in post-2003 Iraq, they have consistently displayed robust backing for Iraqi civil society and a resolute defence of human rights, particularly in response to instances of violent suppression of social protests.

- For the Iraqi state, Islam stands at the centre with the inclusion of all ethnic and religious identities; any sectarian conflict should be peacefully resolved.

Islam is placed at the centre of what should be the moral and religious conduct of people's lives and, when it comes to governance, all ethnic and religious identities should be included, sectarian power-sharing agreements should be refused, and any conflicts related to sectarian issues should be resolved through peaceful means.³⁵⁹ Following the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, Sistani referred to all Iraqis as "brothers of humanity", and called on Iraqis to "throw away hatred and violence and substitute love and peaceful dialogue in order to solve all the disputes".³⁶⁰

3.2. Self-Other Nexus in Post-2003 Iraqi Religious Authority

In the following section, I shall describe the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus as relevant to religious authority. In the first subsection, following a theoretical contextualisation of the self-other nexus, I shall offer a historical account from the 10th century to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, highlighting the trajectory of the self-other nexus as impacted by historical developments.

³⁵⁸ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 31, 45, 49, 51.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 129–151.

³⁶⁰ Sistani, "A Message to the Iraqi People about Sectarian Sedition", 18 July 2006, quoted in Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 143.

I shall underline how the Shia Iraqi and Iranian clerical classes have evolved over the centuries in a continuous process of mutual observation, identifying elements of 'resemblance' and 'difference' in each other. Specifically, I shall illustrate how encounters with different governments have shaped their varying approaches in dealing with political authority and how, especially in the 20th century, this has led to a pattern of nationalisation between the *hawza* of Najaf on one hand and the *hawza* of Qom on the other.

The second sub-section will delve into the development of the self-other nexus in the post-2003 context, and it will be structured into two parts. In the first one, focusing on the crucial aspect of the clerical approach towards political authority, I shall illustrate how the post-2003 Iraqi approach has evolved by following the dynamic of the self-other nexus within Najafi *hawza* itself. Elements that recalled the Iranian model have been identified amongst the Najafi senior clerics, with Sistani's 'pragmatic' approach emerging as dominant. It has, in fact, been recognised in line with tradition, and is thus truly 'Iraqi'. This process has enabled a pivotal re-negotiation of the role of Shia religious authority within the Iraqi state after decades of political repression.

In the second part, I shall illustrate how in regard to Sistani's stance on matters that concerned the behaviour of political authority, the trajectory of the self-other nexus has unfolded differently. Given the institutional specificities of the Iranian state, drawing a strict line between the political and religious dimensions is not entirely possible. The boundaries between the self-other nexus concerning religious authority and that of the political establishment are thus very blurry. Despite Sistani and the *hawza*'s efforts in curbing the influence of militias and Iranian political interference, given the entrenched nature of these political issues, they have not succeeded. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iranian religious establishment has held a crucial institutional position and, in the post-regime environment, this has signified pursuing the main Iranian state interest towards Iraq, maintaining Iraq's dependency for regional advantages.

At the time of writing in 2025, Iran appears to have achieved its goal, and the case of Sistani's June 2014 fatwa against ISIS, which led to the establishment of the PMF, illustrates how he has adapted to the prevailing Iraqi reality and adjusted his

posture and course of action. In a sense, it could be argued that the other Iran has had a crucial impact on the Iraqi self, leading to a substantial modification of Sistani's stance.

This section represents a critical phase in tackling the first sub-question of this chapter: how the religious authority self is constructed through the other. Following an examination of the interaction between the Iraqi self and the Iranian 'other' in the context of religious authority, the analysis will now move towards exploring how the self-other nexus has constructed the fundamental cores of the state's collective identity: Power, Myth, and Security. This transition will enable the investigation of the second sub-question: how to describe the state's collective identity as impacted by the agency of its religious authority.

Ultimately, this comprehensive examination will provide a thorough response to the inquiry regarding the formation of the Iraqi religious authority' self through the Iranian 'other', which will enable me to address the main question of this chapter: how Shia religious commonality has impacted the post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran.

3.2.1. From the 10th Century to the 1979 Iranian Revolution

Within my model's theorisation of the self-other nexus, Shia Iraqi and Iranian religious authorities, as the self and the other of this empirical site of observation, should not be conceived as binary and hierarchical oppositions, where one is primary, the 'origin', and the other is secondary, derivative.³⁶¹ It is their *nexus* that gives both ontological meaning: that is, their relation, their intersubjective interaction. The latter happens through a process of mutual recognition of 'alterity and resemblance'. "We recognize the other as *resembling* us, but *exterior* to us";³⁶² "Each is for the other the middle term through which each mediates itself".³⁶³ Self and other "recognise themselves as mutually recognising one another".³⁶⁴ This process is one of

³⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 22–50.

³⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Séan Hand, (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 43, (the italics in the text are the author's).

³⁶³ Georg Friedrich von Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 112.

³⁶⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112.

establishing “*difference*”³⁶⁵, “although [difference] does not exist”³⁶⁶ as an ontologically prior form. It, in fact, emerges through the interaction process.

The acquisition of ontological meaning of self and other, as arising from their inter-subjective relation, happens effectively like a *dialogue*. In a dialogue, “there is a constant interaction between meanings”,³⁶⁷ and all “meanings” “have the potential of conditioning others”.³⁶⁸ “Which [meaning] will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of *utterance*”.³⁶⁹ That is, the meaning that self and other acquire arises from the inter-subjective relation itself.

The construction of Iraqi and Iranian religious identities over the centuries serves as a compelling example of the self-other nexus as outlined above. The specificities related to the formation of the Shia clerical class and religious authority centred around the *hawza* represent significant empirical manifestations of the “originary synthesis”,³⁷⁰ the process of establishing ‘difference’ in the inter-subjective observation of ‘alterity’ and ‘resemblance’, and the role played by the historical contingencies in this unfolding.

This process dates back to the 10th century, when a substantial sense of ‘self’ and ‘other’ within religious authority did not exist although Shiism did exist: its roots, in fact, trace back to the early Islamic period.³⁷¹ From the 10th until the 16th centuries, Shia populations tended to gather in territories under benevolent powers.³⁷² Rather than Shia learning centres as they would appear in the following centuries, these were primarily Shia communities striving to maintain their independence from Sunni-dominated regions.

³⁶⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 62.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 426. (The italics is the author’s).

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 426.

³⁷⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 62.

³⁷¹ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 70.

³⁷² They would, for instance, gather in the Mesopotamian shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala under the rule of the Shia Buyyid dynasty (945–1055) or, from the 13th century onward, in the region of the Jabal Amil (today’s southern Lebanon). Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shia Islam. The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 75–104.

With the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) in the Persian Empire, today's Iran, and the transformation of Shiism into the state religion, clerics reached the status of a fully-fledged hierocracy.³⁷³ While 'depending' on the state, they also enjoyed unprecedented social and economic possibilities.³⁷⁴ A clerical class based in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, hosting the tombs of the Imams, also emerged under the Ottoman Empire in today's Iraq. The two 'poles' – Qom and Teheran and Najaf and Karbala – rose as epicentres of Shia religious learning amongst others (in India, Pakistan, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, etc.).³⁷⁵

With the formation of the Shia clerical class, the process of mutual observation of 'resemblance' and 'alterity' between different centres of learning was initiated. In today's Iraq and Iran, in fact, the Shia clergy encountered different political authorities to deal with. The diverse Shia clergy's strategies that were adopted differentiated the two, and a consequent sense of 'self' and 'other' in their respective identities developed.

While Iranian scholars were integrated into a formal hierarchy, the Shia clerics under Ottoman rule developed as a kind of *de facto* extra-territorial clerical power in the cities of Najaf and Karbala. The shrine cities, in fact, effectively constituted a zone of frequent military conflicts between the Ottoman and Persian empires.³⁷⁶ While deprived of state support, Shia clerics in Najaf and Karbala relied on the voluntary contributions of the lay population, launching several campaigns of conversion of the Mesopotamian tribes to Shiism.³⁷⁷

Such an independent and loosely regulated environment enhanced growth in the religious teachings and the scholarship they would produce and, by the end of the 19th century, the Mesopotamian scholars had gained pre-eminence over their colleagues based in Iran.³⁷⁸

³⁷³ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 70.

³⁷⁴ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam. Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shiite Iran from the Beginning to 1980* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 122–159.

³⁷⁵ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 71.

³⁷⁶ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shias of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 14.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 25–48.

³⁷⁸ Nakash, *The Shias of Iraq*, 184–201.

In this context of scholarly empowerment, the clerical class in Najaf and Karbala developed regular patterns of behaviour, eventually giving rise to a fully-fledged institution: the '*hawza ailmiiyya*' ('the territory of learning', in Arabic).³⁷⁹ This term initially referred to the collective body of religious professionals whose primary task was teaching and learning. Yet, as Najaf's influence expanded beyond its city limits in the 19th century, particularly through Najafi representatives traveling to regions like Iran and India to teach and collect religious alms, a pattern of centralisation unfolded.³⁸⁰ Simultaneously, with the introduction of the *marjaiyya al-taqlid* doctrine, long-distance networks were progressively built.³⁸¹ The term '*hawza*' came thus to represent the community of learning in specific locations: one would refer to the *hawza* of Najaf or the *hawza* of Qom, for instance, as it is at the time of writing.³⁸²

Until the first half of the 20th century, within this centralised and transnational framework, the clerical environment had very volatile national frontiers.³⁸³ The Najafi *hawza*, whose influence definitely outreached the Iranian *hawzat* in Qom and Teheran, strongly supported their counterparts in Iran when the latter mobilised against their rulers.³⁸⁴

When Iran, for instance, witnessed what would be remembered as the 1905–1911 'constitutional revolution',³⁸⁵ which led to the establishment of an elected parliament, three Iranian *mujtahid* based in Najaf mobilised the *hawza* in favour of the constitutional stance, playing an active role in presenting the scholars as leading political actors.³⁸⁶

³⁷⁹ Meir Litvak, *Shii Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq. The Ulema of Najaf and Karbala* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22.

³⁸⁰ Litvak, *Shii Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq*, 67.

³⁸¹ The Najafi scholar Murtadha Ansari (d. 1864) introduced the *marjaiyya al-taqlid* doctrine. This doctrine, in fact, allowed scholars based in Najaf, as well as other *hawzat*, to be followed by worshippers from any area of the Shia world. Moussavi, "The Institutionalisation of the Marja-i Taqlid in the Nineteenth Century Shiite Community". 280).

³⁸² Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 74.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

³⁸⁵ Abdul-Hadi Hairi, *Shiism and Constitutionalism in Iran. A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Iranian Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 98–100.

³⁸⁶ In 1909, the Shia scholar Mohammed Naini wrote one of the most important books of Shia political philosophy, *The Awakening of the Islamic Community and the Purification of the Nation*. The book was revolutionary in many aspects, as it articulated a connection between the Islamic concepts of government and the Western concepts of constitution and the rule by the people. Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 80–81.

In the second half of the 20th century, however, a trend of nationalisation among Shia clergy became apparent, as nationalist ideologies in both Iraq and Iran were very popular and also impacted on the Shia clerical class.³⁸⁷ Driven, once again, by the different political authorities they would encounter, a growing sense of national ‘alterity’ emerged among the Shia *hawzat*.

From the 1920s until the end of Baath rule in 2003, Iraqi Shia clerics faced varying degrees of hostility from their governments. While they enjoyed relative autonomy and stability during the British mandate and the monarchy period (from 1921, with King Faisal I, to the 1958 revolutionary coup),³⁸⁸ the Qasim regime in 1958 sought to curtail the influence of religious figures and institutions.³⁸⁹ The Baath regime, in contrast, unleashed overt repression against the Shia community.³⁹⁰

In Iran, on the other hand, clerics gradually gained strength under successive regimes, eventually becoming a strong opposition force that led the 1979 Islamic Revolution against the Shah.³⁹¹ The revolution further elevated the status of the Qom *hawza* and, due to the political role assigned to clerics, solidified a pattern of polarisation within the Shia learning community, with Qom on one side and Najaf on the other.³⁹²

3.2.2. The Self-Other Nexus Trajectory in Post-2003 Iraq

Describing the continuous connection between Iraqi and Iranian religious authorities over the centuries, the preceding investigation has also highlighted the critical role of Shia clergy’s relations with political authority and the various strategies adopted by the clerical class for their survival. The following section, focusing on the self-other nexus trajectory in post-2003 Iraq, will be divided into two parts, building upon the earlier analysis.

The first part will delve into the re-negotiation of the Iraqi *hawza*’s relations with Iraqi political authority after decades of repression, illustrating how Sistani’s pragmatic

³⁸⁷ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*., 82.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 80–81.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

approach emerged as dominant and how the self-other nexus unfolded within the Iraqi *hawza* itself. Given the interconnection between self and other, as have emerged from the previous analysis on the evolution of the two clergies over time, elements of 'alterity' have also been identified with Najaf, including the example of Grand Ayatollah Bushir al-Najafi.

The second part will illustrate how the political authority has significantly impacted Shia religious authority, leading Sistani and the Najafi *hawza* to navigate a political reality with crucial implications for their stances on pivotal issues. The role of the Iranian state in shaping this political context, along with the influence of the Iranian religious establishment, holding an institutional role, will be emphasised. Through the example of Sistani's June 2014 fatwa, the political and military implications, and the reaction of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the paragraph will shed light on how Iran, with its political and religious actors, has impacted Iraqi religious authority.

This complex reality reflects the tightly interconnected political and religious self-other nexuses within the framework of Shia Islam.

3.2.3. A 'Pragmatic' Approach Towards Political Authority. The Self-Other Nexus Within the Najafi *Hawza*

In post-regime Iraq, after decades of repression against the Shia clerics, the relationship between religious and political authorities has been renegotiated. Due to the continuous political instability, Sistani has in fact provided guidance on several occasions and has come to constitute a crucial figure for the ongoing Iraqi development. The way in which he has done so can be considered in line with the Najafi tradition.

That is, considering the 20th century nationalisation of the Iranian and Iraqi school as outlined in the previous section, the school he has embodied recalls that of the Iraqi clergy in the first half of the 1900s. This clerical model has often been described as 'quietist', a definition which seems inaccurate in many ways. Rather than 'quietist', the Iraqi approach can be defined as 'pragmatic'.³⁹³ The Najafi clerical school

³⁹³ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 2.

is one that opts for guidance without direct political intervention. While maintaining independence from political authority, it tactfully pursues its objectives.³⁹⁴

Considering the inter-subjective and continuous exchange between Iraqi and Iranian clerics across the centuries, it should not be surprising that stances that recalled the Iranian model have co-existed within the Najafi *hawza*. Through the self-other nexus observation of 'resemblance' and 'alterity' elements with such different stances, Sistani's approach has progressively emerged in post-2003 Iraq and been affirmed as dominant. In theoretical terms, it has acquired full ontological existence: that is, it has been recognised by the religious and broader Iraqi collectivity as the 'self'.

Amongst the three Najafi grand ayatollahs besides Sistani, (Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayyad, Bashir Hussein al-Najafi), the case of the latter seems the most significant. In the next paragraphs, I shall describe the exchange between Sistani and Najafi and how Sistani has established his position.

Sistani's pragmatic approach is rooted in the principle of '*taklif shari*' ('legal responsibility', in Arabic). This concept encompasses the religious duties and responsibilities that individuals are obligated to uphold in accordance with *sharia*, Islamic law.³⁹⁵ Within the Najafi clerical tradition, this principle underscores the importance of religious authorities safeguarding communal unity in alignment with Islamic principles, while also preventing harm arising from occupation or internal conflicts.³⁹⁶ In contrast to Ruhollah Khomeini, who formulated the concept of the political authority of the jurist and incorporated it into the Islamic republic's constitution, Sistani displayed no inclination to formalise his authority or establish a clerically governed system akin to that of Iran.³⁹⁷ Yet, in line with the Najafi traditional articulation of the *taklif shari*, when the first post-national elections were held in 2005, for example, Sistani's office, directed by his influential son, Muhammed Reza, played a key role in forming the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the Shia coalition which won the elections.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 2–3.

³⁹⁵ Al-Qarawee, "The Formal Marja", 489.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 481–497, 489.

³⁹⁷ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 2–3.

³⁹⁸ Al-Qarawee, "The Formal Marja", 489.

While preventing members of his clerical network from running for public offices,³⁹⁹ Sistani also aimed at asserting religious authority as a crucial extraconstitutional actor. In the prologue of the Iraqi constitution which was drafted and took effect in 2005, in fact, the guidance of the religious leadership is explicitly mentioned.⁴⁰⁰ The line between ‘political interference’ and active political guidance is very subtle. With his fatwas and statements, Sistani intervened on several occasions in the following years, publically criticising the political establishment’s corruption, violence and its reliance on Iranian-backed militias. Safeguarding communal unity and providing guidance without crossing the delicate boundaries between ‘social’ and ‘political’ leadership has proven to be challenging, and Bashir Hussein al-Najafi’s positions on various occasions have served as instances of ongoing negotiation and definition.

When the 2005 elections were approaching, for instance, Najafi openly endorsed the UIA, publicly stating that voting for other parties would “serve the enemies of Iraq”.⁴⁰¹ Sistani, conversely, had incited Iraqis to exercise their right to vote.⁴⁰² His insistence on the democratic process underscored how Sistani’s school of Shia thought conceives the *hawza*’s involvement in politics: religious authority is expected to embody social leadership and it morally guides the *people*; it does not operate in the political field as a competitor.

Also, during Nouri al-Maliki’s first and second governments (2006–2014), Sistani consistently criticised Maliki’s actions. He did so, however, insisting that the premier would address the legitimate demands of the protesters who had taken to the streets throughout his premiership.⁴⁰³ He did not interfere directly in the political process, but emphasised national unity and respect for the people.

When Maliki ran for a third term in 2014, social unrest was engulfing the country. Maliki’s authoritarian rule, in fact, had raised huge concerns amongst Iraqi

³⁹⁹ Al-Qarawee, “The Formal Marja”, 490.

⁴⁰⁰ *Iraqi Constitution* (2005), preamble.

⁴⁰¹ Edward Wong, “Shiite Coalition Strained as Iraq Elections Near; Fissures Grow in Conservative Grouping”, *International Herald Tribune*, 9 December 2005.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*

⁴⁰³ *Al Jazeera*, “Cleric Urges Iraq Poll Neutrality”, 27 February 2010, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/2/27/cleric-urges-iraq-poll-neutrality>. Accessed June 2023.

activists and local and international observers, including the United Nations.⁴⁰⁴ On this occasion, the contrasting approaches of Sistani and Najafi towards political authority became starkly evident.

While Sistani firmly maintained that Iraqi voters should “determine the fate of their country through elections”,⁴⁰⁵ Najafi repeatedly criticised the Maliki government, labelling it as “deficient”, “inefficient”, and lacking in “qualified functionaries”.⁴⁰⁶ When Najafi publicly denounced key Maliki allies who were up for re-election, Sistani asserted his understanding of *hawza*’s role, issuing a statement which urged the *marjaiyya* to maintain strict neutrality regarding the various candidates.⁴⁰⁷

Najafi continued to name politicians, accusing specific ones of having “betrayed the country”, “stolen public money”, and helped to create “sectarianism”.⁴⁰⁸ He issued a fatwa that called on the public “not to elect any party that has even one single minister in the government”.⁴⁰⁹ He also openly endorsed the Citizen Coalition headed by Ammar al-Hakim, who had pro-Iranian political leanings.⁴¹⁰ While Sistani closely monitored the political deadlock and social unrest, encouraging people not to vote for anyone involved in corruption, Najafi was clearly advocating a more direct role of religious authority in politics. Many local commentators noted similarities with Khomeini’s model.⁴¹¹

Subsequent events clearly demonstrated how Sistani’s approach ultimately established itself as dominant. Leading up to the elections, civil society groups called for Sistani’s intervention, unequivocally recognising him as the preeminent Grand Ayatollah of post-2003 Najaf.⁴¹²

Even the representatives of Maliki’s party, the Dawa, sought advice from Sistani on resolving the political impasse. Despite the social unrest and the Dawa’s vote of no-confidence, Maliki would not step down. It was during this critical juncture that

⁴⁰⁴ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 80.

⁴⁰⁵ *Al-Bayinah*, Baghdad, 8 March 2011, quoted in Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 123.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ *Al-Iraqiyah TV*, Dubai, “Al-Iraqiyah List Supports Iraqi Vice-President Abd al-Mahdi for Premier”, 20 October 2020, quoted in Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 123.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹¹ This does not signify that Najafi ever explicitly endorsed the Iranian doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih* (the doctrine of the jurispudent), Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 124.

⁴¹² Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 124–126.

finally intervened. In July 2014, he wrote a handwritten letter to Maliki, signed and sealed.⁴¹³ He referred to “critical circumstances” and the need for a new “vision”.⁴¹⁴ While not explicitly calling for Maliki’s resignation, the letter empowered Dawa’s members, who almost unanimously voted against Maliki’s nomination. Maliki, thus, finally resigned.⁴¹⁵

3.2.4. Iranian Religious Authority as a Political Actor and Its Implications on the Iraqi Religious ‘Self’

While the self-other nexus has led to the emergence of Sistani’s traditional approach within the Najafi *hawza* in regard to the Shia clerical stance towards political authority, it has taken a different trajectory for other crucial issues concerning the post-2003 Iraqi socio-political environment. The reasons for such a diverse unfolding lay in the complex interrelation between the political and religious dimensions which characterise Shia Islam and, specifically, the role that the Iranian religious establishment plays in the Iranian state.

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iranian religious authority has assumed a pivotal political role with interests extending beyond the development of Shia religious thought and encompassing the political sphere.

As detailed in the following chapter on political authority, a key interest of the Iranian state in Iraq has been to maintain Iraq’s dependency, thereby securing strategic advantages within the region. This strategic pursuit has had profound consequences, including Iraq’s political elite relying heavily on Iranian military and political support. This reliance has led to the systematisation of practices such as corruption and the resorting to violence as means to means to gain and maintain political power.

Although both Sistani and Khamenei have shared the overarching goal of empowering Iraq’s Shia majority, they have diverged in their perspectives regarding which specific factions to support within the Shia political landscape and the ultimate

⁴¹³ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 82.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*

objectives of this support.⁴¹⁶ In the pursuit of these objectives, Khamenei has leveraged Iranian military and political forces that have established a significant presence in Iraq since the early years following the 2003 regime change.

Sistani has consistently criticised the corrupt and violent practices resulting from Iranian influence in Iraq's political sphere.⁴¹⁷ However, given the entrenched nature of these issues and Sistani's clerical approach, which does not directly interfere in Iraqi politics, he has not succeeded in restoring order and curbing the influence of militias in the country. Notably, his June 2014 fatwa calling on Iraqis to combat ISIS, which led to the formation of the PMF, exemplifies the substantial impact of the Iranian 'other' on Iraq's religious 'self' within the unfolding self-other nexus, and the shift in Sistani's approach in regard to the militias.

Despite Sistani's numerous fatwas on the illegality of militias and the urge to deliver weapons to the competent authorities, in June 2014 he issued a fatwa calling on Iraqis to take up arms against the ISIS "terrorists", as he called them.⁴¹⁸ His representative in Karbala announced on his behalf that:

"Citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists, defending their country and their people and their holy places, should volunteer and join the security forces to achieve this holy purpose (...) He who sacrifices for the cause of defending his country and his family and his honour will be a martyr".⁴¹⁹

Khamenei embraced the fatwa, describing it as a "divine inspiration".⁴²⁰ This fatwa effectively presented the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which had maintained a presence in Iraq since the immediate post-invasion, with a significant

⁴¹⁶ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 4.

⁴¹⁷ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 41–69.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴¹⁹ *Al Jazeera*, "Iraq Cleric Issues Call to Arms Against ISIL", 14 June 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/6/14/iraq-cleric-issues-call-to-arms-against-isil>. Accessed October 2023.

⁴²⁰ *Bratha News*, "As-Sayyid al-Khamenei: Ana Ala Yaqeen Bi Anna Fatwa as-Sayyid al-Sistani lil Jihad al-Kifai «Ilham Ilah»", (*Sayyid Khamenei: I am Certain that Sayyid Sistani's Fatwa for Defensive Jihad is a «Divine Inspiration»*, translation from Arabic by the author), 29 August 2016, <https://burathanews.com/arabic/news/246324>. Accessed September 2023.

opening to extend their influence in Iraq.⁴²¹ Shortly after Sistani's fatwa, the PMF were formed, consolidating numerous Iranian-supported militias under its umbrella.⁴²²

Recognising that his fatwa was being used to empower Tehran-backed militias and certain abusive and sectarian elements, Sistani grew more cautious in conveying his endorsement of the PMF.⁴²³ Just a few days after Sistani issued his fatwa, his representative in Karbala clarified that it was not intended to legitimise the establishment of irregular paramilitary groups, but to lend support to Iraqi security forces.⁴²⁴ Both Sistani's statements and those made by his representatives deliberately avoided using the term 'PMF', which had become associated with IRGC-backed groups, preferring the term 'volunteers'.⁴²⁵

This choice could be seen as an attempt to highlight the role of Iraqi volunteers within the forces. When some of these groups faced accusations of committing war crimes and mistreating Sunni civilians, Sistani's office issued a comprehensive statement urging the fighters to refrain from all forms of abuse and to exercise a high level of restraint.⁴²⁶ However, despite these attempts to contain the PMF abuses and the Iranian para-military groups' influence, the PMF continued to gain power in subsequent years.⁴²⁷

I would argue that it is unrealistic to assume that Sistani had not anticipated this development. Instead, it seems that with ISIS expanding its control, he felt compelled to take what he saw as the most advisable course of action. While some may argue that Sistani's June 2014 fatwa and subsequent change in approach toward the militia

⁴²¹ *Al Jazeera*, "Iraq's Popular Demobilisation", 26 February 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/2/26/iraqs-popular-demobilisation>. Accessed October 2023.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

⁴²³ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 5.

⁴²⁴ *Website of Sistani's Office*, "Nass Ma Warada Bishan al-Awdaat al-Raihina fi Al-Iraq fi Khutbat al-Juma Allati Alaqa Fadhilat al-Alama al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi Mumaththil al-Marjaiyya al-Diniyya al-Ulya", (*Text Regarding the Current Situation in Iraq in the Friday Sermon Delivered by His Eminence, Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi, the Representative of the Highest Religious Authority*, translation from Arabic by the author), 20 June 2014, <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24915/>. Accessed September 2023.

⁴²⁵ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 4.

⁴²⁶ *Website of Sistani's Office*, "Nasaih wa Taujeehat lil-Muqatileen fi Sahaat al-Jihad", (*Advice and Guidance for Fighters in the Battlefields of Jihad*, translation from Arabic by the author), 12 February 2015, <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/25034/>. Accessed September 2023.

⁴²⁷ See for instance: Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi: State and Power in Post-2014 Iraq", The Century Foundation, 5 March 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>.

issue were driven primarily by political considerations, dismissing the influence of the 'other', namely Iranian religious authority, on the Iraqi 'self' would be an oversight.

Upon close examination of Shia religious authority in the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian context, it becomes apparent that distinguishing strictly between the religious and political dimensions is challenging. The intertwined interests of Iranian religious and political authorities have impacted the Iraqi *hawza*'s dealings with the local political establishment. The Iraqi political authority, despite recognising Sistani's moral and social leadership and maintaining the *hawza*'s autonomy, has not fully adhered to his guidance.

As the chapter on political authority will describe, Iran has played an active role in shaping the Iraqi political landscape, contributing to the systematisation of practices (reliance on the Iranian patron, corruption, militia violence), which Sistani had consistently opposed. In this complex context, drawing clear lines between the political and religious self-other nexuses proves to be a hard if not impossible task. I argue that Sistani's significant shift in stance is a manifestation of the impact of Iran as the 'other' on the Iraqi 'self', representing his adaptation to an unsolicited political environment.

3.3. Core-Constructs of State's Collective Identity in Post-2003 Iraqi Religious Authority: Power, Myth & Security

In this section, I shall focus on analysing what I consider to be the core-constructs of the state's collective identity: Power, Myth and Security. As outlined in my theoretical model, these three cores are shaped by the self-other nexus. As demonstrated in the preceding section, post-2003 Iraqi religious authority is marked by Sistani's prominent position within the Najafi clerical circles, alongside the influence of the Iranian religious establishment, which aligns with Iran's political objectives in post-regime Iraq.

While this Iraq-Iran self-other nexus has impacted on religious authority in the political arena, it has not diminished Sistani's social leadership and the independence of the Iraqi *hawza* from political authority. In the following sections, I shall delve into how such a self-other nexus has constructed the core constructs of post-2003 Iraqi identity of its religious authority.

This section will address the second sub-question, exploring how to describe post-2003 Iraqi state's collective identity as deriving from the agency of its Shia religious authority, and provide a comprehensive response to the question of self-construction through the other. Although the previous section offered initial insights into the latter sub-question, a more comprehensive understanding necessitates an examination of the core constructs of state identity.

After dissecting each of these constructs, I shall present a comprehensive argument regarding their intersection – the interplay between symbolic capital/power, resonance, and violence, which I refer to as the 'Symbolic Cluster' – in the subsequent section. This will provide all the necessary elements to ultimately address the primary research question of this study as relevant to this chapter's empirical site of observation: how Shia religious commonality influences Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations. This will be explored in the final analytical section of this chapter.

3.3.1. Normalising Power in the Religious Field & Contested Power in the Political Field

In the next sections, I shall focus on the construct of Power. I will argue how, due to a self-other nexus involving Iranian religious authority as a political actor, Sistani's approach represents normalising Power in the religious field while remaining contested in the political arena.

After providing a theoretical description of the concept of 'field' and normalising Power, I shall offer the example of the struggle between Sistani and the Iraqi *hawza* with the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who has been a crucial political leader since the immediate post-invasion. This contention revolves around two central themes of Sistani's approach: the defence of the *hawza* as a hierarchical institution with its established scholarly proceedings, and the advocacy for social and political order, manifesting as respect for government, the fight against corruption, and militias' violence amongst other aspects. Describing this contention, I shall also highlight the role played by Iran and Iranian religious authority in the described dynamic.

When considering the impact of the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus on the concept of Power within post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, it is essential to differentiate between the religious and political fields. The specificities concerning Shia Islam and the complex relation between religious and political authorities require this crucial distinction despite, as earlier seen, the two being deeply interconnected.

As explained in the theoretical model chapter, a 'field' represents the sociological space where the competition for Power unfolds,⁴²⁸ with its nature defined by the 'capital' that actors fight for within it.⁴²⁹ In the political field, the capital is a combination of different resources that grant a governmental position, while in the religious field, it manifests as the dominant school of thought that characterises the *hawza* and guides its stance on a wide array of issues.⁴³⁰

The 'symbolic' capital holds the potential to be contested within any fields, regardless of their primary capital. Symbolic capital bestows upon the field's actors' symbolic power, granting them the capacity to shape the collectivity's "principles of vision and division".⁴³¹ That is, it grants certain field's competitors the ability to influence other society actors to perceive and adopt their 'worldview', and either validate or alter this 'worldview' to present their actions in the world as justifiable and essential.

When symbolic power is fully acquired, one can talk of 'normalising' Power. As a normalising force, Power shapes the field's perception and distinctions between 'right' and 'wrong', 'true' and 'false', as well as the collective understanding of these norms.⁴³² It acts as a catalyst for creating shared symbolic codes, fostering a common vision of unity, a collective 'common sense', and a general set of values recognised as 'valid' by all of the field's actors.⁴³³

⁴²⁸ David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 9.

⁴²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press & Basil Blackwell, 1991), 24.

⁴³⁰ This conceptualisation of *field* and *capital* pertains to this work's theoretical framework and should not be interpreted as deriving from Bourdieu's theory of field.

⁴³¹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 224.

⁴³² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1975), 23–35; and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 118–120; and Jonathan Gaventa, "Power after Lukes: An Overview of Theories of Power since Lukes and Their Application to Development," Institute of Development Studies, https://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/power_after_lukes.pdf.

⁴³³ Gaventa, "Power after Lukes".

“What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourses. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression”.⁴³⁴

Normalising Power is not possessed but *embodied* and internalised by all actors of a given field. It is “co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network”.⁴³⁵ It is not a “binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other”⁴³⁶ but, rather “a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies”.⁴³⁷

I would contend that, due to the political role that characterises Iranian religious authority and the consequent Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, Sistani’s school of thought embodies normalising Power in the religious field but is still contested in the political field.

As illustrated when discussing the case of Grand Ayatollah Bashir Hussein al-Najafi, Sistani did not necessitate ‘forcing’ him into compliance. Rather, Sistani’s approach ‘absorbed’ the competing narrative that Najafi embodied within the *hawza* circles. Najafi’s stances could be seen as “discourses of resistance”:

“[...] there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies.”⁴³⁸

⁴³⁴ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 119.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

Conversely, the earlier illustrated political pressure posed on Sistani's discourse on the illegality of militias, which even led to a modification of his stance, proves how his approach is still contested in the political field where, as will be illustrated in the next chapter on political authority, symbolic power has not been acquired by any group.

To illustrate my argument, in the following sub-section I shall delve into the case of Sistani and the *hawza*'s interactions with the politician and Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Their struggle is in fact quite illustrative of how Sistani embodies normalising Power within the religious field, while his symbolic vision for Iraq's future sparks contention in the political field. It is also meaningful in terms of the role played by Iran in this dynamic.

3.3.1.1. Sadr's Challenge to Sistani's Power & the Role of Iran

The contention between Sistani and the Najafi *hawza* on one side and Moqtada al-Sadr on the other revolves around two central themes of Sistani's discourse: his defence of the *hawza* as a hierarchical institution with established procedures, and his advocacy for social and political order, emphasising the importance of the rule of law while condemning corruption and violence as a means to gain and sustain political power. In this context, the Sadr case serves as a significant illustration of the role of Iranian religious authority.

In the early years following regime change, Najafi clerics dealt with "by far the biggest challenge the ayatollahs ever faced":⁴³⁹ the emergence of a non-hierarchical and highly 'personalised' landscape within post-2003 radical lay Shiism. This environment saw radical lay Islamists or clerics who were not *maraji* claiming to speak for Islam, issuing fatwas and openly challenging the traditional authority of the *hawza*.⁴⁴⁰ The Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was one of these; not only did he engage in a fierce confrontation with the Najafi *hawza*, but also rose to become one of the most influential political figures in post-2003 Iraq.

⁴³⁹ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 22.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

In May 2003, despite not holding the status of ayatollah, or even a *mujtahid*, Sadr issued a fatwa permitting theft and looting, provided the perpetrators donated one-fifth of their gains to his office.⁴⁴¹ This act not only secured a source of funding for him, but also represented a direct challenge to the *hawza*'s authority. Furthermore, he openly expressed his intentions to declare himself a *marja*, disregarding centuries of Shia jurisprudence.⁴⁴²

Sadr also established also the Mahdi army, named after the Imam who went into occultation in the 9th century, and set up his own judicial and penal systems.⁴⁴³ In 2004, the Mahdi army led two anti-occupation uprisings, including the hostage-taking of the city of Najaf and Sistani and his representatives.⁴⁴⁴ Sadr even launched a newspaper titled '*al-Hawza al-Natiqa*' ('The Speaking Jurisprudent', in Arabic), explicitly emphasising the distinction between himself and the ayatollahs of Najaf.⁴⁴⁵

Sadr's father, Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, had been assassinated in 1999 by Saddam Hussein's regime.⁴⁴⁶ In the 1990s, Sadiq al-Sadr had condemned Ayatollah Sistani as a "silent jurisprudent" in contrast to a "speaking jurisprudent", one who heeded the religious duty to speak out against tyranny.⁴⁴⁷ His tragic disappearance had a significant impact on the Shia community in Iraq and, in 2003, Moqtada al-Sadr counted on his father's prestige to achieve popularity.⁴⁴⁸

Sadr appealed to the poor of the Baghdad Shia slums where, in the chaos following the invasion, he would hand out bread, water and oranges.⁴⁴⁹ As the next chapter on political authority will illustrate, populism has been a card to which Sadr has often resorted. Deviating from centuries of Shia scholarship and tradition, he relied on charisma rather than established scholarship, as prescribed by the *marjayiia al-taqlid* doctrine, to gain followers.

⁴⁴¹ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 24.

⁴⁴² Even following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, self-designation did not occur; Ayatollah Khamenei's elevation to the status of ayatollah was the result of Ayatollah Khomeini's designation before his death in 1989. Saïd Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴³ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 24.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

During that period, Sadr's political discourse was centred on the resistance against the US occupiers and the promotion of a Shia Islamist vision for Iraq.⁴⁵⁰ His rhetoric exhibited a strong and confrontational Shia exclusiveness aimed at marginalising other segments of Iraqi society, with the Mahdi army being implicated in sectarian crimes.⁴⁵¹ This seemed to reflect a conception of the relationship between the clergy and political elites that significantly deviated from the established Iraqi Shia clerical tradition.

Interpreting Sadr's stance as influenced or directed by Iran would be inaccurate. Sadr was pursuing his own interest to fill the power-vacuum but, I would argue, the chaotic environment to which Sadr contributed, and the challenges he posed to the Najafi *hawza*, did indeed align with Iranian interests in Iraq. In fact, Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian IRGC Quds' Force, provided him with significant support.⁴⁵²

In response to Sadr's challenges to the *hawza* as an institution and their advocacy for social and political order, Sistani wrote extensively on the importance of respecting the hierarchical structure and warned against the dangers of interpretations by unqualified individuals.⁴⁵³ He also urged him to dismantle his militia.⁴⁵⁴ Sadr chose to disregard this advice, leading Sistani to continue issuing fatwas and decrees condemning the militias' activities and stressing the importance of respecting the government and the rule of law.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁰ Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2012), 60–63, 101–105.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² The Quds Force is an IRGC specialized unit, which is responsible for extra-territorial operations. By primarily focusing on activities outside Iran's borders, the Quds Force supports and exports Iran's revolutionary ideals, promotes Islamic governance, and neutralises perceived threats to Iran's national security. It was established in 1980 and, as an IRGC unit, responds directly to the Iranian Supreme Leader (Udit Banerjee, "Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps", *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 (2015): 93–106, 98–101). Following Soleimani's assassination by a US airstrike in January 2020, Major General Esmail Ghaani assumed the role of commander of the Quds Force (Reuters, "Iran Names Deputy Quds Force Commander to Replace Soleimani After Killing," *Reuters*, 3 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-security-blast-iran-successor-idUKKBN1Z20XA>. Accessed June 2022).

⁴⁵³ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 27.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

Throughout this period, Sistani closely monitored the transition from US occupation to Iraqi independence and the establishment of democratic institutions.⁴⁵⁶

While Sadr initially refused to engage with the US-sponsored political transition, he sent his representatives to the 2005 first national elections, joining the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the Shia coalition that Sistani had supported, and ultimately securing a place in parliament through their victory.⁴⁵⁷

Following 2005, his direct confrontation with the *hawza* gradually diminished to the point of disappearing. Despite the sectarian crimes committed by his Mahdi army, in 2007 he pledged to stand “shoulder to shoulder with the Sunnis” and extended a hand to Christians.⁴⁵⁸ Years later, following Sistani’s extensive proclamation urging the PMF militias to avoid all forms of abuse, Moqtada al-Sadr’s militia, renamed as the ‘Peace Brigades’, emerged as a faction loyal to Sistani.⁴⁵⁹

He explicitly aligned himself with Sistani, emphasising his movement’s Iraq-centric orientation and consistently criticising “sectarian militias”,⁴⁶⁰ as he referred to them. This rhetoric dominated his 2018 Parliamentary Elections campaign.⁴⁶¹

Sadr’s recognition of Sistani as the *de facto* leader of the post-2003 Iraqi *hawza* underscores the normalising Power Sistani had attained in the religious field.

However, since the 2003–2007 civil war, corruption and the use of militias’ violence as a means to gain a foothold in the government have become normalised practices in the political arena. All of Sistani’s post-invasion fatwas on militias were completely disregarded by the entire political elite, Sadr included. This contradiction underlines how Sistani’s general approach is still contested in the political field.

3.3.2. Myth: Shared by The Iraqi Collectivity but Not by the Political Actors

⁴⁵⁶ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 41–44.

⁴⁵⁷ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 104.

⁴⁵⁸ Amatzia Baram, “Religious Extremism and Ecumenical Tendencies in Modern Iraqi Shiism”, in *The Sunna and Shia in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 118.

⁴⁵⁹ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 30.

⁴⁶⁰ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 28–30.

⁴⁶¹ Renad Mansour, *Iraq’s 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction between Reform and the Status Quo*, LSE Middle East Centre Report, February 2019, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100099/1/Mansour_Iraq_s_2018_government_formation_2019.pdf.

In the following section, I shall focus on the second core construct of the state's collective identity: Myth, defined as any culturally-embedded notion imbued with a symbolic repertoire. For my analysis, I have selected two Myths that have played integral roles in Sistani's discourse and action following the regime change in Iraq.

These are the defence for a united, independent Iraq, which resists foreign forces, and the expectation that religious authority should embody social leadership. Both of these will be analysed providing empirical examples from the post-2003 environment as well as from the previous centuries. As outlined in my theoretical model, in fact, Myths' symbolic resonance tends to make them quite enduring over time. As social constructs, however, they are constantly subject to a processual development following the self-other nexus dynamic which, for the post-regime context, will be appropriately examined.

I would argue that, due to the specificities of the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, the Myths that have had a crucial role in the discourse and action of the Iraqi religious establishment have been simultaneously shared by the Iraqi collectivity and contested within the political field. On the one hand, they have resonated within the Iraqi collective consciousness and been considered as distinctive of the Iraqi community (otherwise they could not be considered as post-2003 Iraqi Myths). On the other hand, they have not been consistently translated into corresponding political action.

3.3.2.1. United Iraq Against Foreign Forces & Religious Authority as Social Leadership

The advocacy for a united and independent Iraq resisting foreign forces and the expectation that religious authority should embody social leadership, represent deeply engrained cultural notions which appear to be tightly intertwined. It is by acting in the interests of the *people*, to whom the Iraqi religious authority responds, that Iraqi clerics for centuries have fought against foreign interference in defence of an independent Iraq.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶² Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 79–82.

Even in their historical precedents, the two Iraqi Myths can be analysed together, as will be done in the following paragraphs. Before delving into the post-2003 environment, I shall provide some examples of the previous centuries.

I would argue that the emergence of such Myths can be traced back to the historical context preceding the process of nationalisation within the clerical establishments of Iraq and Iran.

During the 18th century, these Myths developed in a dynamic of mutual support within their respective political contexts and seemed to concern both religious authorities. In 1890, for instance, the Qajari rulers (1794–1925) granted a fifty-year monopoly on the cultivation and commercial exploitation of Iranian tobacco to a British company.⁴⁶³ This decision sparked widespread protests in Iran, particularly among the Iranian merchant class, whose interests were directly threatened. The Iranian *ulema*, acting as social leaders and advocating against colonial powers, petitioned the Shah in support of the protesters, but the Shah remained inflexible. In solidarity with the Iranians against their rulers, the Najafi clergy reinforced the rulings of local *ulema* who called for a boycott of tobacco by all Muslims as long as the British company held the concession.⁴⁶⁴ Faced with such a massive boycott, the Iranian rulers eventually terminated the agreement with the British company.⁴⁶⁵

Considering the relevance of anti-American and anti-British forces as imperialistic powers in the revolutionary ideology, it could be argued that such Myths still represent a pivotal component of the discourse and action of Iranian religious authority. Analysing the latter in such terms, however, goes beyond the scope of this work.

Focusing on the Iraqi case, in 1914, not so long after the fight against the British concession from the Qajari rulers, the British troops entered Mesopotamia. Up until that point, the Najafi Shia clergy had been anxious to keep the Sunni Ottoman state at a distance to avoid persecution but, on that occasion, they sided with their rulers to fight foreign occupation. As social leaders, they call on the people, issuing fatwas

⁴⁶³ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 80.

⁴⁶⁴ The legend goes that all Iranians, including the Shah's wives who removed all water-pipes from his palace so that he could not smoke, abruptly stopped smoking. *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

urging the population to join the Ottoman army against the British, and leading tribal militias against the foreign oppressor.⁴⁶⁶

When the Ottoman Empire finally capitulated in 1918, the *ulama* petitioned the Society of Nations to demand the creation of an independent Iraqi state ruled by the *mujtahids*.⁴⁶⁷ It was a Karbala *mujtahid*, Mohammed Taqi Shirazi, who led one of the most important episodes in the collective memory of Iraqis, the ‘Revolution of 1920’, in which an army of tribal leaders, young clerics and sons of clerics succeeded in ousting the British in only a few days. Before the British finally defeated the insurgents and imposed the formation of an Iraqi state, an independent government in Karbala had been declared.⁴⁶⁸

As my interviews with common Iraqis showed, the Revolution of 1920 is still remembered as one of the most pivotal moments in the fight against the colonial powers.⁴⁶⁹

When Sistani and the Iraqi *hawza* had to navigate the power vacuum left by Saddam’s removal, they adopted an anti-foreign occupation stance and assumed a role of social leadership.

Sistani always referred to the US as the “occupying power”⁴⁷⁰ and, with his June 2003 ‘democratic fatwa’, he called on “each eligible Iraqi to choose the person who represents him/her in the constituent council for writing the constitution”.⁴⁷¹ He thus insisted on direct elections while Paul Bremer III, the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), was proceeding to draft a new constitution for the country, before Iraqi institutions were even established.

In numerous other decrees, fatwas, and statements, Sistani pushed for early elections in the form of one person one vote throughout the whole following year and, by turning to the United Nations (UN), pressed the CPA to hold general elections right away. Elections were finally held in January 2005.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁶ Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La Formation de l’Irak Contemporain: Le Rôle Politique des Ulémas Chiïtes à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la création de l’État Irakien* (Paris: CNRS, 1991), 319–35.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁴⁶⁸ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 81.

⁴⁶⁹ Interviews conducted by the author with Iraqis living in London and Exeter between 2016 and 2017.

⁴⁷⁰ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 50.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 57.

The post-2003 struggle against the US occupation may appear as a case which, being imbued with such a relevant Iraqi Myth, has heavily impacted the discourse and action of both the Iraqi religious and political authorities. The resistance against the US occupation represented, in fact, a wide-spread narrative, which united both Sunni and Shia militias in the fight that broke out.

I would argue, however, that this analysis is not entirely accurate. The post-invasion anti-US discourse, in fact, massively facilitated the Iranian penetration into the Iraqi military and politics, with Shia Iraqi actors taking advantage of the Iranian help and being complicit in this process. Parties such as the Badr Organisation and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), amongst others, which had opposed the US occupation receiving substantial Iranian support, joined the UIA and won the 2005 elections.⁴⁷³ Their presence into the newly established Iraqi institutions enabled the actual penetration of Iran into the Iraqi state, which, despite their anti-US occupier's narrative, massively contradicted the anti-foreign interference Myth.

This inner contradiction emerged as evident in the following years. Sistani's numerous fatwas against Iranian foreign interference have never been listened to.

Despite being considered as a moral guide by all Shia parties, which has often turned to him at times of crisis (such as in the earlier illustrated case of Nouri al-Maliki in 2014), his support for the continuous popular protests has never led to concrete political action. Continuing to embody his role of a social leader, Sistani has sided with the Iraqi people denouncing corruption, militia violence and Iranian interference in 2012, 2014, 2015 and, more recently, in 2018-2019.⁴⁷⁴

On November 11, 2019, when Sistani met Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the representative in Iraq of the UN secretary general, in the midst of social unrest and protests in Baghdad and southern Iraqi cities, he expressed his concern that "respective parties might not be seriously committed about implementing real reforms". If those parties "were incapable or unwilling to make the required reforms",

⁴⁷³ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 56–74.

⁴⁷⁴ *Al Jazeera*, "Iraq's al-Sistani Blames Government for Deaths at Protests", 11 October 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/11/iraqs-al-sistani-blames-government-for-deaths-at-protests>. Accessed June 2023.

he continued, “an alternative path should be taken”.⁴⁷⁵ None of his appeals were heeded.

Sistani’s role as a social leader, his tenacious denouncement of Iranian foreign interference, and the disparity between his discourse and actual political action, have also emerged from my interviews. One Iraqi whom I met in Bahrain in 2017 told me that Sistani “defended Iraq from foreign actors and Iraqi politicians’ corruption”, but “our politicians will never change”.⁴⁷⁶

3.3.3. Security: The Impact of the Self-Other Nexus on Sistani’s Discourse

In this section, my analysis will focus on how the self-other nexus has shaped the third core-construct of the state’s collective identity: Security. The Security dimension particularly exemplifies the intricate interplay between the post-2003 religious authority’s self-other nexus and its intertwined nature with the political sphere, leading to a significant shift in Sistani’s stance.

In the subsequent paragraphs, I shall delve deeper into the June 2014 fatwa example, highlighting not only its portrayal as a pivotal change in Sistani’s perspective on the militia issue but also its implication for his position on sectarianism. Despite his consistent advocacy for peaceful resolutions to sectarian conflicts, the June 2014 fatwa demonstrates a shift in the symbolic collective interpretation of the ‘ISIS fighters’ and the associated violence during the ISIS crisis.

Following the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam which hosts the tombs of two Imams, Sistani issued a heartfelt appeal.

The attack had been orchestrated by al-Qaeda which, in the tumultuous years of the 2003–2007 civil war, committed numerous sectarian crimes against the Shia community. Encouraging Shias to restrain from revenge,⁴⁷⁷ Sistani called on Iraqis of

⁴⁷⁵ Al-Qarawee, “The Subtle Power of Sistani”.

⁴⁷⁶ Interview conducted by the author with Bahraini al-Wifaq politician in English, Manama, Bahrain, 2017.

⁴⁷⁷ Robert F. Worth, “Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury”, *The New York Times*, 22 February 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian.html>. Accessed June 2023.

“all different sects” to “throw away hatred and violence and substitute love and peaceful dialogue in order to solve all the disputes”. He referred to all Iraqis as “brothers of humanity” and “partners in the motherland”.⁴⁷⁸

His words on that occasion were very significant in terms of his stance on sectarian conflict: he consistently advocated for a peaceful resolution, emphasising the unity of Iraq with its diverse ethno-religious makeup. Such a position on sectarianism is intricately intertwined with his more general defence of social and political order, which entails rejection of militia violence and his support for democratic institutions. During the US occupation, Sistani’s insistence on holding direct elections to establish a parliamentary system also signified ensuring a government which, besides representing the demographic Shia majority, also included Sunni and Kurdish constituents.⁴⁷⁹ The effort to promote unity, inclusivity and avoid ethno-sectarian conflict has always represented a crucial component of his discourse.

As described in the earlier sections, the political landscape Sistani had to face led to a crucial evolution of his stance on such pivotal issues, and the June 2014 fatwa against ISIS is perhaps the most significant example of this. To analyse this important shift in more depth, I would argue that focusing on the language Sistani adopted will be enlightening.

In response to the al-Askari Mosque Samarra bombing, as earlier observed, Sistani adopted neutral and cautious language, condemning the violence of *all* the various armed groups while advocating for peace. In contrast, in the June 2014 fatwa, not only did he label the ISIS fighters as ‘terrorists’ but he also called ‘martyrs’ those who would sacrifice themselves for the defence of their country, family and honour.⁴⁸⁰

The sharp distinction between the ISIS fighters and the Iraqis called to arms against them highlights the symbolic perception that the ISIS jihadists had acquired. Violence against them was not perceived as ‘direct’ (the one exercised by an actor and sanctioned by society),⁴⁸¹ or ‘repressive’ (the violence that repressive Power

⁴⁷⁸ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 141.

⁴⁷⁹ Al-Qarawee, “The ‘Formal’ Marja”; and al-Qarawee, “Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq”.

⁴⁸⁰ *Al Jazeera*, “Iraq Cleric Issues Call to Arms Against ISIL”.

⁴⁸¹ Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291–305, 294.

exercises within society).⁴⁸² It had become *symbolic* violence: the one that is perceived as legitimate by all society actors and required to ensure peace and stability.⁴⁸³

The ISIS jihadists were not considered as fighters who needed to be restrained and guided towards peace, as he had previously done with other armed groups. Rather, they were treated as individuals to be sacrificed for the unity and peace of the country. Killing them was a necessary act as they had become '*homo sacer*', a conceptual idea of man whose life is stripped of relevance, devoid of value, not a subject of ordinary laws.⁴⁸⁴ Ending its life is not prosecuted by the human law that regulates domestic societies, nor in any way pertaining to a legislative threshold which is superior to human law.⁴⁸⁵

The area of the conflict which Sistani was calling for was not considered to be Iraq or any areas surrounding it; instead, it was a 'zone of indistinction': the *situs* that embodies the 'sovereign state of exception', a threshold between a normal situation and chaos, in which the rules still exist but the law is suspended.⁴⁸⁶ While conventional laws remained in place, the exceptional circumstances of the threat posed by ISIS redefined the acceptable boundaries of violence; the usual rules and laws governing societal conduct were temporarily set aside in the face of an unprecedented and extreme threat.

The magnitude of this shift in Sistani's stance is notable, bearing in mind the implications that he had certainly considered: namely, the empowerment of Iranian-backed Shia militias. I would argue that two major causes can be identified. On the one hand, ISIS represented a '*collective trauma*'.⁴⁸⁷ As outlined in my theoretical model, collective traumas "can sediment into the collective subconscious and become raw material for major historical processes and events".⁴⁸⁸

While the construction of symbolic violence tends to take place over a long time span, when the 'other' acts in a way that quickly modifies the social environment, we

⁴⁸² Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 224.

⁴⁸³ Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 291.

⁴⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 138.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁸⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1979), 19.

⁴⁸⁷ Galtung, "Cultural Violence", 295.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

can talk of a 'trauma'.⁴⁸⁹ The latter results in relatively rapid construction of aggressive discourses around the other which, in a short period of time, may become symbolic violence.

On the other hand, by the time Sistani issued his religious fatwa in 2014, resorting to militia's violence had become 'culturalised'. 'Cultural violence' is "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence [...] that can be used to justify or legitimize direct [the violence exercised by an actor and sanctioned by society] or structural violence [the one built on social structures]. Stars, crosses and crescents; flags, anthems and military". "One way cultural violence works is by changing the *moral color* of an act [...]"; "Another way is by making reality opaque, so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent".⁴⁹⁰

A 24-year-old Iraqi man living in Baghdad told me in 2021 that he had "never seen anything but war" in his entire life.⁴⁹¹ This is not hard to believe considering that he was six-year-old when the US invaded Iraq. Since the US invasion, Iraq has faced continuous instability, with militias being deployed to overcome virtually all political stalemates the country has experienced.

The process of 'culturalisation' of violence happens over time. "At the bottom is the steady flow through time of cultural violence, a substratum from which the other two [direct and structural violence] can derive their nutrients".⁴⁹² With militia violence having become a way of achieving a place in government, the 'moral colour' of militia violence has progressively changed and Iraqi 'reality' has become 'opaque'. One may condemn militia violence morally and consider it as a symptom of a vicious instability and corruption cycle, but at the time of writing in 2025 it is part of every-day Iraq.

It should thus not be surprising that, instead of relying on the Iraqi army, the only viable option to counter ISIS, even in the perception of the Iraqi religious authority, has been to join the militias.

3.4. The Tying Nexus of the Three Core-Construct: The Symbolic Cluster

⁴⁸⁹ Galtung, "Cultural Violence", 295.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴⁹¹ Interview conducted in Arabic on Zoom in July 2021, translation from Arabic of the author.

⁴⁹² Galtung, "Cultural Violence", 296.

In the preceding sections, I have examined how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has shaped the core-constructs of the state's collective identity as relevant to the empirical site of observation under scrutiny: religious authority. The analyses on Power, Myth and Security have been crucial in addressing the primary sub-question of this study – how the religious authority self gets constructed through the other –, and the second interrelated sub-question: how the state's religious collective identity can be described as deriving from religious authority.

Before delving into the examination of how the religious Shia identity influences Iraq-Iran interstate relations, in the following section I shall present a comprehensive argument regarding the state's collective identity as manifesting in relation to religious authority. I shall do this by focusing on the Symbolic Cluster.

As my model suggests, the binding nexus among the three core-constructs, the thread that runs through them, and the ultimate foundation of the state's collective identity is the Symbolic Cluster. This concept refers to the interplay of symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance, and symbolic violence, and it can be considered as the ultimate core of the state's collective identity.

In the following sub-section, following a brief theoretical introduction of the Symbolic Cluster, I shall emphasise how Sistani and the *hawza's* symbolic beliefs and interpretations are deeply engraved in Iraqi society and, yet, not universally shared. By examining how the rejection of Sistani's symbolic understanding of Iraq primarily stems from the political elite, I shall then argue how the post-2003 Iraqi social system appears fragmented, with the political class constituting a social system of its own. After discussing what I mean by this, I shall add a final element to my argument on post-2003 Iraqi religious authority. That is, while Sistani has come to terms with realities that did not align with its symbolic vision for the country, he has also continued putting forward such a symbolic vision. This apparent contradiction lies in the fractured social system he has had to navigate.

3.4.1. Sistani: Guidance and Leadership in a Fragmented Social System

As the interplay between symbolic power, resonance and violence, the Symbolic Cluster is the pulsing heart of symbolic understanding and attribution of meaning which the agency cluster under scrutiny puts forward within society.

The Symbolic Cluster is the core of “all forms of symbolic capital – prestige, charisma, charm [...]”,⁴⁹³ “reputation, fame, etc., which is the form assumed by these different kinds of capital when they [the agency cluster] are perceived and recognised as legitimate”.⁴⁹⁴

If the Symbolic Cluster of the agency cluster under examination is shared with other society actors, their symbolic understanding of what a country should be is collectively shared. The ideologies and histories which constitute their Myths are symbolically recognised as belonging to the collectivity, and their enforcement of order and hierarchies are collectively understood as necessary.

Regarding post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, on the one hand its symbolic idea of self appears as deeply embedded into Iraqi society. Sistani’s successful defence of the *hawza* institution, the resonance of the Myths he has articulated in his discourse, and his support for Iraqis protesting against the political establishment, all indicate the strong position of the *hawza*’s symbolic vision for Iraq within the society. On the other hand, the inability of post-2003 religious authority to curtail and prevent Iranian interference in Iraqi politics also reveals that this symbolic understanding is not universally shared.

Considering all these elements of complexities, I would argue that due to the specificities of the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, the Iraqi social system appears *fragmented*, and Iraqi religious authority’s symbolic interpretations and beliefs have had to adapt and navigate this divided social landscape. That is, Iraqi politics has evolved into a distinct social system, with its own patterns of behaviour and perception (reliance on Iranian patronage, corruption and violence), which are not recognised as legitimate or valid by the broader Iraqi society. As outlined in my theoretical model, these patterns reflect the manifestation of ‘social structures’, which are collective understandings of ‘how society works’, which manifest as rules, norms and values which shape society’s actors’ behaviour and perception.⁴⁹⁵ The core

⁴⁹³ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 128.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁹⁵ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 66.

constructs of Power, Myth, and Security acquire structuration features as they become collectively known by society's actors, often in an unconscious process.⁴⁹⁶

Due to the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, the post-2003 structuration process has been fragmented; not in the sense that the constructs-structures development has not happened, but that it has led to distinct social systems within the same Iraqi society. I would argue that this is a fragmented social system that explains the apparent contradiction of Sistani's discourse in its evolution over the years. While his June 2014 fatwa empowered Iranian-backed militias and marked a symbolic shift regarding the ISIS fighters and militia violence, he also sided with the people in 2019, condemning Iranian interference and militia violence.

Acknowledging the presence of Iranian-backed militias in the fight against ISIS could serve the ultimate purpose of maintaining order under those circumstances. The ISIS threat, moreover, has indeed represented a collective trauma, and militia violence has become cultural violence, also influencing the religious authority perception around it.

However, all his fatwas following 2014, his attempts to distance himself from the PMF abuses, and his support for the popular protests condemning the political elite, show how Sistani has not fundamentally altered his symbolic understanding of the norms, rules and values that should govern Iraq. He has found himself navigating a fractured social system and, being committed to embodying his social leadership role and provide guidance, he has adapted to different circumstances.

3.5. Post-2003 Iraqi Religious Authority and Inter-State Relations with Iran Under Shia Commonality

In the preceding sections, I conducted an analysis of the core-constructs of the state's collective identity (Power, Myth and Security), and of the Symbolic Cluster, the binding tie between the three. This comprehensive examination has allowed me to provide a thorough response to the sub-questions at the core of this research in regard to Iraqi religious authority: how to describe the state's collective identity as deriving

⁴⁹⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 65–69.

from its religious authority, and how the religious authority self is constructed through the other.

By combining the various elements analysed in the previous sections, in the next paragraphs I shall present a conclusive and comprehensive argument on how Shia religious commonality has impacted the post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran. Addressing the impact of Shia religious commonality on post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations also entails assessing the relations between the two religious authorities and their respective interests towards the Iraqi state.

I argue that, despite Sistani's efforts in putting forward his symbolic vision for the country, and regardless of how symbolically embedded this vision is in the Iraqi collectivity, as in 2025, he has not fully succeeded. He has, in fact, encountered a political landscape which has not fully followed his guidance. In contrast, the Iranian religious establishment, pursuing the Iranian state's interest in regard to Iraq (maintaining Iraq in a dependent position), can be considered to have achieved its aim.

It would be inaccurate to argue that Iranian religious authority has attempted to influence Sistani and the Najafi *hawza* by pushing for the establishment of the *velayat-e-faqih* system, the rule of the jurisprudent. Rather, it has done so by backing the Iranian state political moves towards Iraq and thus contributing to an Iraqi political landscape which would rend Sistani's stances on a wide range of issues practically inapplicable.

It is in this sense that my interviews with common Iraqis should be interpreted. While they all believed that Iranian religious authority has made attempts to influence Sistani and the Najafi *hawza*, they never provided explicit examples. They consistently lamented excessive Iranian meddling in Iraqi politics which they rightly see as being bolstered by Iranian religious backing.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁷ Interviews conducted with Iraqi interviewees by the author in both Arabic and English on Zoom between 2020 and 2022.

I argue that, considering the symbolic embeddedness of the clerical Iraqi tradition in the Iraqi collectivity and how in line Sistani's authority has been in regard to the latter, it would have been exceptionally challenging for the Iranian religious authority to attempt to export its institutional model. Analysing the Iranian religious authority in these terms may not be entirely accurate and, in fact, somewhat pointless.

Given the practical difficulties it would have faced, it seems unlikely that such an agenda had ever been part of Iran's intentions. The Iranian model of the rule of the jurisprudence has never been present in Iraq, and its introduction would have likely been met with strong resistance from the Iraqi political authority itself, whose agency would have been, in their perception, undermined. Additionally, Iran's isolation from the international community would have meant opposition not only from the US occupying forces but also from the broader global community. Even my interviews with Iranian clerics in Qom show how this aim has not even been contemplated. On the topic of the *velayat-e-faqih*, they all said that it would not be exported in countries where "it does not seem applicable".⁴⁹⁸

Despite the above considerations, it is conceivable that the influence on the Iraqi Shia doctrine could extend even further into its impact on Iraqi politics, surpassing the level it currently holds at the time of writing. Religious authority, in fact, could potentially exert significant influence on the political landscape even within an institutional framework that does not align with the *velayat-e-faqih* system. The example of Ayatollah Bushir al-Najafi, as presented in the section on the self-other nexus, is significant. So far, the presence of Sistani has made it challenging to assess the applicability of this scenario. However, questions have arisen regarding what will happen when Sistani passes away, a topic that has been explored by several scholars.⁴⁹⁹

Harith Hasan al-Qarawee has highlighted how, upon Sistani's death, there will be a competitive and "fragmented spectacle",⁵⁰⁰ and "Tehran will be pleased if religious authority in Najaf is held by a cleric who is loyal to its regime".⁵⁰¹ In this regard,

⁴⁹⁸ Interviews conducted by the author with Iranian clerics in 2016 in Qom, Iran, in English.

⁴⁹⁹ See for instance al-Qarawee "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 6–7; and Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 164–176.

⁵⁰⁰ Al-Qarawee "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 7.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

he mentioned Ayatollah Mahmood Hashimi al-Shahrurdi, the former head of the Iranian Judiciary, who had supported Khomeini and was a potential successor to Khamenei. Shahrurdi had long-standing ties with the Dawa Party and it seems that, when he announced to return to Najaf after many years in Iran, Nouri al-Maliki backed his return. In 2012, he began his campaign to attract followers in Iraq and established his school.⁵⁰² However, recognising the political considerations behind these plans, a joint committee representing senior clerics in Najaf made the unusual decision not to allow students who attended Shahrurdi's classes and received a salary from his office to participate in their seminars. Although this warning was not finally enforced, it was perhaps crucial to show Shahrurdi the Iraqi *hawza*'s stance concerning the political implications of his presence.⁵⁰³

It is challenging to predict the exact course of events following Sistani's passing. In conclusion, as of 2025, it is evident that Iran holds substantial influence over Iraq's trajectory. Despite Sistani's considerable efforts, the Iranian religious establishment remains a significant component of the 'Iranian machine' that has consistently pursued its aims in the region. The latter, as for now in 2025, seems to have achieved its main objective in Iraq.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter has centred on Iraqi religious authority, which serves as the first empirical site of observation in this study. I have conducted my analysis on the Iraqi Najafi *hawza* led by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, clarifying that it is crucial to distinguish between those clerics who belong to the school of the Najafi *hawza* and those who do not. The latter, in fact, may have a large *marjaiyya*, but cannot be considered as constituting post-2003 Iraqi religious authority.

After providing some introductory information about the *marjaiyya al-taqlid* system and the reasons why Sistani has come to play such a crucial role within the post-2003 Iraqi *hawza*, I have applied my theoretical model to describe the state's collective identity and its impact on the inter-state relations with a relevant other.

⁵⁰² Al-Qarawee "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 7.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

In order to answer this study's main research question – how Shia commonality impacts on post-2003 Iraq inter-state relations with Iran –, I have broken my investigation on religious authority into two interrelated sub-questions: how the religious authority self has been constructed through the other, and how to describe the state's religious collective identity as derived from religious authority.

After an in-depth analysis of what I consider as the founding dynamic of state's collective identity, the self-other nexus, the three main core-constructs (Power, Myth and Security) and the tying link between the three, the Symbolic Cluster, I have reached the following conclusion.

Sistani's approach is deeply rooted in the Iraqi clerical tradition, enjoying widespread acceptance and legitimacy among both Najafi clerics and the popular environment. His stance on the role of religious authority in relation to political leaders, his defence of the hierarchical structure of the *hawza*, and the narratives presented in his discourse, which advocate for a united and independent Iraq resisting foreign intervention, resonate with the majority of Iraqi society. Sistani's consistent support for the continuous popular protests further underscores the strong connection he has with the Iraqi people.

In the light of these aspects, it could be argued that the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus is one which has not led to a substantial modification of the traditional Iraqi Najafi *hawza*.

In fact, the self-other nexus is a process which does not necessarily entail a transformation of the 'self' through the incorporation of elements from the 'other'. In the case of post-2003 Iraq, instead, it seems to have facilitated a re-negotiation of the role of Iraqi religious authority within the Iraqi state. After enduring decades of oppression by political rulers, the Iraqi *hawza* has reasserted its crucial role in the country's development, maintaining its independence from the political authority and simultaneously providing moral and political guidance.

As analysed in the historical excursus of the Iraqi-Iranian clerical self-other nexus over the centuries, such a renegotiation can be seen as an implication of the self-other in times that preceded the American invasion. Despite the political repression the Iraqi clerics had faced for years, and not only from the Baathist regime, the historical exchange between the Iraqi and Iranian *hawzat* in a continuous and

processual mutual observation of elements of 'alterity' and 'resemblance' has led to the emergence of a fervid and solid Iraqi clerical class which, when persecuted by the local popular authorities, found ways to survive and continue its scholarly production. Even before 2003, in fact, Sistani was already extremely popular in the Shia world.

In the post-2003 environment, however, Iraqi social structures appear fragmented, with the Iraqi political elite forming a social system of their own. The reliance on Iranian patronage, corruption and the use of militia violence have evolved into patterned behaviours which, despite not being recognised as lawful by the rest of Iraqi society and the religious authority, have become a standardised means to secure political positions.

This socio-political reality represents a construction of the *political* self-other nexus. Since the immediate post-invasion, Iran has pursued one main interest towards the Iraqi state: keeping the country in a position of dependence in order to secure strategic depth in the region.

Considering the institutional role that the Iranian religious establishment has held since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the boundaries between the self-other nexus of religious authority and that of political authority are difficult to draw. To fully assess Iraqi religious authority, the political self-other nexus and its resulting core-constructs of the state's collective identity, which will be analysed in the following chapter on political authority, cannot be dismissed.

In fact, Sistani has encountered huge challenges in curtailing militia violence and preventing Iranian interference. To continue fulfilling his role as a social leader and guide, he has had to navigate a complex political landscape, which he had neither initiated nor significantly influenced. Such a political landscape, in contrast, has been dominated by the IRGC forces and Iranian Shia militias, which directly respond to Iranian religious authority whose interests are strongly aligned with Iranian political authority. Given the institutional specificities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in fact, the two – Iranian and religious authorities – partially overlap.

Sistani's June 2014 fatwa, which encouraged capable Iraqis to take up arms against ISIS, represented a significant alteration of his discourse around militias and the peaceful resolution of ethno-sectarian tensions. The June 2014 fatwa, which led to the formation of the PMF, was described by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali

Khamenei, as 'divine inspiration', as the PMF's activities aligned with his long-standing objectives as an Iranian political actor. Notably, many of the PMF militias were – and still are at the time of writing – Iranian-backed Shia militias.

In conclusion, it can be argued that, at the time of writing in 2025, Iran has successfully achieved its goal. Despite the social role embodied by Sistani, his popularity amongst the Iraqi people, its re-negotiated role within the Iraqi state, and the independence of the *hawza* which he had managed to maintain, the post-2003 Iraqi political context is one where Iran exerts a major influence, with Iranian religious authority having played a crucial role in pursuing this objective.

4. Post-2003 Iraqi Political Authority

4.1. Introduction

After exploring how Shia religious identity has impacted on inter-state relations between Iraq and Iran through the analysis of post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, I shall now proceed to examine the second selected empirical site of observation: Iraqi political authority. This will enable me to take a further stride in addressing the main question of this research: how Shia commonality has impacted on the inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran.

I shall pursue this aim by applying my model on the state's collective identity and how it impacts on the state's relations with a relevant other in accordance to the agency cluster under scrutiny. The two interrelated sub-questions that have presented as fundamental to proceed in my analysis will be formulated as: how the post-2003 Iraqi political self is constructed through Iranian political authority as the 'other'; and how to describe Iraqi political collective identity in the post-regime environment. Addressing these sub-enquiries will enable me to present a final, comprehensive argument on how Shia political identity has impacted on the post-2003 relations between the two countries.

To introduce the broader context of this analysis, I shall begin by examining the October 2021 elections as a paradigmatic case of Iraq's persistent political instability. These elections encapsulate the structural dysfunctions that have shaped Iraqi politics since 2003, including cycles of electoral deadlocks, elite-driven power struggles, and public disenchantment with institutional politics. By analysing these elections, key features of the Shia political field emerge, offering a foundation for understanding how political authority has been legitimised, contested, and reconfigured in post-2003 Iraq.

I shall then proceed to an analysis of what I consider the founding dynamic of a state's identity construction: the self-other nexus. In the dedicated section, I shall provide further analysis to what has emerged from the previous chapter. I shall in fact argue that Iran, as the other, has represented an exogenous and subversive actor which has penetrated into the Shia field through various means: providing military

support of Iraqi Shia militias engaged in the power-struggle; the involvement of hybrid actors within Iraqi politics (Iranian-backed militias' commanders who have run for Iraqi elections despite the law forbidding it); and undertaking direct military action into Iraqi soil when the country's political trajectory deviated from Iran's envisioned direction.

Iraq, as the self, has taken advantage of Iranian penetration to make the most of it in an attempt to win the power-struggle. This misalignment of interests has led to Iraq's instability (despite Shia parties being in power since the first elections of 2005, intra-Shia rivalry makes them marred by continuous political crises). Moreover, it has resulted in corruption (as based on reliance on the Iranian external patron) and violence becoming wide-spread practices to achieve a place in government in post-2003 Iraq. Consequently, Iraqi political authority has progressively lost its popular constituency, leading to a virtually persistent state of social unrest.

As my model instructs, the self-other nexus constructs the main cores of the state's collective identity: Power, Myth and Security, with the symbolic cluster – the interrelation of symbolic capital/power (two notions of the same crucial concept – relevant to Power), symbolic resonance (relevant to Myth) and symbolic violence (relevant to Security) – representing the tying link between the three. In the dedicated sections, I shall argue how Power has been repressive, as Iraqi political authority has not been able to acquire symbolic power and exercise symbolic violence; how the construct of Myth has been characterised by three different Myths (the 'Iraqist nationalist imbued with an exclusivist Shia assertion', 'Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces', and the 'Shrine protection narrative'), which have been resonating in different sections of Iraqi society at the expense of others; and how Security has been characterised by the state's fragmentation of its monopoly on violence. An unresolved symbolic competition has featured the symbolic cluster, meaning that different groups have been putting forward different symbolic understandings of Iraq and its future.

After answering with the above analyses the two sub-questions, I shall move to finally addressing this study's main research question. In the dedicated section on Shia commonality and its impact on inter-state relations, I shall argue how Shia political commonality has represented a crucial vehicle for Iranian penetration into the Shia field. In a country like Iraq, which found itself in a power-vacuum to fill after Saddam's fall and where Iraqi Shia parties had been persecuted for decades, Shia

political identity had become a pivotal asset for Iran to exploit. At the time of writing in 2025, it can be argued that Iran has succeeded in its ultimate aim of keeping Iraq in a dependent position.

A final concluding section will underline the answers to the sub-questions and the main research question of this study resulting from this analysis.

Before moving to the following introductory sub-section, where I shall begin my analysis of the October 2021 elections, I shall provide a visual representation. Following the previous chapters' graphics, this depiction will serve as a conceptual map, guiding the chapter's analysis and structuring its key themes.

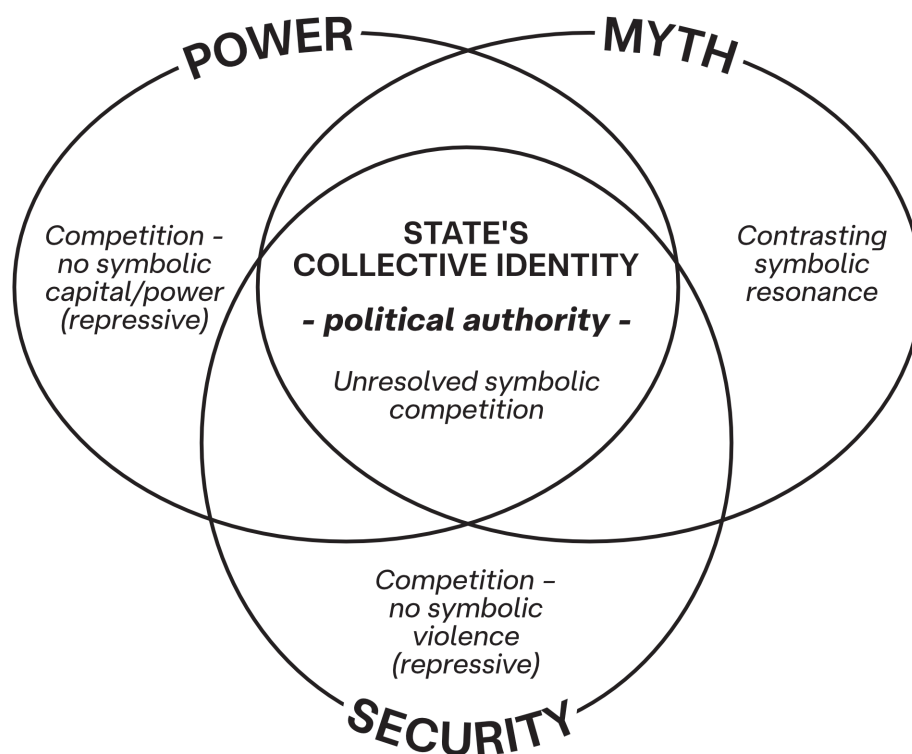


Figure 3. Conceptual Map of Political Authority and State's Collective Identity

4.1.1. October 2021 Elections

At the time of writing in 2025, the October 2021 elections stand as a paradigmatic case of Iraq's persistent political instability. They exemplify the structural

dysfunctions that have plagued the country since 2003, with repeated cycles of electoral disputes, prolonged deadlocks, and government formations that fail to deliver lasting stability.⁵⁰⁴ These elections were intended as a response to mass protests demanding reform, yet they ultimately reinforced the entrenched dynamics of elite power struggles, deepening public disillusionment and reaffirming the centrality of factionalism in Iraqi governance.

In the following paragraphs, an analysis of the October 2021 elections will be provided to introduce key features of the Shia political field. This will serve as an entry point for understanding how political authority in post-2003 Iraq has been shaped in a processual exchange with its relevant 'other', Iran. In the next sections, these dynamics will then be examined through the application of my theoretical model, addressing how the post-2003 Iraqi political self has been constructed through Iranian political authority and how Iraqi political collective identity can be described in the post-regime environment.

Held six months ahead of schedule on October 10, 2021, the elections were a direct consequence of the 2019–2020 *Tishreen* protests, which saw mass demonstrations against corruption, poor governance, and foreign influence. The protests resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi, the appointment of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, and the passage of a new electoral law designed to weaken party dominance and empower independent candidates. However, these reforms did not meaningfully alter Iraq's political landscape.⁵⁰⁵ The voter turnout, at 43.54%—the lowest since 2003—reflected widespread disillusionment, particularly among younger Iraqis and the *Tishreen* movement, many of whom boycotted the elections.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁴ For a comprehensive description of every post-invasion Iraqi election, see the interactive maps provided by Hooman Oliaei, "Sixteen Years of Parliamentary Elections in Iraq", September 29, 2021, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b287848e17874c0a8d65849e64af4566>. Accessed June 18, 2022.

⁵⁰⁵ For a comparative analysis between the two electoral systems and the October 2021 elections, see, for instance, Hashim Al-Rikabi, "The Shock of the 2021 Elections," February 2022, *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Paper*, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/syrien-irak/single-title/-/content/the-shock-of-the-2021-elections>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁰⁶ All elections' numbers and percentages mentioned in this paragraph are based on the Official Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) for Iraq, ihec.iq/ المفوضية العليا المستقلة للانتخابات. Accessed June 2022.

Despite these challenges, the elections produced a clear winner: the Sadrist Movement, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, which secured 73 seats—more than any other faction.⁵⁰⁷ However, instead of facilitating a straightforward government formation, the results triggered yet another protracted crisis. The Coordination Framework (CF), a coalition of Iran-aligned parties and militias that performed poorly in the elections, rejected the outcome and demanded a manual recount.⁵⁰⁸ Although the Federal Court upheld the results, the dispute stalled government formation for months, deepening political uncertainty.⁵⁰⁹

In an unprecedented move, al-Sadr ordered his 73 MPs to resign in June 2022, aiming to force a dissolution of parliament and new elections.⁵¹⁰ This manoeuvre aimed to delegitimise rival Shia factions and protest the entrenched quota-based system. The vacant seats were subsequently filled by members of the CF, altering the parliamentary balance.⁵¹¹ Jalil al-Nouri, a member of Sadr's inner circle, tweeted on June 15: "Whoever thinks the revolution is over is wrong. Beware of stillness, as it always precedes the storm".⁵¹² "The wall for security and political analysis", a Telegram account affiliated with the Sadrist group, also wrote:

"The Framework thinks that the Sadrist and Muqtada al-Sadr have abandoned their electoral rights [...] In this context of daydreaming, they forgot that the gates of

⁵⁰⁷ Sharik Ali, "Ijtimaa Al-Itaar Al-Tanseeqi Yutalib Bil-'Ad Wal-Firz Al-Yadawi Al-Shaamil Wayujihi Dawa Lil-Raees Al-Jumhuriyya," ("Coordination Framework Meeting Calls for Comprehensive Manual Counting and Calls for a President of the Republic," translation from Arabic by the author), *Rudawarabia.net*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/2410202113>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁰⁸ Sharik Ali, "Ijtimaa Al-Itaar Al-Tanseeqi Yutalib Bil-'Ad Wal-Firz Al-Yadawi Al-Shaamil Wayujihi Dawa Lil-Raees Al-Jumhuriyya," ("Coordination Framework Meeting Calls for Comprehensive Manual Counting and Calls for a President of the Republic," translation from Arabic by the author), *Rudawarabia.net*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/2410202113>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁰ *Al Monitor*, "Sadr Withdrawal from Iraqi Parliament Challenges Shiite Rivals," June 13, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/sadr-withdrawal-iraqi-parliament-challenges-shiite-rivals#ixzz7YUZvxusT>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵¹¹ Samya Kullab, "Iraq's Parliament Elects a New Speaker to End a Nearly Yearlong Vacuum", *Associated Press*, October 31, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/d2f914397971c244a8421914c85fcedd>, Accessed June 2022.

⁵¹² Jalil Al-Nouri tweet, June 15, 2022, https://twitter.com/Jalil_AlNouri/status/1536836770150723584, Accessed June 2022.

hell will be opened for them, and that the Sadrist movement is able to bring down any government they form within only a few hours. This is if the parliament continues”.⁵¹³

Al-Sadr’s populist tactics, including mobilising mass protests and sit-ins, heightened tensions, culminating in violent confrontations, particularly in Baghdad’s Green Zone. The crisis peaked in late August 2022 when al-Sadr announced his retirement from politics, prompting his supporters to storm the Green Zone, resulting in clashes that left at least 30 dead and hundreds injured. The unrest subsided only after al-Sadr called for calm and ordered his followers to withdraw.⁵¹⁴

The deadlock finally ended on October 13, 2022, with the election of Abdul Latif Rashid as president and the appointment of Mohammed Shia’ Al-Sudani as prime minister, backed by the CF.⁵¹⁵ However, this resolution did not mark the end of Iraq’s political instability. Al-Sudani’s tenure has been characterised by continued factional struggles, entrenched corruption, and the unchecked influence of Iran-backed militias within both government institutions and the security sector. As of 2025, Iraq remains locked in a recurring cycle of political crises, with each election and government formation replicating the same structural challenges rather than resolving them.

The October 2021 elections thus stand as a microcosm of Iraq’s broader governance failures: an entrenched elite insulated from public demands, a political system unable to transition beyond sectarian power struggles, and an electorate increasingly disengaged due to the futility of institutional change. While the elections were framed as a step toward reform, they instead reinforced Iraq’s long-standing patterns of instability, making them an instructive case for analysing the country’s post-2003 political trajectory.

Examining these elections provides a crucial entry point for understanding Iraq’s systemic challenges, as the theoretical model developed in this study will be

⁵¹³ “The wall for security and political analysis,” Telegram account, June 13, 2022, <https://t.me/aljidarforanalysis>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵¹⁴ BBC News, “Iraq: Deadly Clashes Erupt in Baghdad as Political Crisis Intensifies”, August 30, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62736710>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵¹⁵ Deutsche Welle, “Iraq Gets a New Government After a Year of Deadlock”, October 28, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/iraq-gets-a-new-government-after-a-year-of-deadlock/a-63592772>. Accessed July 2022.

applied to the nature of political authority exemplified by this case. This, in turn, serves as a foundation for addressing the research question – how Shia commonality has influenced inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – and its sub-questions, formulated in relation to the selected empirical site of observation: how the post-2003 Iraqi political self is constructed through Iranian political authority as the ‘other’; and how Iraqi political collective identity can be described in the post-regime environment. In the following section, I shall begin this analysis by applying my model from the self-other nexus, establishing the conceptual groundwork for understanding political authority in post-2003 Iraq and its processual formation through exchange with its relevant ‘other,’ Iran.

4.2. Self-Other Nexus in Post-2003 Iraqi Political Authority

In the following section, I shall describe the self-other nexus behind the construction of post-2003 Iraqi political identity. The analysis will be divided into three sub-sections. First, I shall argue that there has been no intersubjective, dialogical and non-hierarchical exchange between the two: Iran, as the other, has represented an *exogenous* and *subversive* force which has *penetrated* the Iraqi Shia field; Iraq, as the self, has relied on Iran as an external patron to gain some advantage in the political competition. As significant of this self-other nexus, I shall also report the interview I had with Mohammad Qalibaf, former IRGC commander and crucial conservative political leader.

Secondly, I shall describe the different means of Iranian penetration (funding Shia militia-wings of Iraqi parties; taking direct military action into the Iraqi soil; infiltrating Iraqi politics through hybrid actors). Thirdly, I shall finally argue how, due to Iranian penetration, the Iraqi Shia field appears as *hybrid* – that is, interconnected with the Shia religious and military fields – and how it does not entirely overlap with the wider field of Iraqi national politics but, rather, at times *competes* with it.

This section will serve as a vital step in addressing the crucial sub-question of this study: how the self gets constructed through the other. After having explored the relation between the Iraqi self and the Iranian other in relation to political authority, I shall move to analyse how the self-other nexus has constructed the main cores of

state's collective identity: Power, Myth and Security. This will allow me to address the second sub-question – how to describe state's collective identity – and subsequently provide a full answer to the investigation on how the Iraqi political self has been constructed through the Iranian other.

4.2.1. Iran as an Exogenous and Subversive Actor & Penetration into the Iraqi Shia Field

As my model puts forward, the self-other nexus is the founding dynamic of state's identity construction. The continuous process of identity formation happens through an interconnected nexus which ties the self to the relevant other: self and other acquire ontological and epistemological meaning as “they recognise themselves as mutually recognising one another”.⁵¹⁶ By identifying elements of ‘alterity’ and ‘resemblance’ in the other, not only does the self recognise the other as ‘other’; it also recognises itself as self, “for exteriority leads the subject back to itself”.⁵¹⁷

This relation is intersubjective and non-hierarchical – as the relation is at the centre, no element is prior to the other – and it is dialogical. That is to say, “there is a constant interaction between meanings”, where all “meanings” “have the potential of conditioning others”.⁵¹⁸ “How it will do so and to what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of *utterance*”⁵¹⁹ talking of the self-other relation, at the moment of the interaction itself.

In the case of post-2003 Iraqi political identity, this interaction has been characterised by Iran acting as an exogenous and subversive force: exogenous, as it has *penetrated* into the Shia field, and subversive, as it has impacted on Iraqi politics in a way that has undermined the attempts to construct a functioning political system and, in terms of identity construction, a collectively shared idea of political self.

Iran, in fact, has projected onto the space of competition which the field represents its own interest: maintaining Iraq in a dependent relationship in order to

⁵¹⁶ Georg F. V. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 112.

⁵¹⁷ Emmanuel Lévinas *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand, (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 43.

⁵¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 426.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*

have the upper hand in its transnational fight (it has militias in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen).⁵²⁰

In achieving this aim, the Shia notion of identity has been instrumental: Iran has, in fact, capitalised on its Shia counterparts offering itself as an external patron, both in terms of funding and political leverage. Thus, Iraq, as the self, has continued the power struggle trying to make the most of the Iranian penetration. The aim of the Shia actors who have relied on Iran has been, in fact, that of winning the political competition, and the reliance on Iran has served this purpose.

When the people have expressed their frustration at foreign interference in the numerous waves of protests, certain groups have adopted a nationalist political discourse to win the streets; yet, even then, they have still been complicit in the Iranian penetration. Moqtada al-Sadr, for instance, in the struggle that broke out in the immediate post-invasion years (2003–2007),⁵²¹ had close ties with Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).⁵²² After years of social unrest, with the people demonstrating and demanding for the end of foreign involvement, he won the 2018 elections with very nationalist anti-Iran rhetoric. Yet, when he turned violent against the 2019 streets protests,⁵²³ unidentified armed elements attacked the demonstrators.⁵²⁴ According to

⁵²⁰ See for instance: Barbara Slavin, "Mullahs, Money, and Militias: How Iran Exerts Its Influence in the Middle East," *United States Institute of Peace Report*, June 1, 2008, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2008/06/mullahs-money-and-militias-how-iran-exerts-its-influence-middle-east/>. Accessed June 2022].

⁵²¹ Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 187.

⁵²² The Quds Force is an IRGC specialized unit, which is responsible for extra-territorial operations. By primarily focusing on activities outside of Iran's borders, the Quds Force supports and exports Iran's revolutionary ideals, promotes Islamic governance, and counter perceived threats to Iran's national security. It was established in 1980 and, as an IRGC unit, responds directly to the Iranian Supreme Leader (Udit Banerjee, "Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps", *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 (2015): 98–101). Following Soleimani's assassination by a US airstrike in January 2020, Major General Esmail Ghaani assumed the role of commander of the Quds Force (*Reuters*, "Iran Names Deputy Quds Force Commander to Replace Soleimani After Killing," Jan. 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-security-blast-iran-successor-idUKKBN1Z20XA>. Accessed June 2022).

⁵²³ International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box," *Middle East Report* No. 223, 26 July, 2021, 20, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵²⁴ United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), "Update on Demonstrations in Iraq: Accountability for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements," May 2021, Baghdad, 4,

many observers, these groups and individuals were coming from Iran and/or Iranian-backed militias which comprise the PMF.⁵²⁵

Reflecting on the self-other nexus in relation to Iraqi political authority, the interview I conducted with the conservative politician Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf is quite significant. Qalibaf is a crucial Iranian political and military leader. At the time of writing he is speaker of parliament; when the interview was conducted in May 2016 he was mayor of Teheran.⁵²⁶ He has been one of the longest-serving mayors of the capital city in Iran's history, from 2005 to 2017, and run for the 2005 and 2013 presidential elections.⁵²⁷ Before getting into politics, as a IRGC high-ranking officer, he participated in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, he was appointed commander of the IRGC Air force in 1996, and from 2000 to 2005 he was chief of the Iranian Police Forces.⁵²⁸

Besides refusing to answer any specific question on the IRGC or the relations of Iran with the different Iraqi Shia groups, his main arguments on Iran-Iraq relations were quite straightforward:

"There is no dichotomy nor difference between Iraqi and Iranian people [...] we are *brothers*: you should ask questions about commonalities, not differences";

"It is clear that Iran is the most powerful Shia country in the world and it is a core Shia value that we have to help those who are oppressed; since the Shia groups in the region are permanently being oppressed by their dictator regimes, the Islamic Republic tries to help them [...] we help Iraqi people if they are oppressed, that's all we do".

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_Report_Accountability_for_Human_Rights_Violations_and_Abuses_ENG.pdf. Accessed July 2022.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid*, 27.

⁵²⁶ The interview was conducted in May 2016 in Tehran at the Municipality Building.

⁵²⁷ Qalibaf also participated in presidential elections: he run for the 2005 elections in the same coalition as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who then won), in the 2013 elections (losing to the reformist Hassan Rouhani) and he announced his run for a third time in the 2017 elections to then withdrew in favour of Ebrahim Raisi's candidacy (who is in fact the current Iranian President at the time of writing). (Library of Congress, "Official Campaign Web Site - Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf," retrieved from: <http://ghalibaf.ir/>, Congress.gov, Washington DC, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0019080/>. Accessed July 2022).

⁵²⁸ Library of Congress, "Official Campaign Web Site".

When asked about the actualisation of this “help”, he exclusively mentioned Saddam Hussein’s regime and “foreign interference”:

“It was the repression of a dictator regime and foreign interference that oppressed people’s freedom and their religious choice and prevented Shias from playing their real and just role in governing their destiny. After the fall of Saddam and the Baath party, changing the constitution, and establishing democratic laws and rules for which Iraqi people have been given the right to vote, Shia power has become more real and apparent than before [in Iraq]”;

“The problem was that a dictator with an oppressive regime and with the help of some western countries, invaded our country and violated international laws and our borders, and tried to destroy our identity, religion, and nationality”.

Arguing that “the problem has been solved by the fall of Saddam and foreign intervention”, he concluded the interview claiming that any other question on Iranian intervention at the time of the interview “had been answered” or were “not relevant to the main research question of this study”.

Despite Qalibaf’s reluctance to participate in the interview, some interesting reflections can still be made.

Relationally speaking, denying any difference with the other is equal to not acknowledging the other at all; not only has Qalibaf denied any difference between “Iraqi and Iranian people”, but has also refused to answer any question specifically addressing Iranian relation with that or the other Shia party.

Talking of Shias in Iraq, moreover, he has never made any distinction, simplifying a spectrum which is, on the contrary, quite complex and articulated. In this sense, he has thus indirectly underlined how Iran has penetrated into the Shia field of competition aiming at its own state’s interests and, to achieve these, has interacted with other field’s competitors in similar ways (essentially, as an external patron). Finally, insisting on the “help” for the Iraqi “brothers” and the prominence of Iran in the Shia world, he has unequivocally underscored the hierarchy behind Shia Iraq and Iran.

Refusing to answer any question concerning “help” other than against Saddam Hussein seems *per se* significant of Iranian meddling into Iraqi affairs.

4.2.2. The Different Means of Iranian Penetration

Having argued how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has been characterised by the Iranian penetration into the Iraqi Shia field, in the next paragraphs I shall observe the different forms of this penetration.

Iranian penetration has happened through different means: funding Shia militia wings of Iraqi political groups; taking direct military action on Iraqi soil, both to suppress protests (such as in 2019) and to influence the outcome of post-election political stalemates; and infiltrating Iraqi politics through *hybrid actors* – figures who operate at the intersection of military and political spheres, particularly those emerging from Iranian-backed PMF militias. These actors blur the line between formal political authority and armed non-state entities, leveraging both electoral participation and paramilitary influence to shape governance outcomes in Iraq.⁵²⁹

Despite being explicitly forbidden by Article 9(b) of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which prohibits members of militias from participating in politics, many have circumvented this restriction by rebranding under different electoral names.⁵³⁰ This practice has been in place since the very first post-2003 elections in 2005, allowing militia figures to enter formal politics while maintaining their paramilitary affiliations. A notable example of this was seen in the aftermath of the October 2021 elections, previously discussed, where the Coordination Framework (CF) emerged as a powerful bloc composed largely of Iranian-backed hybrid actors. The CF provided a political front for figures tied to armed groups, enabling them to exert direct influence over government formation while simultaneously operating outside state structures. Through this mechanism, numerous Iranian-backed hybrid actors have successfully infiltrated Iraqi politics, consolidating their influence within both the state apparatus and the security sector.

⁵²⁹ Thanassis Cambanis et al., *Hybrid Actors. Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2019), 9.

⁵³⁰ *Iraqi Constitution* (2005), Article 9(b).

In the following lines, I shall provide examples of the other two means of Iranian penetration, along with further insights into the role of hybrid actors.

In the immediate post-invasion period, the Quds' Force represented the main conduit of the Iraqi armed groups' funding. Mawaffaq al-Rubaiae, former member of the Iraqi Governing Council and Iraq's National advisor from 2004 to 2009, described the Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, "the most powerful man in Iraq without question. Nothing gets done without him".⁵³¹ One of the greatly supported Iraqi militias was the Badr Brigade, the militia-wing of the Iraqi party Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI had been founded in Iran by Iraqi exiles who had escaped the Saddam Hussein regime.⁵³² While in exile, seeking to oust this regime and establish an Iranian-modelled Islamic government in Iraq, they had founded their Islamist group.⁵³³ In 1982, the IRGC created, funded and trained the Badr Brigade,⁵³⁴ which played a significant role during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war fighting with the Iranian forces against Saddam Hussein troops.⁵³⁵

In 2003, SCIRI leaders returned to Iraq aiming at gaining their share of power in the post-Saddam era. Their militia, the Badr Brigade, had 15,000 militiamen on the ground;⁵³⁶ one third of the Moqtada al-Sadr' Mahdi army, which, at its peak, could count 60,000 fighters.⁵³⁷ The Badr Brigade was not in any way less powerful, however; it was, in fact, massively better-organised, funded and trained, as it had support from the IRGC Quds Force.⁵³⁸

⁵³¹ Martin Chulov, "Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian General 'Secretly Running' Iraq," *The Guardian*, 28 July, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence>. Accessed on June 2022.

⁵³² The three founders were Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim (a prominent Shi'a cleric), Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi al-Modarresi and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim (the younger brother of Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim; after the assassination of his brother in 2003, he assumed the leadership of SCIRI). (International Crisis Group, *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, Middle East Report No. 70, November 15, 2007, 1–2, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/shiite-politics-iraq-role-supreme-council>. Accessed July 2022).

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3–5.

⁵³⁶ James Jones, *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq*, Sept. 6, 2007, 30, <https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/independent-commission-security-forces-iraq>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵³⁷ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 65.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

Both the Badr Brigade and SCIRI participated in 2005 elections, the first elections of post-Saddam Iraq.⁵³⁹ Being part of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) Shia coalition, which won the elections, they went to parliament.

Although it was still not illegal for militias to participate in elections, the Badr Brigade changed its name into 'Badr Organisation' to re-brand itself and present a more acceptable and moderate image to appeal to a wider range of voters.⁵⁴⁰ It had been, in fact, responsible for extrajudicial killings, abductions, and other forms of violence targeting individuals based on their sectarian identity.⁵⁴¹

With the UIA winning the elections, Bayan Jabr, senior SCIRI member and commander of the Badr, was made Minister of the Interior.⁵⁴² Jabar then had full control of the Special Police Commandos (later renamed the Iraqi National Police);⁵⁴³ his first move was to 'clean up' the ministry and fill it with as many Badr militiamen as possible.⁵⁴⁴

Thus, while maintaining its armed wing outside the state, between 2005 and 2006, the Special Commandos operated as one of the most violent actors of the sectarian civil war.⁵⁴⁵ As it had been established by ministerial order, it was not subject to legal, parliamentary or cabinet oversight.

SCIRI has remained in Iraqi politics until the time of writing. In 2007, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, one of the three founders, changed the party's name into 'Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq' (ISCI) to present the organisation beyond its Islamic revolutionary

⁵³⁹ In 2005, two general elections, the drafting of the constitution and a referendum to approve the constitution were held. The first January 30, 2005 elections were held to elect the new National Assembly, which was given the mandate to draft a new constitution and form the Iraqi Transitional Government. On October 15, 2005, Iraqis voted to approve the new constitution, which vested the legislative authority in two bodies: the Council of Representatives and the Council of Union. On December 15, 2005, the general elections to appoint the 275 Council of Representatives' members took place. (Oliaei, "Sixteen Years of Parliamentary Elections in Iraq").

⁵⁴⁰ Guido Steinberg, "The Badr Organization Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Comment*, July 21, 2017, 4, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C26_sbg.pdf. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁴¹ Steinberg, "The Badr Organization," 4–5.

⁵⁴² Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 63.

⁵⁴³ Dexter Filkins, "Armed Groups Propel Iraq Toward Chaos," *New York Times*, May 24, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/24/world/middleeast/24security.html>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁴⁴ Michael Moss, "How Iraq Police Reform Became Casualty of War," *New York Times*, May 22, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/22/world/middleeast/22security.html>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁴⁵ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 63.

roots.⁵⁴⁶ Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's son, Ammar al-Hakim, took over ISCI leadership after his father's passing,⁵⁴⁷ and he is now part of the CF front.

Iran has also sent its own men to affect the outcome of the power-struggle; in the immediate post-invasion period, the US military claimed that the Quds Forces had 150 members in Iraq and arrested a small group of them.⁵⁴⁸ Moreover, it also took direct military action on Iraqi soil.

Following the CF rejection of the elections' results, for instance, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who was appointed on May 2020 following the protests and still acts as Prime Minister given the current standoff, escaped unharmed an assassination attempt by armed drones on October 31.⁵⁴⁹ The attack was unclaimed but was widely attributed in the media to the pro-Iran militia groups, because of the use, also, of the drone technology.⁵⁵⁰ Stressing that the drones could not have been produced in Iraq, some local commentators have also accused the government of not holding the perpetrators accountable. "There are parties that are hostile to the government and do not want stability, and this is known since the beginning of the assassinations and killings that escalated in 2019", said al-Kafai, an Iraqi political analyst to the Iraqi channel al-Forat.

"Whoever fabricated this operation must be held accountable, and if there is an accused person who must be brought to justice, we must not forget it [...] Whoever

⁵⁴⁶ Abbas Kadhim, "A Major Crack in Iraqi Shia Politics," *Huffington Post*, July 26, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-major-crack-in-iraqi-shia-politics_b_59766ab6e4b01cf1c4bb72bd. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁸ Dafna Linzer, "Troops Authorised to Kill Iranian Operatives in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/25/AR2007012502199.html>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁴⁹ John Davison and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraqi PM Safe After Drone Attack on Residence, Military Says," *Reuters*, November 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/drone-attack-targets-iraq-pm-who-escapes-unhurt-iraq-military-2021-11-07/>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁵⁰ See for instance: Al-Hurra, "Ad-Durunz al-Mutawwira: Adat Qatl Jadida Takhruju an Saytirat «al-Wakil» fi ash-Sharq al-Awsat," ("Drone Technology: A New Killing Instrument that is Beyond the Control of the Representative in the Middle East," translation from Arabic of the author), *Al Hurra*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.alhurra.com/arabic-and-international/2021/12/08/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82>. Accessed July 2022.

fabricated this operation must be held accountable [...] The drones were not manufactured locally”.⁵⁵¹

4.2.3. Iraqi Shia Field as Hybrid & Competing with the Wider Field of Iraqi National Politics

Before moving on to analyse how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has shaped the main core-constructs of state’s political collective identity (Power, Myth and Security), I shall conclude this section by reflecting on how, due to Iranian penetration, the Shia field interacts with other fields and with what implications for Iraqi politics.

I shall thus argue how the Iraqi Shia field appears as *hybrid* – that is, interconnected with the Shia religious and military fields – and how, these two fields being *transnational*, this interrelationship has important implications on its interaction with the wider field of Iraqi national politics. The Shia field and the Iraqi national politics field, in fact, do not entirely overlap, and the former at times *competes* with the latter.

Due to Iranian penetration, the “structured arena of conflict”⁵⁵² which the field represents – the camp of forces, the sociological site of competition – is deeply interconnected with the Shia religious and military fields. Such fields *cut across* the national borders of Iraq and Iran, and they are constituted by competitors whose aims and range of action are *transnational*.

It is in this sense that the post-2003 Iraqi Shia field is a *hybrid* one; not in the sense that is interconnected with other fields, which is an ordinary field’s feature.⁵⁵³ It

⁵⁵¹ *Al Forat News*, “Al-Kafai: Mutamar al-Araji Athbata Aahhat Istihdaf Rais al-Wazir wa Nafa Fabrikatah,” (“Al-Kafai: The Araji Conference Confirmed Prime Minister was Targeted and Denied [the case] Fabrication,” translation from Arabic of the author), November 29, 2021, <https://alforatnews.iq/news/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D9%86%D9%81%D9%89-%D9%81%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%87>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁵² David Swartz, *Culture and Power. The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 9.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 128.

is hybrid, meaning that the camp of forces is interconnected with others whose competition and struggled-over power is transnational.

Let us think, for instance, of the PMF leaders, who fight against ISIS in Syria or anywhere else jihadist groups may be found, or follow the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose fatwas are directed at the whole Shia world. These actors compete within the Iraqi Shia field while simultaneously pursuing their objectives concerning different ways of conceiving Shia politics at large, and issues such as the complex relation between political and religious authority in Shiism; the transnational sense of commonality and solidarity amongst the various Shia minority groups in the Muslim world; the extent of commonality that is or is not perceived between Iraq and Iran as Shia power-knowledge poles, etc.

Consequently, as the Shia field's "potential and active forces"⁵⁵⁴ which do aim at the Iraqi state wage battles which, by being interconnected with transnational fields, are shaped by interests which do not necessarily overlap with those of the Iraqi state, the 'borders' of the Iraqi Shia field go beyond Iraq's borders. The Shia field's interaction with the wider field of Iraqi politics is thus as if the Shia field were not a sub-field of the other.

The Shia field has at times *cooperated* with that of Iraqi national politics (as in the struggle against ISIS and the decision to deploy the PMF militias against it), and at times *competed* with it. I argue that the intra-Shia rivalry, which has been widely commented on by analysts and observers as the inner cause of Iraqi instability,⁵⁵⁵ should be seen in this sense.

A good example of the competition between the Shia field and that of Iraqi national politics is offered by the Iranian attack of March 2022, when a dozen ballistic missiles were launched by Iran in an unprecedented assault on Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

⁵⁵⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 101.

⁵⁵⁵ See for instance: Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Social Protest in Iraq and Reality of the Internal Shia Dispute", *al-Jazeera Centre for Studies Paper*, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/08/20158307585163273.html>. Accessed July 2022; and Renad Mansour, "Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State," *Chatham House paper*, July 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-07-04-iraq-after-isis-mansour-final2.pdf>. Accessed July 2022.

explained that the targeted area was used by Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, but a joint Iraqi-Kurdish inquiry concluded that there was no evidence to support the claim.⁵⁵⁶

Although no direct links between Iraqi national politics and such incidents can be drawn on the basis of the current evidence, the earlier-mentioned assassination attempt of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi suggests that there may be some connections with the election results, which Iran-supported parties have refuted and, at the time of writing, continue to reject.

In May 2022, Dutch diplomat Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, who has been heading a UN envoy to Iraq to assess the post-elections environment, was sharply critical of the Iranian attacks and described them as “disturbing, disruptive and dangerous”.⁵⁵⁷

4.3. Core-Constructs of State’s Collective Identity in Post-2003 Iraqi Political Authority: Power, Myth & Security

The focus of this section will be an analysis of what I consider the core-constructs of state’s collective identity: Power, Myth and Security. As conceptualised in my model, these three main cores are constructed by the self-other nexus. The Iraq-Iran self-other relation, as observed in the previous section, has been characterised by the Iranian penetration into the Shia field. In the following paragraphs, I shall therefore look at how such a penetration has forged the main constructs of post-2003 Iraqi political identity.

This section will address the second sub-question – how to describe Iraqi political collective identity – while also offering a comprehensive response to the question of self-construction through the other. The previous section has provided preliminary insights into the latter sub-question but, given that a state’s collective is

⁵⁵⁶ *The National*, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Target ‘Terror Groups’ in Iraq’s Erbil,” *The National News*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2022/05/11/iran-revolutionary-guards-target-terror-groups-in-iraqs-erbil/>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁵⁷ Sinan Mahmoud, “UN Warns Iraq to Form Government Before ‘Streets Boil Over’,” *The National News*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2022/05/18/un-warns-iraq-to-form-government-before-streets-boil-over/>. Accessed July 2022.

constructed by the self-other nexus, a more complete understanding requires a depiction of state's identity core-constructs.

After analysing each of the constructs, I shall proceed to put forward a comprehensive argument on the intersection of the three – the interrelation of symbolic capital/power, resonance and violence (what I call the symbolic cluster) – in the following section.

I shall thus have all the elements to finally address the main research question of this study as relevant to this empirical site of observation – how Shia commonality impacts on the Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations – which will be explored in the final analytical section of this chapter.

4.3.1. Power: Repressive Power & Repressive Violence

In the next lines, I shall focus on the construct of Power. I shall show how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has constructed Power as repressive and how it has been exercising repressive violence.

I shall show how corruption and violence have become common practices to gain a government position in post-2003. While for Iraqi actors Iranian patronage is instrumental in this aim, Iran has objectives which do not align with the wider field of Iraqi national politics. I shall illustrate how the Iraqi people have become progressively alienated from their ruling elite and how, when Iraqis take to the streets to demand the end of corruption and Iranian interference, populism is likely to rise. Three separate sub-sections will provide the examples of significant political leaders: Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi al-Amiri and Moqtada al-Sadr.

Due to the reliance on Iran as an external patron, corruption and military violence have come to represent wide-spread practices to gain some advantage in the power-struggle in post-2003 Iraq.

As such practices have become the main instruments to achieve a government position, Iraqi political actors have progressively lost their popular base, with no Shia group acquiring symbolic power in Iraqi society. Symbolic power would have meant

dictating their symbolic “principles of vision and division”,⁵⁵⁸ acquiring the ability to “make people see and believe”⁵⁵⁹ their own “vision of the world”,⁵⁶⁰ and “confirming or transforming [such a] vision of the world” for them, in order to present their “action on the world”⁵⁶¹ as legitimate and necessary.

The Power that has been exercised has thus been repressive, one where “a massive and primal condition of domination”⁵⁶² occurs, and “a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other”⁵⁶³ characterises social hierarchies. The violence that such a Power perpetrates is equally repressive; it is not symbolic violence, “that of trust, obligation”,⁵⁶⁴ which corresponds to “the most economical mode of domination because it best corresponds to the economy of the system”.⁵⁶⁵

“They are all thieves, liars and killers”, one young Iraqi living in Jordan told me, discussing political authority after the October 2021 elections. “I shall never go back to Iraq and I pray every day for my family. They are not safe there, no-one is.”⁵⁶⁶

Corruption has become so extensive that it has solidified into unwritten consociational rules which regulates the appointment of governing figures. The system is called ‘Muhasasa Taifia’ (in Arabic, the ‘ethno-sectarian appointment’) and establishes that the speaker for the Council of Representatives must be Sunni, the President has to come from one of the two main Kurdish parties, and the Prime Minister, who is formally appointed by the President from the largest bloc in parliament, must be Shia.⁵⁶⁷ A Muhasasa Taifia subsidiary, the *wikala* system, gives the elected

⁵⁵⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press & Basil Blackwell, 1991), 224.

⁵⁵⁹ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 170.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 142.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 127.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ Interview with Iraqi man on zoom in English, April 2021.

⁵⁶⁷ Toby Dodge, “Iraq’s Informal Consociationalism and Its Problems,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2020): 145–152, 147–148.

politicians the right to appoint senior civil servants across government, rewarding their party followers and faction members on the payroll.⁵⁶⁸

A great deal has been written by scholars of the Muhasasa Taifia system as the main cause of corruption in Iraqi politics.⁵⁶⁹ While acknowledging that the Muhasasa Taifia system has certainly contributed to a vicious cycle, I argue, the Muhasasa Taifia corrupt system is an implication of the reliance on external patronage. The formal rules regulating the Muhasasa Taifia are in fact limited and the fact that it has established itself by being practiced is quite significant of how corruption has become a norm.

Violence has become so pervasive that the Shia field can be considered as one of continuous instability, while paradoxically being the one dominating Iraq since the first 2005 elections. While Iraqi actors' reliance on Iran as a patron is instrumental at gaining a place in government, Iran aims at keeping Iraq in a dependent relationship and pursues ultimate aims which do not necessarily overlap with those of wider field of Iraqi politics.

Consequently, on the one hand, the field's Iraqi competitors continue to depend on Iran and resort to violence when they incur in political stalemates. On the other hand, Iran intervenes with subversive actions when Iraqi politics does not unfold in a direction that serves its aims. As seen earlier, it is reasonable to believe that Mustafa al-Kadhimi's assassination attempt was perpetrated by Iran and that the missiles on Erbil in March may be connected with the elections results, which Iranian-backed parties have refuted.

⁵⁶⁸ Toby Dodge, "Corruption Continues to Destabilize Iraq," *Chatham House Paper*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/10/corruption-continues-destabilize-iraq>. Accessed June 2022.

The Muhasasa Taifia emerged in July 2003, very early on after the invasion, with the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), the first post-invasion Iraqi body, which was set-up by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Under the pressure of those formerly exiled parties which had strongly supported the US invasion – namely: the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the Islamic Dawa party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – an "exclusive elite bargain" took place and the MT – albeit not officially – was established. (Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 46).

⁵⁶⁹ See for instance: Liam Anderson, "Filling Out Iraq's Federation: A Bottom-up Approach to Challenging the Muhasasa," *Ethnopolitics* (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2022.2124669>; Toby Dodge, "Iraq's Informal Consociationalism and Its Problems," *Ethnopolitics* 20, nN. 2 (October 2020): 145-152, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12330>; and Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, "Sectarianization and De-sectarianization in the Struggle for Iraq's Political Field," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 18, No. 1 (2020): 58-69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2020.1729513>.

The Iraqi people's alienation from their ruling elite is documented by public surveys⁵⁷⁰ and proven by the continuous protests. Corruption and the Iranian infiltration are seen by the demonstrators as the main sources of Iraqi instability. In such a contested field, populism is likely to rise, with certain actors tactfully adopting anti-sectarian and anti-Iran rhetoric when social unrest breaks out, while simultaneously relying on Iran at times of necessity.

As described in my theoretical model, the construction of the other within the self through securitisation practices does not seem to apply to the Iraqi case due, I would argue, to such an estrangement between the Iraqi political elite and the popular base. The case of the populist leader Moqtada al-Sadr offers an interesting example of how repressive and symbolic violence may coexist; in the 2019 protests, all those who were not supporting him were turned into a security threat. His followers were thus mobilised and incited to "clear the streets".⁵⁷¹ In this case, symbolic violence tied Sadr to its followers; conversely, repressive violence was exercised on all of the others.

In the following sub-sections, three examples of Iraqi politicians will be given. They have been selected as quite significant of the reliance on the Iranian patron through the presence of hybrid actors, political elite's corruption, and populism. Those are: Nouri al-Maliki and Hadi al-Amiri, and Moqtada al-Sadr.

4.3.1.1. Nouri al-Maliki

Nouri al-Maliki is a good example of how Iraqi political actors have achieved and maintained their grip on power through Iranian-backed corruption and violence.

Maliki was appointed as Prime Minister in 2006, after long negotiations that followed the December 2005 parliamentary elections.⁵⁷² Maliki and the Dawa party, unlike the majority of other groups, did not have their own militia.⁵⁷³ Between 2006 and 2007, to secure his grip on power during the civil war, Maliki thus developed an

⁵⁷⁰ See for instance: Arab Barometer V, "Iraq Country Report," 7–8, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Iraq_Report_Public-Opinion_2019.pdf. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁷¹ International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising," 20.

⁵⁷² Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 127.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*

informal and extra-constitutional chain of command, which would allow the Prime Minister to override the Ministries of Defence and the Interior.⁵⁷⁴

This informal chain was embodied into two main extra-constitutional security entities: the Office of the Commander in Chief (OCINC) and provincial-level operations commands,⁵⁷⁵ which were the best-trained units in the army conducts special missions for the Prime Minister, including the arrest of political rivals.⁵⁷⁶

It was through such informal channels that Maliki, to maintain premiership in 2010 despite having lost the elections, sought help from Iran and its paramilitary allies, including the Badr Organisation, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah al-Iraqiyya.⁵⁷⁷ After months of violence, with civilians wounded and killed,⁵⁷⁸ Maliki was again appointed as Prime Minister with Allawi relegated to head a new security council.⁵⁷⁹

Once he had achieved premiership, he distributed the ministerial cabinets following the corrupt practice of rewarding allies and supporters.⁵⁸⁰ In 2011, to repress protests that broke out in the Sunni parts of country, he again sought help from the Badr and the other pro-Iran military groups.⁵⁸¹ It was also he, as Prime Minister, who placed the PMF under his direct supervision (which is still the case at the time of writing), thus violating the Iraqi constitution.

⁵⁷⁴ Kenneth Katzaman, Statement before the Subcommittee on International Organisations, Human Rights and Oversight of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Hearing: "Unfinished Business: United Nations Chapter VII Mandates and the US–Iraq Bilateral Agreement," September 17, 2009, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2010), 23.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁶ See for instance: Kelly McEvers, "Iraqi Leader Accused of Running Secret Prison," National Public Radio (NPR), February 2, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/02/02/133440159/group-claims-iraq-secret-prison-in-operation?t=1657140703500>, accessed July 2022; Steven Lee Myers, "Secret Baghdad Jail Held Sunnis From the North," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/22/world/middleeast/22prison.html>. Accessed July 2022; Ned Parker, "Diyala Struggles to Overcome Sectarian Bad Blood," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-oct-25-la-fg-iraq-diyala-20101026-story.html>, accessed July 2022; and Joel Wing, "Maliki's Private Security Forces," *Musings on Iraq*, March 1, 2009, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/03/malikis-private-security-forces.html>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁷⁷ Cambanis, et al., *Hybrid Actors...*, 27.

⁵⁷⁸ Ned Parker, "Iraq Elections Marred By Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-mar-08-la-fg-iraq-election8-2010mar08-story.html>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁷⁹ BBC, "Nouri Maliki Reappointed Iraqi Prime Minister," November 12, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11732158>. Accessed July 2022.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Numerous calls for resignation were raised in 2014. He finally resigned only when Grand Ayatollah Sistani handed a letter to him insisting on the selection of a new Prime Minister.⁵⁸² Yet, he has been back into politics since the October 2021 elections.

4.3.1.2. Hadi al-Amiri

Hadi al-Amiri serves as a prime example of an Iranian-backed hybrid actor, skilfully navigating between engaging in militia activities and assuming roles within Iraqi institutions.

In the chaotic post-invasion years, he was part of the Badr Brigade. As a Badr militiaman, he had taken part in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war on the Iranian side.⁵⁸³ Until 2009, as a Badr commander in Iraq, he remained “somewhat in the shadows”,⁵⁸⁴ to then finally get into parliament when its militia was renamed Badr Organisation and, within the UIA Shia coalition, won the 2005 elections.

When Maliki resorted to the help of pro-Iran militias to maintain premiership in 2010, one of those he rewarded for their help was Hadi al-Amiri, who was made Minister of Transportation. Through substantial funding from the ministry’s budget, Amiri significantly bolstered the organisation, effectively adopting a hybrid actor-practice of concurrently holding prominent roles as both a politician and a militia commander.⁵⁸⁵

When the PMF was founded in 2014, Amiri resigned from his position of Minister of Transportation; he made Muhammad al-Ghabban, a high-ranking Badr’s officer, Minister of the Interior, and became the leader of the Badr again. As Badr commander, he also gained command of the PMF, together with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.⁵⁸⁶ In addition, he became the unofficial military governor of the province of Diyala, north-east of Baghdad.⁵⁸⁷

At the 2019 elections, he closely followed Sadr, the winner of the 2018 elections, and has been an important player of the CF post-October 2021 elections.

⁵⁸² Caroleen Marji Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs. Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018), 82.

⁵⁸³ Steinberg, “The Badr Organisation,” 3.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

4.3.1.3. Moqtada al-Sadr

Moqtada al-Sadr serves as an illustrative example of how internal divisions within the Shia field can present opportunities for the adoption of populist anti-Iran rhetoric, while simultaneously relying on Iran as a potent patron during times of necessity.

As discussed in the previous chapter on religious authority, in the immediate post-invasion years, Sadr's strategic ability to exploit the different actors at play in the power-struggle led him to confront Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.

Attempting to diminish Sistani's leadership amongst the Shias, Sadr drew upon his father's influence, Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who, in the 1990s, had accused Sistani of being a "silent jurisprudent", identified himself as "speaking jurisprudent".⁵⁸⁸ While levying the same accusation against Sistani and belligerently confronting him, he also equally confronted the US occupation. Their tactics, however, were very different: where Sadr relied on his militia activity, Sistani assertively managed a long round of negotiations, which finally led to the 2005 national popular elections.

When that happened, despite his struggle against Sistani, Sadr actively participated in the 2005 elections as part of the UIA, the coalition that Sistani had been supporting. His political stance towards him, in fact, changed considerably: in 2008, upon Sistani's order, he ordered his militia to stand down.⁵⁸⁹ When Qassem Soleimani was assassinated by US airstrikes,⁵⁹⁰ however, he gathered his Mahdi army once again.

After having been very close to Qassem Soleimani during the 2003–2007 civil war,⁵⁹¹ his political discourse has shifted radically in more recent years. Since the 2018

⁵⁸⁸ Ali Al-Madhloom, "Sadr-Sistani Relations and the Political Crisis in Iraq," *Emirates Policy Center*, October 11, 2022, <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/sadr-sistani-relations-and-the-political-crisis-in-iraq>. Accessed October 2022.

⁵⁸⁹ Khaled Farhan, "Iraq's Sadr to Disband Mehdi Army If Clerics Order," *Reuters*, April 7, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-idUSL0434078820080407>. Accessed October 2022.

⁵⁹⁰ John Davison and Ahmed Rasheed, "In Iraq, an Old US Foe Grows His Political Power," *Reuters*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-cleric/>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁹¹ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 187.

national elections campaign, he has adopted a very cross-sectarian and anti-Iran rhetoric.⁵⁹² Furthermore, despite being part of that Shia field which is strongly criticised by the street protesters, he has often acted as if he were representing the masses, not the establishment.

In the political crisis of April 2016, for instance, Sadr demanded Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to replace the entire cabinet and the three presidencies: the Prime Minister, the President and the Speaker of Parliament. As elected leaders, the President and Speaker of Parliament could not be replaced. Sadr's call had populist and rhetorical aims: upon Abadi's refusal, as Sadr had most presumably expected, demonstrators entered the Green Zone, the area of Baghdad where most governmental buildings are located, and stormed the parliament.⁵⁹³

As cogently argued by Maria Fantappie, in that occasion "Sadr channelled popular anger into the political scene, effectively creating a double confrontation: between the street and the political elite, and between his own al-Ahrar bloc [...] and the other Shiite political parties".⁵⁹⁴

In the 2019 protests, also, he backed the demonstrations until when, following Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi's resignation, he used his parliamentary weight to influence the appointment of a new Prime Minister closer to him and formulate an electoral law more advantageous to his voting.⁵⁹⁵ When that happened, he turned violent against the protests, accusing them of being a security threat. He gave instructions to clear the squares of "saboteurs" and "infiltrators", as the protesters, he claimed, had "deviated from the right path" and allowed the US to meddle in Iraqi affairs.⁵⁹⁶ In that occasion, as above noted, some unidentified armed elements, most probably from Iranian-backed militias, effectively helped Sadr to intervene in order to crush the protests.

⁵⁹² Renad Mansour and Christine van den Toorn, "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?," *London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Report*, July 2018, 13–14, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁹³ Maria Fantappie, "Iraq: On the Edge of Chaos," *International Crisis Group Commentary*, May 14, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-edge-chaos>. Accessed June 2022.

⁵⁹⁴ Fantappie, "Iraq: On the Edge of Chaos".

⁵⁹⁵ The new law divides Iraq's 18 provinces into smaller electoral districts in which every 100,000 citizens elect one candidate for parliament. This system favours the Sadrist, whose support mostly comes from rural areas or the urban poor, areas with few political competitors. (Omar al-Jaffal, "Iraq's New Electoral Law: Old Powers Adapting to Change," *Arab Reform Initiative*, January 12, 2021, 7–8, https://www.arab-reform.net/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Arab_Reform_Initiative_en_iraqs-new-electoral-law-old-powers-adapting-to-change_15844.pdf . Accessed June 2022).

⁵⁹⁶ International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising", 20.

4.3.2. Myth: Post-2003 Pronounced Shia Exclusiveness

In the following section, the second core-construct of state's collective identity will be analysed: Myth, defined as any culturally-embedded notion and trend which is imbued with a symbolic repertoire. Three different Myths have been identified as central in the post-2003 Iraqi Shia field:⁵⁹⁷ the Iraqist nationalist vision imbued with an exclusivist Shia assertion; the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces; and the shrine protection narrative.

Each of these will be analysed showing the pre-existing element and the role of the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus behind their development in post-2003 Iraq. As the concept of Myth instructs, in fact, the symbolic resonance of Myths tends to make them quite persistent over time; yet, as social constructs, they are constantly subject to a processual transformation. I shall thus show how the Iranian penetration has brought about an element of Shia exclusiveness at the expense of other sections of Iraqi society, and a noteworthy transnational Shia belligerence against non-Shia communities in the wider Muslim world.

4.3.2.1. Iraqist Nationalist Vision Imbued with an Exclusivist Shia Assertion

The first prevailing political and cultural trend which I shall look at is what I would define as the Iraqist nationalist vision imbued with an exclusivist Shia assertion.

Nationalism as mobilised around the idea of an Iraqi homeland, as well as the Shia-centric principle of vision, are both Myths whose roots precede the 2003 regime change. Crucially, the two as entangled also constitute one Iraqi Myth *per se*; one that sees *Iraq as Shia, and the Shias as Iraqis*. This Myth has historical seeds which are, indeed, anterior to regime change.

In the next lines, I shall provide an historical account of this one Myth to show how deep-rooted into the Shia Iraqi collective imaginary is and how the two Myth-components – the Iraqist nationalism and the Shia-centred principle – have nourished

⁵⁹⁷ For a comprehensive analysis of post-2003 competing myth-symbol complexes, one that considers, also, Sunni groups, see Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*.

each other over time. I shall then proceed to show how it has developed as a consequence of the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, acquiring an element of Shia exclusiveness.

As Toby Dodge has described, from the 1930s and the demise of the Ottoman Empire, there have been two different declinations of Iraqi nationalism: an Arab conception (*qawmiyya*) and an Iraqist one (*wataniyya*).⁵⁹⁸ Whereas the Arab nationalists saw Arab unity as the best way to unite the population against British occupation,⁵⁹⁹ those groups who mobilised around the idea of an Iraqi homeland had a more pluralist vision for the country: one that was not limited linguistically, religiously or racially, and which would entail all the ethno-sectarian groups that constituted Iraq at the time.⁶⁰⁰

For the first fifty years of the Iraqi state, Shia clerics and Shia lay activists tended to promote an Iraqist vision, and the assertion of a specifically Shia identity juxtaposed against other communalist identities was not present.⁶⁰¹ As seen in the previous chapter on religious authority, the Shia religious hierarchy who mobilised in the 1920s was not driven by a Shia exclusivist principle aimed at establishing a Shia state:⁶⁰² what they wanted was to drive the British out, and their struggle took place together with Sunni Arabs and tribal leaders.⁶⁰³

As a consequence of British repression, the Iraqi *hawza* of Najaf entered a period of decline⁶⁰⁴ and, in the following years, secular ideologies gained prominence. When the Abdul Karim Qasim' regime promulgated several laws which the Shia clerics

⁵⁹⁸ Toby Dodge, "Bourdieu goes to Baghdad": Explaining Hybrid Political Identities in Iraq," *Journal of Historical Sociology* vol. 31, no. 1 (March 2018): 25–38, 31.

⁵⁹⁹ For more information on Arab nationalism in Iraq, see for instance: Reeva Spector Simon, *Iraq Between the Two World Wars, The Militarist Origins of Tyranny*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Abdul-Salaam Yousif, "The Struggle for Cultural Hegemony during the Iraqi Revolution," in *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, edited by Robert A. Fernea and William Roger Louis, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

⁶⁰⁰ Dodge, "Bourdieu goes to Baghdad," 33.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁰² Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 221–228.

⁶⁰³ Laurence Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: HURST Publishers, 2008), 81.

⁶⁰⁴ Several Iraqi Shia clerics were in fact exiled or chosen voluntarily to leave the country and move to Iran. Laurence Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 82.

considered alien to Islamic principles,⁶⁰⁵ the Iraqi Shia clerics decided to react and, in 1958, the Dawa party (Hizb al-Dawa al-Islamiyya) was established.⁶⁰⁶

Whereas Dawa's main aim was initially focused on countering the dangers of atheism, the successive political developments led to a more pronounced assertiveness of its Shia identity, with the latter being deployed as symbolic capital within the field of Iraqi national politics. The two notions – the Iraqist principle and the Shia identity – thus quickly converged.

The sectarian anti-Shia basis which characterised the 1963 coup's subsequent regime,⁶⁰⁷ in fact, and, Saddam Hussein's regime, progressively created a clear distinction of Shia identity within Iraq – distinct from other Iraqi constituents and, most crucially, from the state.

All those Iraqi Shias who would be imprisoned, tortured and assassinated by the Baathist regime would not feel in any way less 'Iraqi'; their political identity would tie the two elements in one common knot: being Iraqi and being Shia.

Saddam systematically decimated *hawza*'s ranks, curtailed visas for foreign clerics wishing to study in Najaf, persecuted Dawa members and any Shia constituent.⁶⁰⁸ In 1970, an alleged Iranian coup to overthrow the Iraqi regime was the pretext to denounce the Shia religious authority as agents of the Iranian Shah.⁶⁰⁹ From the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, his suppression escalated even further: in 1980, the senior cleric Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Dawa's founder, and numerous Dawa members were executed.⁶¹⁰

In 1991, with Saddam losing temporary control of some parts of the country due to its military efforts in Kuwait, a massive uprising erupted in predominantly Shia southern areas. Crucial Iraqi cities such as Basra and Najaf became focal points of resistance; Shia clerics and political leaders⁶¹¹ mobilised their constituents in what

⁶⁰⁵ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*, 82.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁰⁷ Following the 1963 coup, the Iraqi regime relied on both the army – which was traditionally staffed by Sunnis – and on the familial solidarity of a number of clans mainly coming from the Sunni village of Tikrit, north of Baghdad. Shias were systematically excluded from chief positions in the state apparatus. (Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 86).

⁶⁰⁸ Loüer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 87.

⁶⁰⁹ Joyce N. Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shias* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 48–49.

⁶¹⁰ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 220.

⁶¹¹ Amongst them, Grand Ayatollah al-Khoei and the *mujtahid* Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr who, as described when talking of his son Moqtada al-Sadr, challenging what he called 'the silent *hawza*', had

would be remembered as perhaps the most pivotal rebellion against the brutality of Saddam Hussein regime.⁶¹² The Baathist regime harshly suppressed the revolt and continued its anti-Shia oppression.

The 1991 revolt played an ultimately significant role in the Myth construction of an Iraqi nationalist vision as assertively Shia. As Fanar Haddad has argued, “the 1991 events and the polarisation of its memory along sectarian lines in the climate of the 1990s made the gap between Shia and Sunni imaginings of Iraq and Iraqi history almost unbridgeable”.⁶¹³

In 2003, after decades of repression and a power-vacuum to fill, the ground was fertile for this Myth to be mobilised for political purposes and develop further in its construction.

On the one hand, those Iraqi actors who would compete for dominance in the 2003–2007 civil war were coming from a political culture which had the Iraqist and Shia exclusivism at its centre. Amongst these actors was Moqtada al-Sadr. During those years, Sadr built a significant part of his constituency on the legacy of his father, Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr (the cleric who had been assassinated by Saddam Hussein following the 1991 revolt), and his rhetoric and political action displayed a pronounced nationalist and simultaneously Shia-centred vision for the country.

On the other hand, the Iranian Shia militias’ funding would massively contribute to the sectarian connotation that the civil war quickly acquired.⁶¹⁴

In post-2003 Iraq, the political and cultural trend that the Shia-centred Iraqist nationalist Myth represents, has acquired belligerent and sectarian tones. Not only did sectarian killings occur in the 2003–2007 civil war; but, as will be explored in the

numerous followers around a populist Shia religious movement which appealed to the poor. He was assassinated in 1999. (Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq...*, 55–60).

⁶¹² Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq. Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011), 86.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁴ By the end of 2004, Sunni and Shia citizens had started fleeing previously mixed areas of Baghdad to avoid being targeted by armed groups of either one or the other religious sectarian group (Nir Rosen, “Anatomy of a Civil War. Iraq’s Descent into Chaos,” *Boston Review*, November 8, 2006, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/rosen-anatomy-civil-war/>. Accessed July 2022). Things were to worsen in the following months. Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (al-Qaeda branch operating in Iraq at the time) would launch mass-casualty attacks in Shia neighbourhoods of Baghdad and the al-Askariyya Mosque in Samarra, one of the most revered Shia shrines. In retaliation for the attack, Sunni mosques became targets. Sectarian violence would continue until 2007. (Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 8–59).

section on Security and in the next chapter on Shia militias, but sectarian practices and crimes have also been committed by the PMF.

Different sectarian groups have always constituted Iraqi society but, as Haddad has conceptualised, three states of ethnic and religious identity can be identified: aggressive, passive and banal.⁶¹⁵ In times of lawlessness and competition for scarce resources, “competing identity claims are likely to move a group’s collective sense of itself from banal or passive to the violently assertive, as the group struggles for survival”.⁶¹⁶

The aggressive assertion of sectarian identities – Shia as well as Sunni⁶¹⁷ – solidified with the Muhasasa Taifia corrupt system. The sectarian assertion should not hide, however, the *Iraqist* principle: being *Iraqi*, within this Myth, is presented as being *Shia*.

Prior to the first elections in 2005, a document circulated around the UIA. It was supposedly written by Adil Abdul al-Mahdi, at the time Vice-President of the transitional government and, despite not presenting an alternative to the Iraqi nation-state, postulated that no ‘national project’ could succeed without an ethno-sectarian group which would embody its principles and carry them forward. The document concluded “Iraq is the Shia [...] and the Shias are Iraq”.⁶¹⁸

4.3.2.2. Shia Iraqist Fight Against Foreign Forces

The second trend that can be identified is the exclusivist Shia Iraqist vision, with the latter being articulated in the fight against foreign forces. In the next lines I shall show the historical references of this Myth and how, due to the Iranian penetration, the ‘anti-occupier rhetoric’ has been articulated in the fight against the US and the Arab world at large. I shall also illustrate how, due to its strong symbolic resonance, it has been manipulated for populist purposes against Iran itself without, however, manifesting into actual political action.

⁶¹⁵ Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 25–29.

⁶¹⁶ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 34.

⁶¹⁷ Amongst the Sunnis who joined the fight, there were soldiers and officers from the dismantled Iraqi army of Saddam Hussein, and al-Qaeda forces. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

⁶¹⁸ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq*, 437.

The 'anti-occupiers' rhetoric has crucial historical antecedents which have permeated into the Iraqi collective imaginary and have acquired strong symbolic resonance. As seen in the previous chapter on religious authority, it has constituted a strong tool for Sistani and made it possible for Sistani to acquire normalising Power in the religious field.

The earlier-mentioned anti-British fight in the 1920s and 1930s is a good example of the events that precede 2003. In post-2003 Iraq, this Myth has been articulated in the fight against American occupiers and the Arab world at large. As Haddad points out, "this does not mean that the Shias saw themselves as anything other than Arab Iraqis; however, Iraqi identity was clearly differentiated from and prioritised over Arab identity".⁶¹⁹

Quite interestingly, however, Iran has also come to constitute the target of this 'anti-occupier' rhetoric. Combined with Shia assertiveness, it has been used to buy popular constituency as a populist mobilising tool. Due to the reliance on the Iranian patron, it has not, however, manifested into concrete political action.

The Sadrist movement has represented a very significant example of this trend in all its declinations – against the US, the Arab world and, later, Iran. Sadrist poet Jawad al-Hamrani addressed the Arab world in the following verses:

"The Arab Golen [Heights] to this day is stolen
Go liberate it then come and be a terrorist [in Iraq]
I am the one who protected you
When the sons of al-Qaynuqaa [the Jews] attacked and you became a beggar
The keys of the [Arab] capitals are in the hands of David [the Jews]
And alcohol has caused the weapons to rust.
The [Arab] league of what? The League of sheep!
You who celebrated my ruin and destruction

[...]

I'm an Iraqi and my head is lifted high in front of all!
I'm still mad and saddled up [for a fight]

⁶¹⁹ Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 166–167.

Play the Arab card like you! No a thousand times!
Americanise myself? Never! That's impossible
I'm an Iraqi and my head is lifted high in front of all! I am a Sadrist!
I am the son of civilisation and the son of Hussein
And it would honour you to befriend me"⁶²⁰

During the 2003–2007 civil war, Moqtada al-Sadr mobilised the masses adopting this Myth against the US. The journalist Nir Rosen recorded his speeches against the US in 2006:

"[...] the United States has succeeded in making us enemies. Instead of reconstructing the shrine of the two imams in Samarra [an important Shia shrine whose bombing in February 2006 contributed to the civil war's escalation] the occupation is building prisons [...] So be patient, my brothers. They are trying to plant a civil war. Do not let them drag you into it. We know that they are going to assassinate our clerics and our leaders to make a sectarian and civil war. So be careful. We shall never be oppressed. Do everything to resist the American idea called democracy".⁶²¹

Although never clarifying its relations with Qassem Soleimani and the military support he received during the 2003–2007 civil war, Moqtada al-Sadr has also exploited this Myth to acquire popular leverage into an 'anti-Iran' narrative. To join the street protests in 2019 before turning against the demonstrators, the Sadrist slogan was "Iran out".⁶²²

4.3.2.3. Shrine Protection Narrative

I name this post-2003 Iraqi Myth "the shrine protection narrative", borrowing Benjamin Isakhan's expression to describe the Shia militias' mobilisation frame

⁶²⁰ Poem by Jawad al-Hamrani, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19sSaY1plcQ>, accessed July 2022, quoted in Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 167–168.

⁶²¹ Nir Rosen, "Anatomy of a Civil War".

⁶²² Ali Mousawi Khalkhali, "Muqtada al-Sadr Complicates Iranian Moves in Iraq," *Al Monitor*, August 5, 2002, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/muqtada-al-sadr-complicates-iranian-moves-iraq>. Accessed August 2022.

against ISIS forces.⁶²³ Drawing on Social Movement Theory, Isakhan has conducted an in-depth analysis of how Shia actors have responded to the ISIS attacks. The narrative of protecting the Shia shrines across the world has, in fact, legitimised the creation of entirely new militias who claim the global shrine protection as their central mandate.⁶²⁴ I argue that he has also provided us with an excellent phrasing for what I consider a post-2003 Iraqi Myth.

The ‘shrine protection narrative’ is extremely exclusivist, belligerent and draws upon a rich Shia religious symbolism. Historical grievances are articulated into a very aggressive fashion, which does not recall the ‘Shia victimhood’ often reported.⁶²⁵

The fight is presented as ‘holy’: the narrative is all centred around the existential necessity of defending the Shia shrines under attack. This Myth’s specificity is its *transnational* scope: Shia shrines are not located only in Iraq, and the martyrs that are evoked, the Shia symbolism that it draws upon, and the Shia population that this fight is supposed to protect, are not only Iraqi but spread across the whole Shia world. When I interviewed the leader of the Tehran university’s Basij group, a young Iraqi fighter joined the meeting. He did not reveal the group he had fought for (it was presumably a PMF militia), but he said that he had fought in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to defend the “holy shrines” and, to him, that was “all the same fight”.⁶²⁶

Qais al-Khazali, Asaib Ahl al-Haq’ leader, visiting the Iraqi region of Diyala in 2014, where the PMF troops had successfully fought ISIS, made a very passionate speech mentioning Zainab,⁶²⁷ whose shrine is actually located in Damascus and was blown up by ISIS in 2014:⁶²⁸

⁶²³ Benjamin Isakhan, “The Islamic State Attacks on Shia Holy Sites and the “Shrine Protection Narrative”: Threats to Sacred Space as a Mobilization Frame,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2020): 724–748.

⁶²⁴ Isakhan, “The Islamic State Attacks on Shia Holy Sites and the “Shrine Protection Narrative”, 734.

⁶²⁵ Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 151–153, 175–177.

⁶²⁶ Interview with Iraqi young man at the Teheran University, May 2016, made by the author in Arabic.

⁶²⁷ Zaynab Bint Ali was the eldest daughter of Ali ibn Abi Talib and Fatimah bint Muhammad; the prophet Muhammad was her maternal grandfather, so she is a member of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the prophet’s family. Shia martyr Husayn ibn Ali was her brother and, when he fought in Karbala, she accompanied him. She is revered in both Sunni and Shia Islam. (Kamran Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shii Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 113–30.)

⁶²⁸ UNAMI, OHCHR, “Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 6 July–10 September 2014,” 2015, 9, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_OHCHR_POC_Report_FIN_AL_6July_10September2014.pdf. Accessed July 2022].

“You, who are fighting now for Iraq, the religion and the holy sites. This is the flag of bravery, this is the flag of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and you are the brave men [...] you are the brothers of Zainab [...] This flag is a symbol of prowess, now you are defending the country, its people and the holy sites”.⁶²⁹

While making this speech, Qais al-Khazali held a red flag symbolising support for the Shia martyr Husain ibn Ali and his brother Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, who refused to allow Husain’s flag to touch the ground until his brother had fallen.⁶³⁰ Clearly drawing upon the Shia heroes and symbols is one of the key elements of the shrine-protection narrative Myth.⁶³¹ This is reflected also in the names adopted by various PMF militias, their flags, mottoes and posters.⁶³²

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, former deputy chief of the PMF who was assassinated in January 2020 by US airstrikes together with Qassem Soleimani, addressed his PMF militiamen in 2015 with the following words:

“We will protect our holy sites by your blood and the blood of the martyrs who preceded you [...] We proved and we will prove again that we are able to defend our honour and our holy places in the holy cities of Karbala, Najaf, Kadhimiya, and Samarra”.⁶³³

The strong symbolic resonance that this Myth has acquired in a relatively short period of time comes from the crucial role that the holy shrines, the Shia martyrs and Shia symbolism hold in the whole Shia world and, thus, in Iraq as well.

In the propaganda films that PMF militias have produced against ISIS, images of Shia shrines under attack are carefully edited juxtaposing footages of the PMF

⁶²⁹ Qais al-Khazali, “Smahat al-Shiakh Shaikh Qais al-Khazali Yosalam Rayat al-Abbas Ala Abtal al-Moqawama, Asaib Ahl al-Haq,” (“Shaikh Qais al-Khazali Delivers the Flag of al-Abbas to the Heroes of the Resistance, The League of the Righteous,” translation from Arabic by the author), *al-Ahad Satellite Channel*, August 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lBeAZf2Ups>. Accessed July 2022, quoted in Isakhan, “The Islamic State Attacks on Shia Holy Sites and the “Shrine Protection Narrative”, 737.

⁶³⁰ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shii Islam. The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 28.

⁶³¹ Isakhan, “The Islamic State Attacks on Shia Holy Sites and the “Shrine Protection Narrative,” 736.

⁶³² *Ibid.*

⁶³³ Statement by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, quoted in *Ibid.*

successfully fighting the battle and music from the Shia religious tradition accompanied with populist Shia poetry.⁶³⁴ The necessity to belligerently defend the shrines is present in material that does not, in fact, necessarily come from the PMF Iranian-led militias. The following verses are an example from 2004–2005, thus preceding the ISIS fight and the PMF establishment, where the Shia poet Rahim al-Maliki addresses ‘terrorism’, although the context in which it was written suggests an assertive sectarianism.⁶³⁵

“A Shia, and some people call me a *rafidhi* [pejorative term adopted against the Shias]

Yes I reject your oppression; I will never pledge allegiance to a lizard

[...]

How many sacrifices have I made for the faith!

The latest was the catastrophe of Karbala

And the blood in Najaf that covered the altar

Rivers of our blood push forth; they [attackers] would not allow it to be held back

They were very happy to see our blood spilled and Ashoura was renewed

[...]

If a fatwa came out against you, the earth will shake

We will sever the hands that extended their claws

We know who you are and we know where the snakes of the house live

And we know in which corners the scorpions hide

Enough blood! Or I will get upset and whatever happens will happen

Beware the people’s tolerant ones when their anger is aroused

⁶³⁴ See for instance: Yasir al-Karbalai and Alaa al-Karbalai, “Inshodat Qowat al-Abbas Alqitaliyya, Ibdāa Yasir al-Karbalai Wa Alaa al-Karbalai,” (“Chants for al-Abbas Defence Brigades, Performed by Yasir al-Karbalai and Alaa al-Karbalai,” translation from Arabic of the author), *al-Anwar YouTube Channel for Hussaini Media*, August 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl-A9LBpcFc>. Accessed July 2022.

⁶³⁵ Poem by Rahim al-Maliki, date of poem uncertain, considering the context and judging from other poem recited at the same gathering, it dates to no earlier than December 2005 and no later than February, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reKjS5ccDyo>. Accessed July 2022, quoted in Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 156.

Nothing will survive”⁶³⁶

Finally, it is worth stressing that the constitutive elements of these trends significantly overlap between the different Myths. Although it is perhaps necessary for theoretical purposes, setting boundaries between them is difficult. In the following Sadrist anthem’s verses, for instance, the belligerent tone is articulated in a strong anti-foreign forces narrative – recalling the second Myth here presented – and references to Shia martyrs and shrines – recalling the third:

“We’re not worried by an American or a terrorist
Not a Bin Laden nor a Zarqawi [ISIS founder but also operating in the 2003–2007 civil war as Al Qaeda leader]
This game of yours is dirty, you who wear the short *dishadeesh*.⁶³⁷
We’re not worried by an American or a terrorist
Not a Bin Laden nor a Zarqawi
And by Ali whoever touches a grain of my soil
[will find me] exploding like a bomb.
This is the land of Najaf is the land of Husayn
This is the land of Ali Haidar the protector
Here was buried the rebels’ Sadr
This is the land of Abbas, patron of the bullet
This is the land of the saints
It has the soil of Karbala
They thought that we feared foreign weapons
For me every prayer is a rocket
For us prayer on the Prophet is a missile
We were raised by Sadr
The victor of the [Shia] *madhab* [school of thought within Islamic jurisprudence].”⁶³⁸

⁶³⁶ Poem by Rahim al-Maliki, quoted by Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 156–157.

⁶³⁷ This is a reference to Sunni Salafis who wear the traditional Arabic dress shorter than normal. (Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 159).

⁶³⁸ Sadr anthem by Murthadha al-Baythani, quoted in Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 159–160.

4.3.3. Security: Repressive Violence and Fragmentation of State's Monopoly of Violence

In this section, I shall analyse how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has constructed what I consider as the third core-construct of state's collective identity: Security.

Security concerns both the domestic and international arena and both are relevant for political authority. In order to avoid repetition, Security in IR will be analysed in depth in the next chapter on militias.

In the next section, I shall first recall what has been argued on Power – that the violence that is perpetrated by Iraqi political authority is not symbolic, but repressive. I shall then analyse how the progressive penetration of Iranian-backed hybrid actors into the Iraqi state has led to fragmentation of the state's monopoly of violence. I shall argue how the practice of changing electoral names has allowed Iran-backed militias to enter Iraqi politics but it is not this practice *per se* that it has led to the state's fragmentation of monopoly of violence. Rather, the political leverage that such groups have acquired have led to the presence of groups which are simultaneously state- and non-state- actors. I shall explain how this has occurred and provide the example of the PMF, to date the most accurate one.

In the section on Power, I have discussed how the Iranian external patron has made corruption and violence crystallised practices of Iraqi politics, and how such an Iraqi-Iranian self-other relation is behind the repressive violence that Iraqi political authority perpetrates on its subjects. While Iran's ultimate different objective is that of keeping Iraq in a dependent relationship, for Iraqi actors such practices are instrumental to achieve or maintain a place in government. This has made popular constituency substantially irrelevant and the alienation of Iraqi political authority from their popular base has not enabled the construction of symbolic violence, one that is perceived as the expression of a needed established order and hierarchy.

The violence that is exercised on the subjects is, in fact, *repressive*, the one exercised by 'dominators' on 'the dominated'.⁶³⁹

⁶³⁹ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 142.

An element constituting Security which has not been previously analysed is how Iranian penetration has led to the fragmentation of the state's monopoly of violence.

I argue that the fragmentation of the state's monopoly of violence has not been enabled by the practice of changing the electoral names of militia groups which, otherwise, could not flow into Iraqi politics; but rather, by the fact that such militias have become to all effect both state and non-state actors in that they act within the state and, simultaneously, do not respond to it. Through the practice of changing electoral names, the hybrid actors' penetration has become so deep-rooted in Iraqi politics that these actors have acquired such political leverage that they have succeeded in legitimising themselves as state actors while concurrently maintaining their independence from the central government. As militias, they thus receive from the state consistent financial and political rewards, but they are not controlled by it and are independent from its accountability.⁶⁴⁰

The PMF forces are, to date, the most cogent example of an umbrella of hybrid actors which have contributed to the state's fragmentation of violence. The PMF consist of around fifty armed groups of 110,000 fighters on paper and 80,000 active fighters on the ground,⁶⁴¹ many of whom are Iranian-backed. As discussed in the previous chapter on religious authority, they were gathered to fight ISIS soon after Sistani's June 2014 fatwa. Article 9, paragraph B, of the Constitution of Iraq states that "the formation of military militia outside the framework of the armed forces is prohibited";⁶⁴² following the 2014 ISIS crisis, so the PMF should have been integrated into the Iraqi armed forces.

The PMF leaders – Falih al-Fayyad at the time of writing and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis until his assassination in 2020 –, however, have been very careful to legitimise the paramilitary umbrella-group as a state actor while, simultaneously, keeping independence from the central government.⁶⁴³

⁶⁴⁰ Cambanis, et al., *Hybrid Actors*, 27.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23

⁶⁴² 2005 *Iraqi Constitution*.

⁶⁴³ Cambanis, et al., *Hybrid Actors*, 27.

Maliki's successor, Haider al-Abadi, expressed his desire to integrate the militias into the state's armed forces on various occasions.⁶⁴⁴ Yet, in 2015, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, then PMF leader, easily managed to impose his willing.

In October 2015, at a time when the PMF were enjoying legitimacy by the people, who saw it as the only force capable of confronting the ISIS threat,⁶⁴⁵ al-Muhandis sent a letter to Abadi in which he complained that Baghdad was not paying the PMF as much as other fighters, thus accusing the government of not doing its part in the ISIS fight.⁶⁴⁶ Abadi was forced to please him, and in February 2016 he passed an executive order that stated that the PMF would be "an independent military formation and a part of the Iraqi armed forces, and attached to the general commander of the armed forces".⁶⁴⁷

The ambiguous phrasing signalled the PMF's success in achieving the legal standing they hoped for: being recognised as a state actor without actually being one. A few months later, the Iraqi parliament passed a law that established the PMF as "an independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces [which is thus not under the ministries of defence or interior] and linked to the Commander-in-Chief [the Prime Minister]".⁶⁴⁸

Now that ISIS still exists only in some pocket areas,⁶⁴⁹ the PMF have also publicised themselves as a crime-fighting organisation; regardless of the efficacy of their action, their practices represent an actual overstepping of Iraqi law enforcement. In August 2019, for instance, they announced the arrest of Hamza al-Shammari, an individual close to Maliki's circles, known as 'Hamza Roulette' for his gambling

⁶⁴⁴ See for instance Haider al-Abadi speech in his Washington visit to meet US President Donald Trump, March 20, 2017. Transcript available at: <https://www.usip.org/transcript-prime-minister-haider-al-abadi-us-institute-peace>. Accessed July 2022.

⁶⁴⁵ In a National Democratic Institute poll over the summer of 2015, 99 percent of Shia respondents claimed they supported the PMF. (*National Democratic Institute*, "Lack of Responsiveness Impacts Mood August – September 2015 Survey Findings," November 23, 2015, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/August%202015%20Survey%20NDI%20Website.pdf>. Accessed July 2022.

⁶⁴⁶ Cambanis, et al., *Hybrid Actors*, 29.

⁶⁴⁷ Executive Order 91 of 2016.

⁶⁴⁸ Iraqi Ministry of Justice, "The Law of the Popular Mobilization Units Commission Number 40 for the Year 2016," (translation from Arabic from Cambanis, et al., *Hybrid Actors*..., 28), January 5, 2017.

⁶⁴⁹ Selman Almohamad, "Not a Storm in a Teacup: The Islamic State after the Caliphate," *German Institute for Global and Area Studies* (GIGA) Focus Middle East, No. 3, 2021, <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/not-a-storm-in-a-teacup-the-islamic-state-after-the-caliphate>. Accessed July 2022.

empire.⁶⁵⁰ Besides persecuting gambling mafias, they also closed casinos and caught drug dealers and sex traffickers in Baghdad and elsewhere.⁶⁵¹

The extreme violence that was perpetrated against civilians in the 2019–2020 mass protests offers a good empirical example of the fragmentation of the state's monopoly of violence, meaning how such Iranian-backed militias can perpetrate violence without being controlled by the state and respond to it. In the next sub-section, an analysis of the protests in this sense will be given.

4.3.3.1. Violence Against the People in 2019

Having argued how the main cause of the fragmentation of state's monopoly of violence has been the establishment of Iranian-backed groups which have managed to legitimise themselves as state actors while, at the same time, not being accountable to it, in the next paragraphs I shall describe the 2019 repressive violence that has been exercised by the PMF. This will, in fact, serve as empirical example of the state's fragmentation of violence.

Through the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) records, I shall show the Iraqi state's inability to control these groups and make them accountable for their actions. I shall also illustrate the Iraqi state's collusion in the violence that was perpetrated, which is significant of the Iraqi political authority's corrupt reliance on the Iranian patron.

The UNAMI and OHCHR records of the abuses that were committed in 2019 protests report the death of 487 protesters and 7,7151 incidents of injury to protesters at, or in the vicinity of, demonstration sites from October 1, 2019 to April 30, 2020.⁶⁵² According to the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR), from October 1,

⁶⁵⁰ BasNews, "Baghdad: Biggest Mafia Chief Arrested", August 6, 2019, <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/iraq/538220>, translation from Arabic by the author. Accessed July 2022.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵² UNAMI and OHCHR, "Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements", 14.

2019 to June 10, 2020, 541 deaths of protesters and 20,597 people injured were reported.⁶⁵³

Violence was perpetrated by both Iraqi security forces and what UNAMI calls “unidentified armed elements, frequently referred to by victims and witnesses as ‘militia’”.⁶⁵⁴

Human rights abuses committed by these ‘unidentified armed elements’ – which can be reasonably attributed to the different militias comprising the PMF – include threats, intimidation, abductions, and targeted killings of activists and protesters “expressing political dissent or criticism of armed groups with various ties to the State”.⁶⁵⁵

The Iraqi state’s actual inability to control the “unidentified armed elements” and hold them accountable for their actions and, simultaneously, its complicity in the perpetration of violence is exemplified by the “absence of identifying badges on uniforms”, the “unclear *de facto* command structures”, and the “multiplicity of forces involved”.⁶⁵⁶ As the UNAMI/OHCHR report highlights, “no [Iraqi] law or internal regulations clearly identify the security forces mandated to engage in crowd control and respond to demonstrations”.

Amongst several examples, in one case around 100 armed and masked men, entered the area around Al Senak bridge in Baghdad and allegedly opened fire indiscriminately at protesters, killing and injuring hundreds of them.⁶⁵⁷ The convoy had allegedly passed through security checkpoints in areas with video surveillance; despite the presence earlier that day of the Iraqi Army, Federal Police and the ‘Anti-Riot Police’ (who were specifically trained for crowd control at demonstration sites), security forces failed to intervene,⁶⁵⁸ and sources report that they disappeared shortly before the attack.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵³ Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR), *Report V: Freedom of Opinion, Expression and Peaceful Demonstration*, covering the period January 24 to June 10, 2020, issued in June 2020. The Commission issued four earlier reports covering demonstration-linked violations from October 1, 2019 onwards.

⁶⁵⁴ UNAMI, “Update on Demonstrations in Iraq”, 4.

⁶⁵⁵ UNAMI and OHCHR, “Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements”, 27.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Iran has condemned the attacks but, considering that it has also condemned the recent attack against Prime Minister Kadhimi – which was perpetrated with drone technology which suggests that the weapons had not been manufactured locally – such declarations do not appear reliable. Iraqi political authority seems to be so corrupted by the infiltration of these groups into its institutions that it has handed over its perpetration of violence. In fact, the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior announced an investigation; however, to date, no investigation results have been released, nor any information concerning the matter which can guarantee that any investigation took place in the first place.⁶⁶⁰ The protests, in fact, were directed at the Iraqi government; besides not being able to keep these groups under its supervision, it was in the state's interests to suppress the demonstrations.

4.4. The Tying Nexus of the Three Constructs: The Symbolic Cluster

In the previous sections, I have analysed how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has constructed the main cores of Iraqi state's collective identity as relevant to political authority: Power, Myth and Security. The analyses earlier provided have represented crucial steps to fully answer the first sub-question of this study – how the political self gets constructed through the other –, and the second interrelated sub-question: how to describe state's political collective identity. In this final section, before proceeding to the analysis of Shia identity as impacting Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations, I shall put forward a comprehensive argument on the state's collective identity as manifesting in relation to political authority by focusing on what I call the Symbolic Cluster.

As my model describes, the tying nexus between the three core-constructs, the link that passes through them, the ultimate core of state's collective identity, is the symbolic cluster, meaning symbols in their interrelation between symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence.

⁶⁶⁰ UNAMI and OHCHR, "Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements", 30.

Building on what I have argued in the previous sections, I shall thus argue how a competition around the inner symbolic understandings of what Iraq is and should look like is still on-going. I shall first give a brief historical account and reveal how the unresolved symbolic competition has continued despite Shia groups being in the government since 2005.

I shall conclude this section by arguing that with Iraqi Shia political authority having lost their popular base, the Iraqi social system can be considered as fragmented. As briefly illustrated in the previous chapter, Iraqi political authority appears to have come to constitute a social system on its own, detached from the rest of Iraqi society. It has its own rules, norms and values. By providing the example of the Tishreen movement, I shall show how, in line with the duality of structure principle, the Iraqi political field 'shapes' the political behaviour of whoever accesses the field.

4.4.1. The Unresolved Symbolic Competition

At the time of writing, more than twenty years after the American invasion, a "struggle to impose one dominant vision of what Iraq is and who Iraqis are"⁶⁶¹ is still on-going. Contrasting symbolic understandings of the country and its future have been expressed: what Iraq should look like as an independent state, with which priorities, alliances, political stances in the international arena etc.

A struggle around those "principles of vision and division"⁶⁶², which gives the collectivity "a unique vision of its identity and an identical vision of its unity",⁶⁶³ has fragmented the collectively shared idea of political self. Symbolic power has not been acquired by any group and symbolic capital is being deployed in the power-struggle, meaning different inner conceptions of Iraq and its future. Different Iraqi Myths have been manipulated for different political purposes and have resonated differently amongst the Iraqi actors. Given the alienation of Iraqi people from the political elites, symbolic violence could not be constructed and repressive violence has been perpetrated. As the symbolic cluster represents the crucial intersection of core-constructs of Power, Myth and Security, such an unresolved symbolic competition

⁶⁶¹ Dodge, "Bourdieu goes to Baghdad," 29.

⁶⁶² Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 224.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

plays out at the very heart of the state's political identity, which is, in fact, characterised by continuous crises.

In 2003 and in the immediate years that followed the invasion, the power vacuum left by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime resulted in a variety of groups joining the struggle to fill the void. Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, secular and minority groups' parties – as well as different groups from the same ethno-religious community –, put forward different symbolic visions for Iraq and its future. They “came up with very different versions of Iraq to tell, and they believed they had the right and the power to make their versions the new reality”.⁶⁶⁴ Crucially, none of these competing visions for the redefinition of the Iraqi state operated in a regional vacuum. In the struggle that broke up, Iran sought to play a role, with Iraqi groups in need of support actively inviting them to do so.⁶⁶⁵

As seen in the previous sections, Shia parties won the first 2005 election and every election since; yet, the symbolic competition has not been resolved. Instead, a Shia field of competition formed within the wider field of Iraqi national politics, with the former partially but not completely overlapping with the latter. In fact, due to the presence of Iranian-backed hybrid actors, the Shia field has acquired a transnational scope and it does not always collaborate with the other one, but sometimes also competes with it.

Another important implication of the unresolved symbolic competition which, in the previous sections, has just been briefly touched upon, is the Iraqi political elite's alienation from the popular base. In structural terms, the Iraqi social system in relation to political authority appears as a fragmented social system. In the next sub-section, I shall provide further details.

4.4.2. Iraq: A Fragmented Social System

I argue that the Iraqi social system is fragmented, meaning that Iraqi politics has come to constitute a social system of its own, responding to its own rules, norms

⁶⁶⁴ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 317.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 321.

and values, which do not correspond to those of the rest of Iraqi society. Due to the Iranian penetration into the Shia field, the reliance on its patronage and the political corruption that derives from it have come to represent the main mechanics of the unresolved symbolic competition, Shia Iraqi parties have lost their popular constituency. As seen when analysing the case of Moqtada al-Sadr, they may have adopted a populist outlook in certain political circumstances, but, when they gain what they need from their popular exploitation, they again resort to violence or adopt corrupt practices of external patronage to continue their power-struggle.

As seen in my model, the main constructs of Power, Myth and Security with the symbolic cluster representing their core-intersection, permeate into social structures, which give collective identity some relative stability over time. The duality of structure (DS) regulates the relation between structures and agency; the DS “relates to the fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency”.⁶⁶⁶ That is, agency and structure impact one another, as “rules and resources are drawn upon by actors in the interaction, but are thereby reconstituted through such interaction”.⁶⁶⁷

Having come to constitute a social system on their own, Iraqi political authority’s agency is regulated by structural properties which pertain to *their* social system, despite the rest of Iraqi society continuing to demand change. Calls for change have been raised by the people taking to the streets and, as seen in the previous chapter, by the religious authority. Iraqi political authority, however, to overcome the political stalemates and repress the protests, keeps resorting to violence and relying on the corrupt network of affiliates. As one young Iraqi woman told me in an interview during the 2019–2020 protests, Iraqi people’s common feeling is one of “shouting at a ghost: no-one listens. We speak a language, they speak another. They think of themselves, that’s it”.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory. Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1979), 71.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁸ Interview in English with Iraqi woman based in Baghdad. Zoom, December 2019.

A good empirical example of the structural properties of the Iraqi political authority's system, is the Tishreen movement. The Tishreen movement parties are constituted of members of Iraqi society who participated in the 2019–2020 protests; the symbolic capital they deployed was one which refuted political establishment and demanded change. Yet, once they entered the political field, its structural properties impacted on their agency. They have been accused of corruption, they have been marred with resignation and infighting, and they have found it very difficult to organise themselves outside the corrupt Iraqi political framework.⁶⁶⁹

From the very beginning, the increased violence against the protesters preceding the elections turned the hubs for activism in Baghdad into heavily fortified zones. This resulted in the very first split within the movement: they became divided between those who decided to participate in the elections and those who decided to boycott them.⁶⁷⁰

Members of the Tishreen movement's Imtidad were pressured through threats to vote for Mohammed Halbousi as the speaker of the Council of Representatives; otherwise, they would not have any place in parliament.⁶⁷¹ This vote resulted in further splits: with several MPs resigning⁶⁷² and accusing Alaa al-Rikabi, the general secretary of Imtidad, one of the Tishreen movement's parties, of siding with Sadr and

⁶⁶⁹ Taif al-Khudary, "The Fragmentation of Iraq's 'Protest Parties' Attests to the Muhasasa System's Resilience", *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, June 7, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/06/07/the-fragmentation-of-iraqs-protest-parties-attests-to-the-muhasasa-systems-resilience/>. Accessed June 2022.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷¹ Al-Khudari, "The Fragmentation of Iraq's 'Protest Parties' Attests to the Muhasasa System's Resilience".

⁶⁷² *Baghdad Today News*, "Ittuhimna Balfasad: Nuwab Imtidad al-Khamsa Yalunun Mawqifan Nihayyan Bada lalan Istiqlalihim," ("Accused of Corruption: Five Deputies Announce a Final Stance After Giving their Resignations," translation from Arabic by the author), May 23, 2022, <https://baghdadtoday.news/189813--.html>. Accessed June 2022).

his CHS coalition.⁶⁷³ Prior to this, the CHS had accused the Tishreen movement's parties of siding with the CF front.⁶⁷⁴

Tishreen members, moreover, were accused of taking bribes from some parties of the political establishment. Hussein al-Ghorabi, the General Secretary of Al Baithal-Uatani, another Tishreen party, has been accused of receiving help from the the Sadrist.⁶⁷⁵ Al-Rikabi, also, has accused of corruption five of its own MPs of corruption; they subsequently resigned.⁶⁷⁶ It is difficult to assess how instrumental such accusations have been, but it is reasonable to believe that, with the corrupt system being so deeply entrenched into Iraqi politics, it has been impossible to organise effectively outside this framework.

Finally, the movement's parties have found it difficult to assert themselves as representatives of the 'Iraqi people'. They have been facing continuous claims from the political establishment insisting that the New Generation party represents the 'Kurdish component', and Imtidad the 'Shia component'.⁶⁷⁷

4.5. Post-2003 Iraqi Political Authority and Inter-State Relations with Iran Under Shia Commonality

⁶⁷³ *Shafaq News*, "Harakat Imtidad Taafi Alaa al-Rikabi Min Mansib al-Amn al-Amm Laha," ("The Imtidad Movement Dismisses Alaa Al-Rikabi From the Position of Secretary-General," translation from Arabic by the author), May 19, 2022, <https://shafaq.com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7>. Accessed June 2022.

⁶⁷⁴ *Al Jazeera*, "Barlaman al-Iraq Yufshil lil-Marrat al-Thaniyah fi Intikhab Rais lil-Jumhuriyah," ("The Iraqi Parliament Fails for the Second Time to Elect a President for the Republic," translation from Arabic by the author), March 26, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2022/3/26/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%B4%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A>. Accessed June 2022.

⁶⁷⁵ Rami Latif, "Ahad Abraz Quwwa "Tishrin": Kayfa Inhirar Mashra "al Baithal-Uatani"?", ("One of the Prominent Forces of the "October Movement": How Did al Baithal-Uatani Collapse?," translation from Arabic by the author), *7al.net*, July 14, 2022, <https://7al.net/2022/04/14/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A/rami-l/news/>. Accessed July 2022.

⁶⁷⁶ Al-Khudari, "The Fragmentation of Iraq's 'Protest Parties' Attests to the Muhasasa System's Resilience".

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

In the previous sections, I have provided an analysis of the core-constructs of state's collective identity, Power, Myth and Security, and the symbolic cluster as the intersection between the three. This has allowed me to provide a full answer to the sub-questions that underline this study's research as relevant to Iraqi political authority: how to describe the state's political collective identity and how the political self gets constructed through the other, which I have started to address with the section on the self-other nexus.

Merging all the elements that have been introduced in the earlier sections will enable me to finally address the main investigation of this study: how Shia commonality impacts on the post-2003 inter-state political Iraqi-Iranian relations. In the next lines, I shall thus present a final, comprehensive argument on how the Shia notion of identity has impacted on the relations between Iraq and Iran in regards to Iraqi political authority, this chapter's empirical site of observation.

Capitalising on its Shia counterparts and on Iraq's post-invasion instability, Iran has deeply penetrated the Iraqi political field, to the point of contributing to the construction of an Iraqi Shia field which is at times in competition with the wider field of Iraqi national politics. Iran has pursued its aim of keeping Iraq in a dependent position in order to wield major influence in the region, achieve strategic depth, and prevent or minimise actions that may run counter to Iranian interests. Iraqi Shia actors have taken advantage of Iranian military help in order to gain more advantage in the power-struggle that occurred following Saddam's fall.

This misalignment of interests has resulted in the continuous instability of Iraqi politics, with Shia parties dominating the political scene since the first elections in 2005 and yet often passing through political crises and social unrest. On the one hand, through direct military intervention on Iraqi soil, Iran has actively contributed to Iraq's instability whenever the Iraqi political unfolding took turns that Iran did not envision. On the other hand, the Shia parties have progressively lost their popular constituency. Corruption as an implication of the reliance on the external patron and resorting to violence have, in fact, become the normative practices to gain a place in government. When the political discourse has been constructed around anti-corruption and anti-

Iran stances, the rhetoric's populist purposes have not enabled substantial change to the Iraqi political system.

Hybrid actors who come from Iranian-backed militias and, despite being forbidden by law, are in the Iraqi parliament, have acquired such political leverage that the PMF have managed to be formally recognised as both state and non-state actors, which receive state funding and yet are not accountable to its institution. The fragmentation of the state's monopoly of violence that derives from this signifies that the several Iranian-backed militias are literally inside the Iraqi state and may pursue Iranian aims without being subject to the Iraqi law.

The Shia exclusiveness of these militias and the transnational scope of their 'Shia fight' have gradually meddled with Iraqi Myths and, considering that the militiamen who come from these groups are also in politics, they have brought their Shia assertiveness into the Iraqi political discourse.

Given the extent of Iranian penetration into the Iraqi Shia field, it should not come as a surprise that the Iraqi dependence from its external patron also concerns the import of electricity, gas and oil products.⁶⁷⁸ Moreover, Iraq has been used as a covert Iranian conduit for arms and money to support the Assad regime in Syria,⁶⁷⁹ to smuggle Iranian oil rebranded as Iraqi and thus circumvent the sanctions,⁶⁸⁰ and makes use of Iranian religious pilgrims' trips to the Shia shrines of Najaf and Karbala to gain access to hard currency.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁷⁸ See for instance: Ben Lando, "Iraq Increases Reliance on Iranian Energy," *Iraqi Oil Report*, July 1, 2011, <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/iraq-increases-reliance-on-iranian-energy-5916/>, [accessed July 3, 2022]; and Lizzie Porter, "Iraq Seeks to Diversify Power Imports as Iran Tightens Supply," *Iraqi Oil Report*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/iraq-seeks-to-diversify-power-imports-as-iran-tightens-supply-44273/>. Accessed July 2022.

⁶⁷⁹ See for instance: Ben Van Heuvelen and Jewdat al-Saidi, "As Syria Erupts, Iraqi Networks Expand Arms Trafficking," *Iraq Oil Report*, September 18, 2012, <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/as-syria-erupts-iraqi-networks-expand-arms-trafficking-8737/>. Accessed July 2022.

⁶⁸⁰ See for instance: Brett Sudetic and Umud Shokri, "Iranian Sanctions Evasion and the Gulf's Complex Oil Trade," *Middle East Institute*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iranian-sanctions-evasion-and-gulfs-complex-oil-trade>. Accessed July 2022].

⁶⁸¹ John Davison, "Iran expands shrines and influence in Iraq," *Reuters Special Report*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-iran-shrines/>. Accessed July 2022.

I would thus argue that Iran has finally succeeded in its aim, with the political inter-state relations between the two countries being characterised by the dependence of Iraq on its Shia neighbour.

Shia commonality has represented the crucial vehicle for this penetration. In a country like Iraq, which found itself in a chaotic post-invasion power vacuum to be filled, with Shia political parties being persecuted for decades, not only by the Baathist regime, and in exile in Iran under Saddam, Shiism as a notion of identity holds strong political leverage for Iran to capitalise on.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on Iraqi political authority, the second chosen empirical site of observation. In order to answer this study's main research question – how Shia commonality impacts on post-2003 Iraq inter-state relations with Iran –, I have pursued my analysis of the Iraqi political elites by breaking my investigation into two interrelated sub-questions: how the political self gets constructed through the other and how to describe the state's political collective identity. This has allowed me to present a comprehensive argument on how Shiism in its political declination has impacted on the relations between the two countries.

By applying my constructivist model, I have reached the conclusion that the Iraqi political self has been constructed by a self-other nexus where Iran, as the other, has represented an exogenous and subversive actor. By acting as an external patron with its Shia Iraqi counterparts fighting to gain power, Iran has pursued its interest of keeping the country in a dependent position. Iraq, as the self, has taken advantage of the Iranian support in the attempt of winning the power-struggle. The misalignment of interests has resulted in Iraq's political instability and a political identity which is still competed and fragmented; a struggle over the inner symbolic understandings of Iraq and its future is still on-going at the time of writing in June 2022.

The state's political collective identity is thus characterised by repressive Power; different Iraqi Myths resonating with different sections of Iraqi society at the expense of others; the Security construct defined by repressive violence and the fragmentation of state's monopoly of violence.

I have thus reached the conclusion that Shia political identity has represented a crucial vehicle for the Iranian penetration into post-2003 Iraq, which has enabled Iran to keep Iraq in a dependent position.

5. Post-2003 Iraqi Non-State Armed Groups

5.1. Introduction

Following the analysis on how Shia identity, in both its religious and political dimensions, has impacted on post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations, I shall now turn to the third selected empirical site of observation: Iraqi non-state armed groups. This will allow me to incorporate the final crucial element needed to comprehensively address the main question of this research: the impact of Shia commonality on the inter-state relations between Iraq and Iran since 2003.

Consistently with my previous analyses in the preceding chapters, I shall pursue my aim by applying my model on the state's collective identity and its impact on the state's relations with a relevant other in accordance with the agency cluster under examination. The two interconnected sub-questions will be formulated: how post-2003 Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups, as the 'self', are constructed through the Iranian security and military apparatus, as the relevant 'other'; and how to describe the identity Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups in the post-regime environment. Addressing these sub-enquiries will allow me to answer the main research question of this study in relation to the examined agency cluster: how Shia commonality has impacted in the post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran.

Given that this is the final agency cluster to be examined in this study, and as the analysis nears its conclusion, I shall follow the application of my theoretical model to Iraqi non-state armed groups by integrating these findings with the previous analyses of the other selected empirical sites of observation – specifically, the agency clusters of religious authority and political authority. By merging these elements into a unified argument, I will finally provide a comprehensive answer to the main enquiry question of this study, revolving around how the notion of Shia identity, in its commonality with Iran as the relevant 'other,' has been constructed through their interaction and has influenced post-2003 inter-state relations.

Before proceeding to present what I am going to discuss in the following sections, three crucial remarks need to be made. First, by 'identity' of non-state armed

groups, I refer to their ideological and operational outlook, encompassing their interests, aims and the discursive justifications for their actions.

Second, when discussing the identity of Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups, I am not only referring to their shared ideological foundations and common objectives, but also to their differences. These varied characteristics, when considered together, form a cohesive agency cluster. It is this collective identity, integrating both their commonalities and specificities, that influences the broader geopolitical dynamics and impacts post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian relations, which will be under investigation in this chapter.

Third, the terms ‘non-state armed groups’ and ‘militias’ will be used interchangeably. There is a substantial body of literature distinguishing between ‘non-state armed groups’, ‘rebel groups’, ‘terrorist groups’, and ‘national liberation organisations’.⁶⁸² This terminology is highly political, particularly concerning the choice between ‘rebel groups’, ‘terrorist groups’, or ‘national liberation organisations’.⁶⁸³ However, this is not the case when differentiating ‘non-state armed groups’ and ‘militias’, so further analysis on this distinction will not be provided.

With these remarks in mind, I will now proceed to present the topics and arguments which I am going to discuss in the next sections.

In the following introductory sub-sections, I will first outline why the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), an umbrella organisation comprising various militias established in 2014 to support the Iraqi army against ISIS, has been chosen as a representative example of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups. The PMF’s significance lies in the pivotal role of Iranian-backed militias, which dominate the PMF and illustrate the broader dependence on Iran that characterises Iraqi non-state armed groups. Over time, Iran’s deep penetration into Iraq’s security framework has resulted in increased material dependence on Iranian forces.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸² United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), *Engaging Non-State Armed Groups*, 5–12, September 2023, <https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/engaging-non-state-armed-groups-en-326.pdf>.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁸⁴ Fanar Haddad, “Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State”, in *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-Conflict Transitions*, ed.

Next, I will trace the evolution of the PMF from its inception to its current role in Iraq, arguing that while the PMF was initially formed as a temporary measure, it effectively formalised various militias, including Iranian-backed ones, within a state-recognised structure.⁶⁸⁵ However, this formalisation granted these militias significant autonomy, further embedding Iranian influence within Iraq's security framework. Finally, I will present the different militia groups within the PMF, including Iranian-backed militias, Saraya al-Salam (Moqtada al-Sadr's militia), Sistani-aligned militias, and Sunni and minority groups. Given the study's focus on Shiism, Sunni and minority militias will be examined solely in relation to their interactions with Iranian-backed militias.

Having provided this background, I shall then apply my theoretical model to the PMF, beginning with the self-other nexus, which plays a crucial role in shaping a state's collective identity. I argue that since 2003 Iran has sought to keep Iraq in a dependent position, using non-state armed groups like the PMF as primary instruments. While Iraq has engaged with Iran through bargaining and accommodation rather than outright conflict,⁶⁸⁶ this dynamic has not led to the complete absorption of Iraq into Iran's sphere of influence. Despite Iran's efforts, key Iraqi Shia PMF components continue to resist Iranian dominance, though they are militarily weaker or have adopted an anti-Iran stance only as a populist manoeuvre. Additionally, the Iraqi army, while engaging with other actors like the US, has often aligned with Iran's directives. The self-other nexus section will finally explore how the military field in Iraq has increasingly absorbed other societal fields, with military capital becoming essential for leverage in political, religious and economic domains. The persistent instability in post-2003 Iraq is a direct consequence of this dynamic.

In subsequent sections, I will examine how the constructs of Power, Myth, and Security within the PMF are shaped by this self-other nexus. Power in the military field of the PMF has been embodied by Iranian-backed militias, which, however, have not

Adam Day (New York: United Nations University, 2020), 30–65, 31, https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2019/11/15165406/TheCenturyFoundation_HybridActors.pdf.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 40–43.

acquired symbolic power. Their influence and repressive violence have been normalised, leading to a dynamic of bargaining and accommodation rather than outright conflict.

In Myth, I will discuss three significant Myths within the PMF: Iranian Shia imperialist projection into the international arena, the shrine protection narrative, and the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces. I will argue that Iran has co-opted the PMF's Myth-spectrum to serve its interests, influencing the other two Myths through the exogenous narrative of Iranian Shia imperialism.

In the Security section, I shall focus on the international arena, examining how the PMF's actions against ISIS have acquired a symbolic dimension, and I shall explore the concept of symbolic violence as projected internationally. I shall also discuss Iran's institutionalised isolation and its impact on the Iraqi state's regional and international relations.

Finally, in the Symbolic Cluster section, I shall argue how these combination of Power, Myth and Security results on post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups being both materially dependent on Iran and marked by an unresolved symbolic competition. This leads to apparent paradoxes, such as the acquisition of violent practices which, despite being normalised, are still perceived as repressive.

After addressing the two sub-questions with these analyses, I shall then proceed to answer this study's main research question. The concluding synthesis will demonstrate that post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran have been marked by significant dependence on the latter, largely due to the deep penetration of Iranian military and political actors into the Iraqi Shia political and military fields. Shia commonality has played a crucial role in shaping these dynamics. The final section will summarise the findings related to non-state armed groups and integrate them with those from previous chapters, providing a comprehensive answer to the study's main research question.

To conclude this introductory section, I shall now present a visual representation of post-2003 Iraqi state collective identity as it emerges from the

agency of non-state militias. Similarly to the previous chapters' graphics, it will serve as a conceptual map, guiding the chapter's analysis and structuring its key themes.

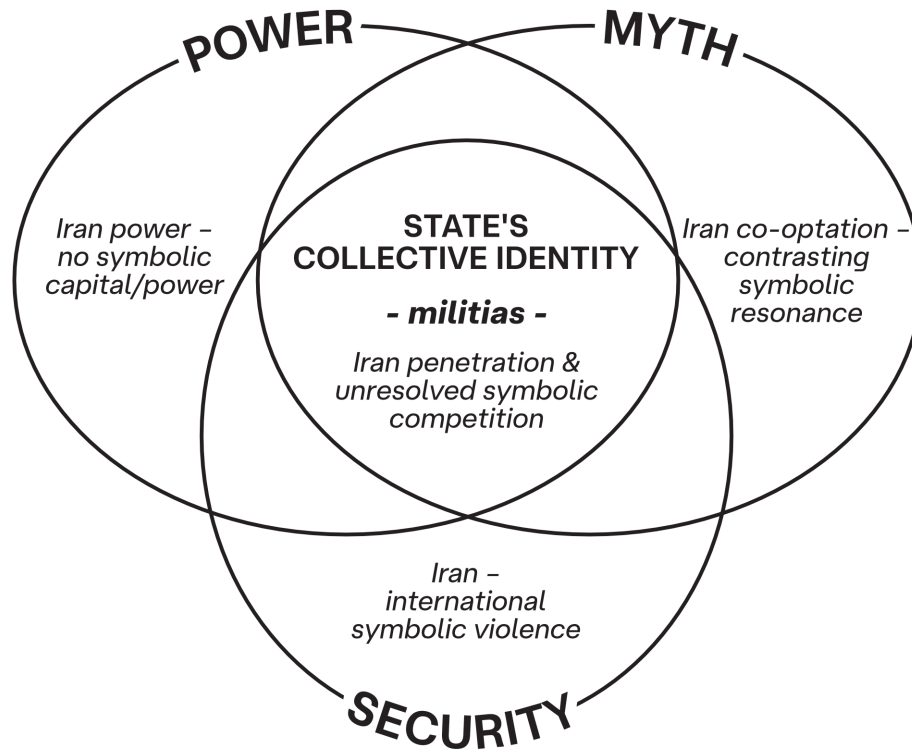


Figure 4. Conceptual Map of Non-state Armed Groups and State's Collective Identity

5.1.1. The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF): A Representative Example of Post-2003 Iraqi Militias

Before beginning the application of my theoretical model in its first, foundational component of the self-other nexus, I shall provide a general overview of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), an umbrella group consisting of different militias which was established in 2014 to assist the Iraqi army in its fight against ISIS and which, to date, is still employed to face any domestic and international military challenges that the Iraqi state may encounter.

It is on the PMF that this study's theoretical model will be applied, in order to address this chapter's two sub-questions – how post-2003 Iraqi Shia non-state armed

groups as the self are constructed through the Iranian security and military apparatus as the relevant 'other'; and how to describe the identity of Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups in the post-regime environment – to finally provide an argument on post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups which will inform the main research question: how Shia commonality has impacted post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran. In the following paragraphs, I shall thus explain why the PMF has been chosen as the most representative example of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups.

The reason for selecting the PMF as a representative example of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups in their ideological and operational identity as a whole, comprising all their differences and complexities, lies in the crucial role played by Iranian-backed militias. There are at least five key categories within the PMF that have been identified as the most relevant, together forming the core structure of the organisation: Iranian-backed militias; Saraya al-Salam (Moqtada al-Sadr's militias); Sistani-aligned militias; Sunni militias; and minority groups (Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, etc.).⁶⁸⁷ Given the scope of this study and its focus on Shiism, Sunni militias and minority group units will be collectively addressed and not examined in detail. Iranian-backed militias are the most powerful in terms of numbers and military capabilities and their leaders occupy high-ranked positions within the Popular Mobilisation Commission (PMC), the governmental body that administers the PMF.⁶⁸⁸ Moreover, due to their substantial military capabilities and their growth since 2014, they have benefited from substantial Iraqi government funding and training and have thereby established leverage and developed relations with the other PMF factions, relations which are independent from the Iraqi state.⁶⁸⁹

Their leading role is thus illustrative of the main aspect constituting post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups: their dependence on Iran. Iran, in fact, has deeply penetrated the Iraqi security framework, comprising both its state and non-state actors, thus the Iraqi army and militias, and has grown over time more and more materially dependent on Iranian forces.

⁶⁸⁷ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 40–43.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Providing military assistance through its militias has been the primary means through which Iran has penetrated the Iraqi Shia political field and ultimately the Iraqi state.⁶⁹⁰ This trend began in 2003 and continues to the present date. While Iraqi actors took advantage of this help in order to win the power-struggle in 2003 and achieve governmental positions in the first national elections in 2005 and in every election since, Iran has pursued a different aim: keeping Iraq in a dependent position in order to achieve strategic depth in the region and exert influence over Iraq. Given the level of Iranian penetration into Iraqi politics and the Iraqi security framework, I argue that Iran has achieved this aim to date.

Following the above explanation of why the PMF was selected as the illustrative example of post-2003 Iraqi militias and the body to which the theoretical model will be applied, the next sub-section will trace the PMF's evolution from its establishment in 2014 to its current role in Iraq.

The primary argument here is that, although the PMF was initially created as a temporary measure to support the Iraqi army in its fight against ISIS, it effectively formalised various militias, including Iranian-backed ones, within a state-recognised structure. However, this formalisation granted these militias considerable autonomy from the Iraqi state.⁶⁹¹ Given the significant role played by Iranian-backed militias within the PMF, this autonomy facilitated Iranian influence by reducing their accountability to the Iraqi state and further embedding Iranian interests within Iraq's security framework.

The subsequent sub-section will provide a detailed analysis of the main PMF groups, highlighting the advanced capabilities of Iranian-backed militias, their influence over other PMF factions and the relationships they have established with these groups.

5.1.1.1. The Evolution of the PMF: From Sistani's 2014 Fatwa to its Current Role in Iraq

⁶⁹⁰ Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), 181–194.

⁶⁹¹ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 38.

The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), or *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* in Arabic, is a coalition of armed groups formally established in 2014, following the June 2014 *fatwa* by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. This *fatwa* called on all Iraqis who were able to “bear arms and fight terrorists” to join the war against ISIS.⁶⁹²

Although it is challenging to determine the exact number of volunteers who joined the fight upon Sistani’s call without prior experience in any non-state armed groups,⁶⁹³ it is clear that the formation of the PMF was initially conceived as a temporary measure to address the ISIS threat. Many pro-Sistani militia leaders, in fact, repeatedly announced that they would disband their groups once the conflict was over.⁶⁹⁴

However, Iranian-backed militias, which became integral components of the PMF, had been active in Iraq since 2003. Their presence has been the principal means through which Iran pursued its strategic objective of maintaining Iraq within its sphere of influence. By 2014, some of these militias, such as the Badr Organisation and the Mahdi Army, had already infiltrated the Iraqi government, participating in parliamentary elections despite constitutional prohibitions against militia commanders doing so.

The formation of the PMF represented a significant opportunity for these militias: while continuing to advance Iranian interests, they would benefit from formal integration into the Iraqi state security apparatus, receiving government funding and training, while remaining largely unaccountable to the Iraqi state.

The Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei described Sistani’s call to arms as “divine inspiration”.⁶⁹⁵ While Sistani, recognising that his *fatwa* was being used to empower Iranian-backed militias, grew more cautious in conveying his endorsement of the PMF,⁶⁹⁶ the Iraqi government proceeded with the formalisation of the PMF,

⁶⁹² Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, “Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq”, *Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief* 105 (2023): 4.

⁶⁹³ Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 28, 2017, 3, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁵ *Buratha News*, “As-Sayyid al-Khamenei: Ana Ala Yaqeen Bi Anna Fatwa as-Sayyid al-Sistani lil Jihad al-Kifai ‘Ilham Ilah’”, (*Sayyid Khamenei: Sayyid Sistani’s Fatwa for Defensive Jihad is a ‘Divine Inspiration’*, translation from Arabic by the author), August 29, 2016, <http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/246324>. Accessed September 2023.

⁶⁹⁶ *Website of Sistani’s office*, “Nass Ma Warada Bishan al-Awdaat al-Raihina fi Al-Iraq fi Khutbat al-Juma Allati Alaqa Fadhilat al-Alama al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi Mumaththil al-Marjaiyya al-Diniyya al-

ensuring its ambiguous status as both a state and non-state actor. This hybrid nature allowed the PMF to operate within state institutions and cooperate with the state when convenient, while simultaneously acting outside its constraints and competing with it when necessary.⁶⁹⁷ As thoroughly analysed in the previous chapter on political authority, the Iraqi political class has significantly benefited from Iran as an external patron, securing governmental positions with the support of Iranian-backed militias. By 2014, Iran had succeeded in penetrating the Iraqi Shia sphere sufficiently for the Iraqi government to pursue a course of action regarding the PMF that aligned with Iranian interests.

In 2014, shortly after Sistani's *fatwa*, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki formalised the PMF by creating the Popular Mobilisation Commission (PMC), the governmental body that administers the PMF. The PMC's chairman would be nominated by the Prime Minister, while neither the PMF nor the PMC would fall under the Ministries of Defence or Interior.⁶⁹⁸ By doing so, Maliki navigated a constitutional grey area, as Article 9b of the Iraqi constitution prohibits the establishment of "militias outside the framework of the armed forces".⁶⁹⁹

In 2015, Haider al-Abadi's government made several attempts to integrate these militias into the state's armed forces and make them accountable to the Iraqi state.⁷⁰⁰ However, the PMF's leader at the time, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, capitalising on the PMF's popularity due to its efforts against ISIS, complained that the central government was not adequately compensating the PMF.⁷⁰¹ He succeeded in exerting his influence, leading Abadi to pass an executive order designating the PMF as "an

Ulya," (*Text regarding the Current Situation in Iraq in the Friday Sermon Delivered by His Eminence, Sayyid Ahmad al-Safi, the representative of the highest religious authority*, translation from Arabic by the author), June 20, 2014, <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24915/>. Accessed September 12, 2023.

⁶⁹⁷ Thanassis Cambanis et al., *Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2019), 7–9.

⁶⁹⁸ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 37.

⁶⁹⁹ *Iraqi Constitution* (2005), Article 9(b).

⁷⁰⁰ Haider al-Abadi's speech during his Washington visit to meet U.S. President Donald Trump, March 20, 2017. Transcript available at: <https://www.usip.org/transcript-prime-minister-haider-al-abadi-us-institute-peace>. Accessed July 2022.

⁷⁰¹ Cambanis, et al., *Hybrid Actors*, 29.

independent military formation and a part of the Iraqi armed forces, attached to the general commander of the armed forces”.⁷⁰²

A few months later, the Iraqi parliament passed a law establishing the PMF as “an independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces, linked to the Commander-in-Chief [of the armed forces, thus the Prime Minister].”⁷⁰³ The ambiguous phrasing legally formalised the presence of the PMF within Iraq’s security framework, acknowledging it as a state actor without fully integrating it into the formal state military structure.

This apparent inconsistency from the Iraqi government as illustrated by al-Abadi’s attempts to integrate the militias into the Iraqi state’s armed forces, Nouri al-Maliki’s contrasting approach, and the Iraqi parliament ultimately sidestepping al-Abadi’s efforts, reflects the fragmented nature of Iraq’s political landscape. While the Iraqi Shia political field is heavily influenced by Iranian actors, it is also plagued by ongoing intra-Shia rivalries. These rivalries manifest in political manoeuvring, with various factions continuously attempting to gain an advantage over one another within the same political field. However, the bottom line is that Iran has infiltrated the Iraqi government, leveraging these internal divisions to further its influence.

To date, the PMF is overseen by the PMC but, despite the PMC chairman being appointed by the Prime Minister, neither the PMC nor the PMF fall under the Ministries of Defence or Interior. This arrangement allows the PMC and the PMF significant autonomy and enables the most powerful militias and their leaders to maintain substantial influence.

As of 2024, the PMC chairman is Faleh al-Fayyadh, who has ties with Iranian-backed militias.⁷⁰⁴ Due to his connection to serious human rights abuses in the suppression of October 2019 protests,⁷⁰⁵ he has faced significant controversy and

⁷⁰² *Executive Order 91* of 2016.

⁷⁰³ Iraqi Ministry of Justice, “The Law of the Popular Mobilization Units Commission Number 40 for the Year 2016,” (translation from Arabic from Cambanis et al., *Hybrid Actors*, 28), January 5, 2017.

⁷⁰⁴ Michael Knights, “Extraordinary Popular Mobilization Force Expansion, by the Numbers”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/extraordinary-popular-mobilization-force-expansion-numbers>.

⁷⁰⁵ US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iraqi Militia Leader Connected to Serious Human Rights Abuse,” January 8, 2021, Washington. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1231>.

sanctions by the US Department of the Treasury under the 2021 Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.⁷⁰⁶

Besides its enhanced military capabilities thanks to government funding and training, since 2014 the PMF has acquired more influence. Iranian-backed militias have been acting as local power-brokers in post-ISIS areas and have been benefiting from extensive economic activities, ranging from legal and illicit investments.⁷⁰⁷ Continuing a practice which has been pursued since 2005 despite the Iraqi Constitution forbidding it, many of its leaders are also involved in formal Iraqi politics, such as Hadi al-Amiri, head of the Badr Organisation, which is part of the PMF, and also leader of the Fatah Alliance, currently in the Iraqi parliament.

The relationship between the PMF and the state, as well as the Iraqi army, is characterised by constant bargaining and accommodation rather than outright antagonism.⁷⁰⁸ Their military objectives may officially coincide, such as in the fight against ISIS, or align illegally, as seen in the repression of the October 2019 protests, where despite official claims that the Iraqi army was not deployed, substantial evidence proves otherwise.⁷⁰⁹ However, their objectives may also clash, such as in the case of the Iranian militias' conflict with the US, which has repeatedly put the Iraqi government in a difficult position. For instance, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has highlighted Iraq's "distinguished relations" with both Iran and the US, stressing Iraq's role in regional stability and the importance of balanced international relations during his 2017 visit to Washington.⁷¹⁰ Despite these efforts, al-Sudani faces

⁷⁰⁶ US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Iraqi Militia Leader Connected to Serious Human Rights Abuse".

⁷⁰⁷ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 21.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 40–43.

⁷⁰⁹ United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), "Update on Demonstrations in Iraq: Accountability for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements," May 2021, Baghdad, 4,

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_Report_Accountability_for_Human_Rights_Violations_and_Abuses_ENG.pdf. Accessed July 2022.

⁷¹⁰ *Baghdad Today*, "Al-Sudani: Iraq Possesses Distinguished Relations with Iran and America", April 17, 2024, translation from Arabic by the author, <https://baghdadtoday.news/247338-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7.html>. Accessed June 2024.

considerable challenges due to the ongoing conflict following the October 7, 2023, Israel-Hamas war.⁷¹¹ PMF Iranian-backed militias have continued their retaliatory attacks in Iraq, including a drone strike on an Israeli airbase. This ongoing aggression has placed al-Sudani in a difficult position, trying to maintain Iraq's sovereignty and stability while managing the complex dynamics of Iranian influence and potential Israeli retaliation.⁷¹²

5.1.1.2. The Main Groups within the PMF

The PMF encompasses such a wide diversity of groups that a recent report has advised US officials to avoid collective terms like 'the PMF,' 'the hashd,' or 'Shia militias'⁷¹³ due to the vast array of groups covered by these terms and their politically charged nature.⁷¹⁴ However, the term PMF will be used here because an overall identity of this umbrella group can indeed be discerned.

Despite the ideological and operational differences among the various factions, I argue that the PMF has acquired a distinct identity linked to the significant capabilities of the Iranian-backed militias and the influence these groups exert on the others. This identity is illustrative of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups.

By examining these differences and analysing each of the main PMF groups, this section aims to underline the dynamics through which Iranian-backed militias exert their influence on the overall PMF and, ultimately, on the Iraqi security framework. Providing insights into the identity of Iraqi non-state armed groups, as the third and final agency cluster of post-2003 Iraq, this chapter's analysis contributes an essential and final piece to address the main research question: how Shia commonality has impacted post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran.

⁷¹¹ *Asharq Al-Awsat*, "Al-Sudani Rejects Diverting the Path of the 'Popular Mobilization Forces' in Iraq from the Official Mission", February 13, 2025, translation from Arabic by the author, <https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/5030875-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B6-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8>. Accessed June 2024.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*

⁷¹³ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 40.

⁷¹⁴ Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 7 (2019): 8.

In the following sub-sections, I shall present the main groups of militias within the PMF in order of their military capabilities: Iranian-backed militias; Saraya al-Salam (Moqtada al-Sadr's militias); Sistani-aligned militias; and Sunni and minority groups militias (Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, etc.). Given this study's focus on Shiism, this last group will be examined solely in relation to their interactions with Iranian-backed militias.

5.1.1.2.1. Iranian-Backed Militias

Iranian-backed militias pledge religious allegiance to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and were mostly established between 2003 and 2014, with the Badr Organisation dating back to the early 1980s. Some of them, such as Kataib Hezbollah among others, are arms of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and of the Iranian foreign intelligence agency, Itilaat.⁷¹⁵

They are the most powerful in terms of numbers and military capabilities⁷¹⁶ and they have played a significant role in Iraq since the immediate aftermath of the US invasion. They dominate high-ranking positions within the PMC, which oversees the PMF, and can be thus considered as the most influential PMF actors.

Iranian-backed militias, such as the Badr Organisation, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah among others, have faced accusations of repeated human rights abuses and criminality.⁷¹⁷ As earlier noted, the current PMC chairman is Faleh al-Fayyadh, who comes from this Iranian-backed PMF division, and has also been sanctioned for his role in the violent suppression of the October 2019 protests.⁷¹⁸

These militias have served as a powerful instrument for Iran to penetrate the Iraqi state, enabling it to pursue its primary interests: maintaining Iraq in a dependent position to exert significant regional influence, achieving strategic depth, and mitigating actions contrary to Iranian interests. These militias not only follow specific

⁷¹⁵ Mansour and Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", 13.

⁷¹⁶ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 40.

⁷¹⁷ *Al Jazeera*, "The Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq: Armament, Funding, and Relations with Hezbollah", December 31, 2019, translation from Arabic by the author, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2019/12/31/الحشد-الشعبي-العراق-تسليح-تمويل-حزب>. Accessed September 2024.

⁷¹⁸ US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Iraqi Militia Leader Connected to Serious Human Rights Abuse".

directives from their Iranian sponsor, but also, having been granted considerable autonomy, they exert influence over post-ISIS areas, establish leverage and develop independent relations with other PMF factions.⁷¹⁹ Additionally, they have pursued economic interests, engaging in both legal and illegal activities.⁷²⁰

While this autonomy suggests a degree of independence from their Iranian sponsor, as some scholars have argued,⁷²¹ I contend that it has further facilitated Iran's penetration of the Iraqi state beyond the security framework, extending into economic and local governance spheres.

In the following paragraphs, I shall first illustrate how these militias have served as instruments for Iran's aims. Subsequently, I will discuss their degree of autonomy, their relations with other PMF militias, and how their ideology and behavioural outlook impact the Iraqi state and its security framework promoting Iranian interests.

Iranian-backed militias have represented a major instrument for Iran to penetrate the Iraqi Shia political field and, ultimately, the Iraqi state. Since the immediate aftermath of the US invasion, Iran has supported Iraqi Shia political groups by bolstering their militia-wings.⁷²² While Iraqi groups have taken advantage of Iranian help to win the power-struggle and achieve a place in government, Iran has pursued a different aim: penetrating the Iraqi state in order to keep Iraq in a dependent position, achieve strategic depth, and prevent or minimise actions that may run counter to Iranian interests. To date, Iran has achieved its ultimate goal. While keeping Iraq in a state of constant instability and thus in a dependent position, it has infiltrated the Iraqi government through hybrid actors. Such hybrid actors have been represented by Iranian-backed militias which have participated in elections and are now politically represented and embedded in state institutions.⁷²³ As of 2024, they hold significant influence within the Iraqi government, with several key positions and roles in ministries

⁷¹⁹ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 45–50.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 51–53.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷²² See for instance: Guido Steinberg, "The Badr Organization: Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Comment*, July 21, 2017, 4, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2017C26_sbg.pdf. Accessed July 2022.

⁷²³ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 43–47.

and security apparatus.⁷²⁴ The Badr Organisation, the oldest and most institutionalised of these militia-factions, has been part of formal politics and embedded in the Ministry of Interior since 2005.⁷²⁵

Whenever it seemed that the country was going in a direction that would not coincide with what Iran had envisioned, Iran has taken direct action on Iraqi soil through these militias. This happened both before and after the 2014 PMF formation.

In 2008, for instance, during the Operation Charge of the Knights, which took place in Basra under the premiership of Nouri al-Maliki to retake control of the city from the Sadrist Mahdi army, the Badr Organisation and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, among others, fought against the Iraqi armed forces.⁷²⁶ The ceasefire between the Iraqi state and other armed groups was brokered only with the involvement of Iranian officials, reflecting Tehran's influence over the Sadrist movement and the broader Shia political landscape in Iraq.⁷²⁷

In 2020, after the US drone strike that killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi PMF commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq intensified their attacks on US forces and facilities in Iraq. This escalation highlighted their ability to disrupt Iraqi politics and align more closely with Iranian strategic interests than with national policies. Initially, the Iraqi government had, in fact, attempted to maintain a neutral stance following the assassination, but the aggressive military responses from these Iranian-backed PMF factions, and the ensuing threat of increased instability, pressured the Iraqi Parliament to pass a non-binding resolution calling for the expulsion of US troops from Iraq.⁷²⁸

⁷²⁴ *Al Jazeera*, "The Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq: Armament, Funding, and Relations with Hezbollah," December 31, 2019, translation from Arabic by the author, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2019/12/31/الحشد-الشعبي-العراق-تسليح-تمويل-حزب>.

⁷²⁵ Raed al-Hamed, "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi: The Alternative Regular Force in Iraq", *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, January 1, 2015, translation from Arabic by the author, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2015/01/201511141532221465.html>. Accessed September 2024.

⁷²⁶ Michael Howard and Annabelle Chapman, "Iran Brokers Peace Deal to End Bloodshed in Basra", *The Guardian*, March 30, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/30/iraq>. Accessed September 2024.

⁷²⁷ *Victorville Daily Press*, "Al-Sadr Truce Calms Iraq", April 1, 2008, <https://eu.vvdailynews.com/story/news/nation-world/2008/04/01/al-sadr-truce-calms-iraq/37052703007/>. Accessed March 2025.

⁷²⁸ *BBC News*, "Iraq Militia Supporters End Deadly US Embassy Siege", January 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50998065>. Accessed September 2024.

Benefiting from substantial government funding and training, PMF Iranian-backed militias have experienced significant growth since 2014. This growth has enabled them to acquire leverage and develop relations with other PMF groups. While this highlights their relative operational autonomy from their Iranian sponsor, it is important to note that they still pursue Iranian interests: they essentially serve as Iran's militia wings in Iraq and their influence on local governance and their engagement in economic activities have further facilitated Iran's penetration into Iraq's political and economic spheres.

In some instances, their superior military capabilities have allowed them to exert influence over the local authority granted to *other* PMF factions.⁷²⁹ In the city of Tuz Khurmatu, located in Salahuddin Province, for example, the Iraqi state granted authority to a local Turkmen minority PMF group, allowing it to assume certain state functions, including security. This minority PMF group, however, had to navigate their relationship with the larger and more powerful Iranian-backed militias to avoid retaliatory attacks. The Iranian-backed militias provided the necessary support and protection that allowed the Turkmen PMF to maintain control over the area.⁷³⁰ Thus, while the central Iraqi government had empowered the Turkmen PMF by delegating security functions to them, the Turkmen PMF had to align their operations with the interests and strategies of the more dominant PMF Iranian-backed militias.

This growth, influence on post-ISIS areas, and formal incorporation into the Iraqi security forces have also facilitated their involvement in various illicit economic activities without facing significant persecution. Iranian-backed militias' activities are extensive, ranging from legal investments, to extortion, smuggling and informal taxes. Their predatory and extortive economic activities have been highly destabilising.⁷³¹

In the city of Tuz Khurmatu, their exertion effectively paralysed the concrete block industry,⁷³² and in December 2019 there were reports of violence related to the lucrative smuggling networks of medium weapons, rockets, assassinations and

⁷²⁹ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 50–53.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*, 50–53.

⁷³² Mark A. DeWeaver, *Decentralized Rent Seeking in Iraq's Post-IS Economy: A Warning from the Concrete Block Industry* (Raparin: Institute of Regional and International Studies, 2017), <http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IRIS%20Iraq%20Report%20Decentralized%20Rent-Seeking%20post-ISIS%20Iraq%20DeWeaver.pdf>.

displacement, around the Mandali border crossing with Iran, Iraq's third busiest border crossing, with estimated annual revenues of USD \$700 million.⁷³³

5.1.1.2.2. Saraya al-Salam. Muqtada al-Sadr's Militia

Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades) represents the latest iteration of auxiliary forces led by Iraqi Shia cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr has maintained his own militias since the 2003–2007 civil war.⁷³⁴ His earlier militia – the Mahdi army – received substantial support from Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),⁷³⁵ and was responsible for serious sectarian crimes.⁷³⁶ However, as a populist and opportunistic leader, since the 2018 elections and the Iraqi populace's rejection of Iranian interference, Sadr has adopted a very cross-sectarian and anti-Iran rhetoric,⁷³⁷ and never fully clarified his relationship with Soleimani.

Consequently, as of 2024, Sadr presents Saraya al-Salam as a nationalistic, disciplined and state-aligned auxiliary force. Its presence in the Sunni-majority shrine city of Samarra is often cited as a successful model for PMF–local relationships.⁷³⁸ The rhetoric of the 'resistance' against Iranian interference is very strong within Saraya al-Salam. Sadr has often referred to Iranian-backed militias as the "impudent" ones.⁷³⁹

Saraya al-Salam's competition with PMF Iranian-backed militias frequently leads to conflict. In December 2021, Saraya al-Salam clashed with the Iranian-backed

⁷³³ DeWeaver, *Decentralized Rent Seeking in Iraq's Post-IS Economy*.

⁷³⁴ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 41.

⁷³⁵ The Quds Force is an IRGC specialised unit, which is responsible for extra-territorial operations. By primarily focusing on activities outside of Iran's borders, the Quds Force supports and exports Iran's revolutionary ideals, promotes Islamic governance, and counters perceived threats to Iran's national security. It was established in 1980 and, as an IRGC unit, responds directly to the Iranian Supreme Leader (Udit Banerjee, "Revolutionary Intelligence: The Expanding Intelligence Role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps", *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 (2015): 93–106, 98–101). Following Soleimani's assassination by a US airstrike in January 2020, Major General Esmail Ghaani assumed the role of commander of the Quds Force (*Reuters*, "Iran Names Deputy Quds Force Commander to Replace Soleimani After Killing", January 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-security-blast-iran-successor-idUKKBN1Z20XA>. Accessed June 2022).

⁷³⁶ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 58–65.

⁷³⁷ Renad Mansour and Christine van den Toorn, "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?," *London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Report*, July 2018, 13–14, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf.

⁷³⁸ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 41.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid*.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the local security forces to exert control over lucrative smuggling routes.⁷⁴⁰

Although difficult to confirm due to a lack of accountability, when Sadr turned against the protesters in October 2019 after initially supporting them, unidentified armed elements, likely from Saraya al-Salam, helped in crushing the protests.⁷⁴¹

5.1.1.2.3. Sistani-Aligned Militias

A third category of PMF groups is what I call Sistani-aligned militias. They were formed in response to Sistani's 2014 *fatwa* and they are closely tied to the Iraqi clergy of the holy shrines of Najaf and Karbala. They follow Sistani's indications and his political vision for Iraq and its future.⁷⁴²

As they were established as a temporary measure to address the existential threat posed by ISIS, they do not have broader ideological motivations beyond the fight against ISIS and the defence of the holy shrines, which is quite a crucial ideological point in Iraqi popular perception. In fact, they are perceived positively by the public, aligning closely with the idealised image of the PMF as the main force that has defended the Iraqi state from ISIS.⁷⁴³

Iranian-backed militias are generally viewed more negatively, but the distinction between the two is often blurred. Iranian-leaning factions frequently patrol the holy shrines, exploiting the defence of the sacred places to their own widespread credibility and popularity.⁷⁴⁴

Following Sistani's guidance, they have shown greater willingness to integrate into state structures and work within the Joint Operations Command (JOC), which coordinates military efforts between the Iraqi army and various militia groups.⁷⁴⁵ Despite their relatively lesser power, they have consistently engaged in conflicts with

⁷⁴⁰ *Shafaq News*, "Iraqi Security at Risk: the conflict between Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Saraya Al-Salam", February 22, 2022, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Iraqi-Security-at-Risk-the-conflict-between-Asaib-Ahl-al-Haq-and-Saraya-Al-Salam>. Accessed October 2024.

⁷⁴¹ International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box," *Middle East Report* No. 223, 26 July, 2021, 20, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>. Accessed June 2022.

⁷⁴² Mansour and Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", 14–15.

⁷⁴³ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 41.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Iranian-backed militias around the holy sites of Najaf and Karbala, playing a significant role in resisting Iran's efforts to extend its influence over these critical religious and cultural centres.⁷⁴⁶

5.1.1.2.4. Sunni & Minority Groups (Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, etc.) Militias

A fourth category includes groups often referred to as Sunni and minority groups (Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, etc.). Given the focus of this study on Shiism, these groups, typically analysed separately, will be briefly discussed concerning their interactions with the more dominant Iranian-backed militias. Their relatively minor role underscores the greater influence exerted by Shia militias in the post-2003 Iraqi landscape.

Sunni militias have been active in Iraq since 2003. Some of these militias were established as part of Prime Minister Maliki's efforts to create a network of auxiliaries under the 2005 Sons of Iraq initiative, also known as the Awakening Forces or Sahwa, which aimed to combat insurgency and improve security by involving Sunni tribal leaders and former insurgents who had turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁷⁴⁷ Many Sunni militias were also formed later during the fight against ISIS.

Initially, Sunnis were apprehensive about the PMF, and the actions of Iranian-backed militias against them during the fight against ISIS and the years that followed justified this apprehension. However, some Sunni factions did join the PMF, as it was the only formal way to participate in the fight against ISIS and access salaries, supplies and logistical support.

Today, Sunni militias are locally focused formations primarily concerned with day-to-day security in their respective Sunni areas. However, Iranian-backed militias exert influence indirectly through local Sunni PMF groups. For instance, in Mosul, after its liberation from ISIS in 2017, Iranian-backed militias like the Badr Organisation and Kataib Hezbollah worked closely with local Sunni militias to maintain control and security.⁷⁴⁸ This cooperation helped to stabilise the area, although it also meant that

⁷⁴⁶ Mansour and Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", 15.

⁷⁴⁷ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 41.

⁷⁴⁸ Michael Georgy, "The Battle Against Islamic State", *Reuters*, December 5, 2017, <https://widerimage.reuters.com/story/the-battle-against-islamic-state>. Accessed October 2024.

Iranian influence became entrenched in local governance and security arrangements.⁷⁴⁹

Similar dynamics characterise the relations between Iranian-backed militias and minority groups. The ISIS genocide against minorities led to the formation of religious and ethnic auxiliary forces. According to one study, there are eleven minority auxiliary forces associated with the PMF.⁷⁵⁰ Others receive sponsorship from Kurdish actors or are linked to the global coalition against ISIS without falling within the PMF framework.⁷⁵¹

In post-ISIS areas, some of these groups have been granted authority by the Iraqi central government in security services. However, due to their limited military capabilities, they have relied on Iranian-backed militias to maintain control of the area, further enabling these powerful militias to exert influence in these territories.⁷⁵²

5.2. Self-Other Nexus in Post-2003 Iraqi Non-State Armed Groups

In the following section, I shall describe the self-other nexus behind the construction of the identity of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups. Previously, I have presented the case of the PMF as the most representative of the various trends, dynamics and ideological and operational foundations of Iraqi militias from 2003 to the present. Consequently, this study's theoretical model will be applied on the PMF, and the analysis of the self-other nexus will represent the first step to take.

This section will be divided into two sub-sections. In the following sub-section, I shall first introduce some foundational theoretical elements of the self-other nexus conceptualisation, arguing that although the self and the other do not represent binary and hierarchical terms, one of the two can indeed strive to maintain the other in a dependent position, thus shaping the relationship in hierarchical terms. I shall then illustrate how, since 2003, this has precisely been Iran's main goal towards Iraq and

⁷⁴⁹ Georgy, "The Battle Against Islamic State".

⁷⁵⁰ Hisham al-Hashimi, "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi", *The Center of Making Policies for International and Strategic Studies*, April 30, 2018.

⁷⁵¹ Wathek Al-Hashmi, "Tribal Mobilization Forces in Iraq: Reality and Future Challenges", *The Center of Making Policies for International and Strategic Studies*, July 12, 2018.

⁷⁵² Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 50–65.

how non-state armed groups – and especially the PMF – have served as Iran’s primary instrument for this purpose. As in the self-other nexus, the relationship is central, rather than either party alone. Iraq has also played a crucial role in this interaction, engaging with Iran and its militias in a dynamic of bargaining and accommodation rather than outright conflict. This self-other nexus, playing out in such dynamics, has ultimately led to Iran’s deep penetration into the Iraqi security framework.

However, this does not mean that the Iraqi self has been entirely absorbed into the Iranian other. While Iran, with its well-equipped militias, has succeeded in keeping Iraq in a dependent position, it has not fully integrated Iraq – its militias, political actors, and overall security framework – into its sphere of influence. Key Shia PMF components, such as Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam and Sistani-aligned militias, continue to resist Iranian-backed militias and Iran’s objectives in Iraq. The Iraqi army, too, maintains an ambiguous stance, formally recognising Iranian-backed militias without holding them accountable, while simultaneously engaging with actors like the US, whom Iran opposes. It is important to note, however, that Iraqi PMF militias are militarily weaker, and some factions that now oppose Iranian influence, like Moqtada al-Sadr’s movement, previously relied on Iranian support, making their current stance appear as a political populist manoeuvre. Despite its occasional engagements with other actors, the Iraqi army has often ultimately aligned with Iranian interests. This apparent contradiction underscores Iran’s deep penetration into Iraq’s security framework and the resulting instability, highlighting Iraq’s continued dependence on Iran.

In the second sub-section, I shall argue that a crucial implication of this security environment, resulting from the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus concerning non-state armed groups, is that the military field has encompassed all other relevant fields, thereby becoming a broader field that encompasses the others. Military capital has become the key resource to acquire for gaining leverage in any other field. The resort to militia violence has been normalised as a practice to gain advantage in political, religious, domestic, international and economic domains. The state of constant instability in post-2003 Iraq is a direct empirical consequence of this absorption.

This section will play a crucial role in tackling the crucial sub-question of this study as formulated according to the agency cluster examined in this chapter: how post-2003 Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups, as the ‘self’, are shaped by the Iranian security and military apparatus, as the relevant ‘other’. After exploring the relationship between the Iraqi self and the Iranian other concerning non-state armed groups, I shall proceed to analyse how the self-other dynamic has constructed the main elements of the state’s collective identity: Power, Myth, and Security. This will enable me to address the second sub-question – how to describe the identity of Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups in the post-regime environment –, and subsequently provide a full answer to the question of self-construction through the other.

5.2.1. Iraq’s Security Framework: Iran’s Penetration & Dependence on Iran

The self-other nexus is the relational process that underlies the construction of collective identity’s constitutive elements. It is the foundational dynamic from which the main constructs of identity, Power, Myth and Security, – are formed and shaped. This means that the nature of this process, that is how it unfolds and the dynamics it follows, forges the aspects of identity’s main constructs.

In this conceptualisation, it is the relation, the interaction between the self and other that gives ontological meaning to both. This interaction is intersubjective – self and other “recognise themselves as mutually recognising one another”⁷⁵³ –; dialogical – it works essentially like a dialogue: the discursive word cannot be separate from a subject who utters it in addressing another subject⁷⁵⁴ –, and non-hierarchical – self and the other are not binary and hierarchical oppositions with one term being primary, the origin, and the other being secondary and derivative.⁷⁵⁵

However, the actual unfolding of the self-other nexus process does not negate the possibility that one of the two terms may pursue the interest of keeping the other in a dependent role. If the interest of one of the two terms is shaped by the aim of maintaining the other term in a ‘secondary’ position, the identity construction will be characterised by such hierarchical interaction.

⁷⁵³ Georg Friedrich von Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 112.

⁷⁵⁴ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 110–117.

⁷⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 22–50.

The self-other dynamic in the construction of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups' identity has been characterised by such an unbalanced relationship: one side of the nexus – Iran, as the other – has sought to keep the Iraqi self in a subordinate position. Specifically, non-state armed groups have been the primary means through which Iran has infiltrated the Iraqi Shia field to advance its own interests. Since 2003, Iran's principal means of penetration have been providing military assistance to Iraqi Shia militias; taking direct actions on Iraqi soil through these militias whenever it seems that Iraqi politics deviates from Iran's envisioned path;⁷⁵⁶ and infiltrating Iraqi politics through hybrid actors – leaders of pro-Iranian militias who have participated in elections and secured positions in government.⁷⁵⁷ The PMF establishment has represented a continuation of this trend and, crucially, the ultimate penetration into the Iraqi security framework, comprising both its non-state armed groups and the state army forces. The PMF, in fact, is ambiguously positioned between the two.

However, in the intersubjective and relational process that the self-other nexus represents, both entities contribute to shaping the resulting dynamic. Iraq, as the self, has also played a role in this relationship with Iran. When Iran provided military assistance in the 2003–2003 civil war, Iraqi actors capitalised on this support to gain the upper hand in the power struggle and secure governmental positions in the first national elections in 2005 and in every election since.⁷⁵⁸ Similarly, with the formation of the PMF, they leveraged this assistance to reclaim Iraqi territories from ISIS.

Following the fight against ISIS, the PMF was not dismantled, and the relationship between the more militarily advanced Iranian-backed militias, the Iraqi state, and other PMF factions has been characterised by bargaining and accommodation rather than outright antagonism.⁷⁵⁹ Direct conflict with Iran would deprive Iraq of a powerful external patron and expose it to military challenges it might not be able to sustain. Additionally, the other PMF factions would be ill-equipped to confront the threat posed by the Iranian-led militias.

⁷⁵⁶ See for instance: John Davison and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraqi PM Safe After Drone Attack on Residence, Military Says," *Reuters*, November 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/drone-attack-targets-iraq-pm-who-escapes-unhurt-iraq-military-2021-11-07/>. Accessed June 2022.

⁷⁵⁷ Cambanis et al., *Hybrid Actors*.

⁷⁵⁸ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 317.

⁷⁵⁹ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 40–43.

This relationship, which has allowed Iran's penetration into the Iraqi security framework, perpetuates the cycle of dependence from the Iraqi self to the Iranian other, which has precisely been Iran's aim.

However, it is crucial to recognise that the self-other nexus dynamic does not result in the complete 'cancellation' of the Iraqi self. The Iraqi self has not been entirely subsumed by the Iranian other. While Iran, with its better-equipped militias, has maintained a strategically advantageous position and succeeded in keeping Iraq in a dependent state, it has not fully incorporated Iraq – its militias, political actors, its entire security framework – into its sphere of influence. Notably, certain PMF factions opposed to Iranian dominance – particularly Saraya al-Salam (Moqtada al-Sadr's militia) and Sistani-aligned militias – have consistently resisted, actively pushing back against the influence of Iranian-backed militias and Iran's broader objectives in Iraq.⁷⁶⁰

Moreover, the Iraqi army has maintained an ambiguous stance, formally recognising PMF Iranian-backed militias as state entities without fully holding them accountable, while also engaging with other actors, such as the US, which Iran opposes.⁷⁶¹ However, due to Iran's deep penetration into Iraq's security framework, this resistance remains fraught with ambiguity. Iraqi PMF militias are militarily weaker, and some factions that now oppose Iranian influence, like Moqtada al-Sadr's movement, previously relied on Iranian support, casting their current stance as a potential political populist manoeuvre. Despite occasional engagements with other actors, the Iraqi army has often ultimately aligned with Iranian interests.

⁷⁶⁰ Haddad, *Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units*, 40–51, and Reuters, "Explainer: Iraq's Competing Shiite Armed Factions and Parties," February 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqs-competing-shiite-armed-factions-parties-2024-02-18>. Accessed September 2024.

⁷⁶¹ See for instance: *Baghdad Today*, "Al-Sudani: Iraq Has Distinguished Relations with Iran and America", April 17, 2024, translation from the Arabic by the author, <https://baghdadtoday.news/247338-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7.html>. Accessed June 2024.

For instance, significant clashes have occurred between Sistani-aligned militias and Iranian-backed groups, particularly around the holy sites of Najaf and Karbala.⁷⁶² Although Sistani's units are not as powerful, these confrontations highlight the tension between factions loyal to Sistani, who advocate for Iraqi national sovereignty, and Iranian-backed militias seeking to expand Iran's influence in Iraq, especially in these key religious centres. Tensions also escalated during the October 2019 protests, when Sistani-aligned groups opposed the heavy-handed tactics used by Iranian-backed militias against demonstrators.⁷⁶³

Saraya al-Salam, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, has similarly clashed with Iranian-backed groups like Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah, particularly in 2019 in Basra and later in Baghdad.⁷⁶⁴ Saraya al-Salam's strong rhetoric against Iranian influence reflects the complex Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus within non-state armed groups. Sadr, who previously leveraged Iranian support during the 2003–2007 civil war to secure government positions, has shifted his movement's discourse to an anti-Iran stance, capitalising on widespread dissatisfaction with Iranian interference.

In 2024, Prime Minister al-Sudani made significant efforts to balance relations with both the US and Iran. During visits to Washington, he strengthened ties with President Biden, focusing on security and economic cooperation, and reiterated that the PMF would adhere to their official role despite some groups misusing their name.⁷⁶⁵ However, he also faced continued retaliatory attacks by PMF Iranian-backed militias following the October 7, 2023 Israel-Hamas war and he remains unable to adopt a fully anti-Iranian stance, as Iraq could not sustain open conflict with Iran.

This situation illustrates the complex self-other nexus described earlier: while Iraq cannot be considered fully aligned with Iran, its security framework remains deeply penetrated by the Iranian other, placing Iraq in a challenging position.

⁷⁶² Hamdi Malik, "Sistani vs. the Militias: The Future of Iraqi Sovereignty", *The Frontier Post*, August 13, 2020, <https://thefrontierpost.com/sistani-vs-the-militias-the-future-of-iraqi-sovereignty/>. Accessed December 2024.

⁷⁶³ John Davison and Ahmed Aboulenein, "Exclusive: Iran-backed militias deployed snipers in Iraq protests - sources," *Reuters*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-iran-militias-exclusiv-idUSKBN1WW0B4>. Accessed December 2024.

⁷⁶⁴ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 48.

⁷⁶⁵ *Asharq Al-Awsat*, "Al-Sudani Rejects Diverting the Path of the 'Popular Mobilization Forces'".

5.2.2. The Military Field Encompassing All Other Fields

I argue that the self-other nexus involving non-state armed groups – marked by Iran’s penetration and Iraq’s dependence on, yet partial resistance to, the Iranian other – has led the post-2003 Iraqi military sphere to increasingly dominate other societal fields, including political, social, religious and economic domains. In the following paragraphs, I shall provide a theoretical background on the concept of ‘field’ and present examples of ongoing post-2003 instability, demonstrating how this has allowed the military field to progressively absorb these other fields.

As a space of competition and struggle, the field is the sociological situs where “potential and active forces”⁷⁶⁶ compete for the capital – the resource that actors vie for – which defines the field and, if acquired, provides a competitive advantage.⁷⁶⁷ Rather than interlinking with other fields, which is an ordinary field’s feature,⁷⁶⁸ the post-2003 military field has subsumed all relevant others, becoming a broader field that encompasses them. In essence, it has ‘absorbed’ these fields, making military capital the key resource to acquire for gaining leverage in any other domain.

Militia violence has been adopted to achieve various objectives across different fields, with military capabilities representing the capital to acquire in order to, for instance, secure a position in the Iraqi government – field of national politics; advancing within the spectrum of Shia parties – field of Shia politics; dealing with public protests – field of domestic challenges; or navigating international conflicts. This has happened since 2003, with Iranian military support playing a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of these struggles.

The Iraqi religious field, where the competition for the dominant Shia school of religious thought takes place, is one in which Sistani wields normalising Power, with his school of thought embodying a regime of truth. However, clashes between Sistani-

⁷⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 101.

⁷⁶⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press & Basil Blackwell, 1991), 24.

⁷⁶⁸ David Swartz, *Culture and Power. The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 128.

aligned militias and Iranian-backed ones around the holy sites of Najaf and Karbala reflect the broader Iranian struggle for control over these significant religious centres. Although it cannot be definitively argued that Iranian-backed militias have succeeded in extending Iranian influence into the religious sphere, these conflicts are highly indicative of Iran's attempts in that direction.

Since 2014, PMF Iranian-backed militias have developed an organisational infrastructure that allows them to maintain independent relations with other PMF factions, establish local governance and also engage in various legal and illegal economic activities. As a result, militia violence has become a form of capital, enabling these groups to gain advantages in both the local political and economic fields.

PMF economic activities, for instance, range from legal investments to extortion, smuggling and informal taxes, with border crossings and ports being particularly lucrative sources.⁷⁶⁹ Iranian-backed militias play a significant role in the shadow economy, but the fight over these lucrative sources also involves local actors, politicians and other security actors, all deploying military violence to achieve an advantage.⁷⁷⁰

Iranian-backed militias in Mosul, for instance, exert significant control over the large-scale scrap metal trade and the toll collection from trucks traveling between Erbil and Mosul.⁷⁷¹ Engaging with local criminals and economic actors, they exploit state infrastructures to maintain this control. In Tuz Khurmatu, PMU-backed Turkmen mafias and Iranian-backed militias manage oil smuggling networks that reach into the Kurdistan region.⁷⁷²

The military field's absorption of other critical fields indicates that Iraq has remained in a state of constant instability since 2003. Given Iran's ultimate interest in

⁷⁶⁹ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Boundary Disputes," *Diwan*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 26 September 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79875?lang=en>.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; Omar Sirri, "Seeing the Political in Baghdad's Shopping Malls", *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 9 January 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/09/seeing-the-political-in-baghdads-shopping-malls/>, accessed December 2024; and Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 51–53.

⁷⁷¹ John Davidson, "Exclusive: Iran-Backed Groups Corner Iraq's Postwar Scrap Metal Market – Sources", *Reuters*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-militias-exclusive/exclusive-iran-backed-groups-corner-iraqs-postwar-scrap-metal-market-sources-idUSKCN1Q20R5>. Accessed December 2024.

⁷⁷² Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq": 4–5.

maintaining Iraq's dependency, this persistent instability is both a consequence of Iran's success in achieving its goals and a condition that continues to secure Iran's strategic objectives.

5.3. Core-Constructs of State's Collective Identity in Post-2003 Iraqi Non-State Armed Groups: Power, Myth & Security

The focus of this section will be an analysis of what I consider the core constructs of a state's collective identity: Power, Myth, and Security. As conceptualised in my model, these three main cores are shaped by the self-other nexus. Following the analysis of how the PMF as representative of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups has been constructed through Iraq's relationship with the relevant other, Iran, and how this relationship has resulted in Iran's penetration into the Iraq's security framework and the military field encompassing all other relevant fields, I shall examine how this self-other relationship has forged the main constructs of post-2003 Iraqi political identity.

This section will address the second sub-question of this chapter – how to describe the Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups in the post-regime environment – while also providing a comprehensive response to the question of self-construction through the other. After analysing each of the constructs, I will present a comprehensive argument on the intersection of the three – the interrelation of symbolic capital/power, resonance and violence (what I call the Symbolic Cluster) – in the following section.

This will provide the necessary elements to address the central research question of this study within this specific empirical site of observation: how Shia commonality has influenced post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran. In the final section of this chapter, dedicated to post-2003 inter-state relations between Iraq and Iran, I will synthesise the findings from the analysis of religious and political authorities to offer a comprehensive argument on these inter-state relations.

5.3.1. Power: Normalisation of Iranian-backed Militias' Repressive Power

In the post-2003 Iraqi military field which, as analysed in the previous section, encompasses all other relevant fields, PMF Iranian-backed militias have been in an

advantaged position. This is true for various reasons: backed by the Iranian patron, they are the most powerful in terms of numbers and military capabilities; as hybrid actors, they are present in the Iraqi Parliament despite the Iraqi Constitution forbidding this; and they hold dominant high-ranking positions within the PMC which oversees the whole PMF.

However, they have not acquired symbolic Power, either within the PMF and the Iraqi military field, or within Iraqi society.

Iranian-backed militias do not hold symbolic Power within the PMF and the Iraqi military field as they have not acquired the ability to “make people see and believe”⁷⁷³ their own “vision of the world”,⁷⁷⁴ and “confirming or transforming [such a] vision of the world”⁷⁷⁵ for others. They have not dictated their symbolic “principles of vision and division”,⁷⁷⁶ presenting their “action on the world”⁷⁷⁷ as legitimate and necessary. The violence that they have exercised is not symbolic, meaning that is not “that of trust, obligation”,⁷⁷⁸ which corresponds to “the most economical mode of domination because it best corresponds to the economy of the system”.⁷⁷⁹

Their ideological outlook – following Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei – and their ultimate aim, which coincides with that of the Iranian state to keep Iraq in a dependent position, along with their day-to-day interests grounded in the Iraqi context, are not shared by the other PMF militias or the various state and non-state actors that constitute Iraq’s security framework. In fact, each PMF militia has its own vision for Iraq, its own interests, as well as its own military priorities and operational tactics.

However, it would be inaccurate to define the Power and violence exercised by Iranian-backed PMF militias as repressive. Repressive Power and repressive violence occur when there is “a massive and primal condition of domination”⁷⁸⁰ and a social

⁷⁷³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 170.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 127.

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 142.

hierarchy characterised by “a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other”.⁷⁸¹

A fully-fledged definition of repressive Power and violence does not accurately describe the Power dynamics characterising Iranian-backed militias within the PMF and the Iraqi military field. The Iraqi security framework has, in fact, engaged with these militias in a dynamic of constant bargaining and accommodation, negotiation and transaction.

I would argue that in the case of the PMF and the post-2003 Iraqi military field, one witnesses a peculiar articulation of repressive Power and violence: one which is normalised in its repressive features. Iranian-backed militias tend to have the upper-hand in this competition as they have major military capabilities. However, the continuous negotiation and bargaining from the side of the other PMF militias or state actors, even when the interests collide and outright conflict breaks out, demonstrate how repressive Power is normalised in its repressive modalities.

The PMF’s illegal economic activities exemplify these dynamics. For instance, in the toll collection from trucks transporting scrap metal between Erbil and Mosul, PMF militias interact with other PMF factions and local criminals who, through negotiation and bargaining, also profit from this trade. The same applies to smuggling networks for drugs and other goods. Border crossings and ports, where these illegal trades are particularly lucrative, are patrolled by the Iraqi military and formal security services. Together with Iranian-backed PMF militias, criminal organisations, other PMF militias, and stakeholders from different political parties, they negotiate and at times compete to secure their share of economic benefits.⁷⁸²

5.3.2. Myth: Iranian Co-Optation & Iraqi Resistance in a Context of Dependence

This section examines the second core construct of a state’s collective identity as conceptualised in my model: Myth, defined as any culturally-embedded notion and

⁷⁸¹ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 142.

⁷⁸² al-Qarawee, “Boundary Disputes”; Omar Sirri, “Seeing the Political in Baghdad’s Shopping Malls”; and Haddad, “Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units”, 51–53.

trend which is imbued with a symbolic repertoire. In the following sub-sections, I will explore three significant Myths present within the PMF: Iranian Shia imperialist projection into the international arena; the shrine protection narrative; and the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces. For each of these Myths, I shall identify the PMF militias that promote them, discuss the pre-existing elements and provide examples of the symbolic materials that embody them.

The PMF's Myth-spectrum has largely been co-opted to serve Iran's strategic objective of keeping Iraq in a dependent position. The first Myth discussed, that is – the Iranian Shia imperialist projection into the international arena, – is exogenous, originating from Iran's state collective identity. However, due to Iran's deep penetration into Iraq's security framework and the influence of Iranian-backed militias within the PMF, this Myth has become central to the identity of post-2003 Iraqi militias, influencing and merging with the other two key Myths: the shrine protection narrative and the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces.

However, a closer examination of the other two Myths reveals an additional layer of complexity inherent in the self-other nexus dynamic previously described. While Iran has exerted significant influence, the Iraqi self has not been entirely subordinated to the Iranian other. The shrine protection narrative, as articulated by Sistani-aligned militias, and the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces, particularly against Iran, promoted by Saraya al-Salam, represent Iraqi efforts to resist Iranian dominance.

Yet, two crucial points must be acknowledged: while Sistani-aligned militias resist Iranian-backed factions attempting to expand influence in Najaf and Karbala, they are militarily weaker. Moreover, Saraya al-Salam's fight against Iranian-backed militias, despite its promotion of the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces, can be seen as a political manoeuvre, given Moqtada al-Sadr's previous reliance on Iranian military support. This apparent contradiction underscores the deep penetration of Iran into Iraq's security framework and the resulting instability, which highlights Iraq's continued dependence on Iran.

5.3.2.1. Iranian Shia Imperialist Projection into the International Arena

The Iranian Shia imperialist projection into the international arena is exogenous, constituting a Myth rooted in Iran's state collective identity. However, given Iran's penetration into Iraq's security framework and the significant influence exerted by Iranian-led militias within the PMF, I argue that this Myth has become the most dominant within the PMF Myth-spectrum. As I will discuss in the following subsections, this Myth has even permeated the other two Myths: the shrine protection narrative and the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces.

This Myth stems from the ideology of exporting the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which is imbued with an Iranian imperialist self-perception. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a general overview of both of these elements.

The ideology of exporting the 1979 Revolution is grounded in the belief that Iran has a religious and political duty to spread its revolutionary principles beyond its borders, especially to other Muslim-majority countries.⁷⁸³ With the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini was brought to the forefront, with his political and religious doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih* (the rule of the jurispudent) shaping Iranian governance to this day. According to the *velayat-e-faqih* doctrine, a senior Islamic cleric, or *faqih*, has both religious and political authority over the state, acting as the guardian of Islamic law.⁷⁸⁴ The Iranian Supreme Leader is the head of the state and embodies this figure.⁷⁸⁵ The ideology of exporting the revolution aims to unite the Muslim world under Khomeini's vision, overthrowing secular, Western-influenced, or generally non-Shia governments, and replacing them with political systems aligned with Shia Islam.⁷⁸⁶

Since the 1980s, the exportation of the Iranian revolution has been pursued not through direct warfare, but through providing military assistance to Shia groups and

⁷⁸³ Abrahamian, Ervand. *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 45–58.

⁷⁸⁴ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih)*, trans. Hamid Algar (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 1970), 27–35

⁷⁸⁵ Hamid Mavani, *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini* (London: Routledge, 2013), 98–102.

⁷⁸⁶ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 210–225.

movements, thereby enabling them to challenge their governments and advance Iran's ideological and strategic objectives.⁷⁸⁷

In the international context where Iran promotes and supports Shia-aligned groups, the projection of power with imperialist undertones is an essential component. Although this is not explicitly stated by current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who frequently advocates for supporting "resistance" groups such as those in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria,⁷⁸⁸ Iran's broader revolutionary mission is shaped to position Iran dominantly, reflecting an imperial posture.

By positioning itself as a protector of Shia Islam and a counterbalance to Western and Sunni influences, the contemporary Iranian regime draws on its imperial legacy, which dates back to the 6th century BC (with the Achaemenid Empire, 550–330 BC), and has a long history of sophisticated governance systems, extensive trade networks, regional dominance and cultural influence.⁷⁸⁹

The Myth of Iranian Shia imperialist projection into the international arena is exemplified in the PMF Iranian-backed militias' use of images that hold a strong symbolic resonance. These symbols are not only emblematic of the militias' allegiance to Iran and their religious loyalty to the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, but they also convey a broader ideological narrative that ties back to Iran's historical and contemporary aspirations for regional dominance.

One of the most potent symbols employed by these militias is Zulfiqar, the legendary sword of Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and the first Imam in Shia Islam. The image of Zulfiqar – depicted as a bifurcated or double-pointed sword, symbolising principles of justice, courage, and the defence of Shia Islam – is

⁷⁸⁷ Afshon P. Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 85–110. Iran has supported the Shia Islamist party Hezbollah in Lebanon since its foundation in the early 1980s during the Lebanese civil war. (Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 25–50). Additionally, Iran has intervened in the Syrian civil war by backing both Kataib Hezbollah and the Assad regime against Western and Sunni groups aiming to overthrow Assad. (Phillip Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus 138 (2015): 10–25). These are just a few examples among many of Iran's broader strategy to extend its influence across the region.

⁷⁸⁸ Niloufar Goudarzi, "Khamenei Praises Proxy Groups as 'Crucial' for Iran", *Iran International*, June 29, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202406291462>. Accessed January 2025.

⁷⁸⁹ Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 15–40.

prominently featured in logos, flags, and emblems, serving as a rallying point for Iranian-backed PMF militias.⁷⁹⁰

The portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideological slogans are also often used in PMF propaganda.⁷⁹¹ The flag of the Lebanese Shia Islamist party Hezbollah is another symbol frequently used by Iranian-backed PMF factions, despite Hezbollah being a distinct Lebanese entity, separate from Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah, which was formed in 2003 following the US invasion.⁷⁹² The Hezbollah flag's raised fist holding a rifle alongside a Quranic verse, symbolising resistance against Western and Zionist oppression, is adopted by many Iranian-backed PMF militias, underscoring their perceived role in Iraq and within the Iraqi PMF as part of a broader struggle. Shia communities are perceived as one and led by Iran, and so are their enemies. This is in essence the basic foundation of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance', which is a crucial component of Iranian political discourse rather than a formal alliance or treaty-based coalition.⁷⁹³

5.3.2.2. Shrine Protection Narrative

The shrine protection narrative Myth was thoroughly analysed in the previous chapter on political authority, focusing on PMF militiamen as hybrid actors in Iraqi politics. To avoid repetition, I will add a new argument here. This Myth, as discussed, aligns with the strategies of Iranian-backed militias, who have integrated it into the broader Iraqi Myth-spectrum to serve their interests. However, this is not the only interpretation; Sistani-aligned units also promote this Myth, though their version is distinctly different, setting their approach apart from Iranian-backed factions.

The shrine protection narrative Myth, as promoted by PMF Iranian-backed militias, represents an intensely Shia exclusivist and belligerent political trend, drawing

⁷⁹⁰ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Sword of Ali: Ancient Symbolism and Modern Ideology", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 9, no. 4 (2016): 411–427.

⁷⁹¹ *LBC International*, "Khamenei affirms Iran's support for Islamic resistance factions", March 20, 2024, <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/middleeastnews/761234/khamenei-affirms-irans-support-for-islamic-resistance-factions/en>. Accessed January 2025.

⁷⁹² Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011), 60–85.

⁷⁹³ Mahan Abedin, "Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' Strategy in the Middle East", *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 1 (2019): 79–87.

heavily on rich Shia religious symbolism. Historical grievances are articulated in an aggressive manner, amplifying the sense of injustice and yet avoiding the Shia victimhood often reported.⁷⁹⁴

This Myth has a transnational scope: Shia shrines are not confined to Iraq, and the martyrs evoked, the Shia symbolism it draws upon, and the Shia population this narrative seeks to protect, extend across the entire Shia world. For Iranian-backed militias, in fact, the shrine protection narrative serves as an extension of the previously described Myth: the Iranian Shia imperialist projection into the international arena. Within this narrative, defending the holy shrines in Iraq is part of a broader struggle, perceiving Shia communities as a unified entity led by Iran, which positions itself as the ultimate protector of Shia Islam with a religious and moral duty to export its revolutionary principles.

While this articulation of the shrine protection remains the most dominant in post-2003 Iraq, largely due to the greater influence and power of Iranian-backed groups, this Myth has also been advocated by Sistani-aligned militias, albeit with a different interpretation.

Compared to the Shia exclusivist version discussed earlier, Sistani's militias approach the shrine protection narrative with a more inclusive perspective, allowing for the participation of armed groups with different affiliations. This inclusivity is evident in the formation of the PMF, which, following Sistani's fatwa, incorporated groups from various ethno-sectarian backgrounds.⁷⁹⁵ Additionally, the transnational dimension of the narrative is interpreted differently, focusing solely on religious allegiance and the defence of Islam against "terrorists" (as Sistani and his representatives refer to ISIS fighters), rather than on broader geopolitical concerns.⁷⁹⁶

It is essential to consider the version put forth by Sistani-aligned factions, as the various clashes between Sistani-aligned units and Iranian-backed militias are highly indicative of the dynamics within the post-2003 Iraqi security framework. Numerous confrontations have occurred between Sistani-aligned militias and Iranian-

⁷⁹⁴ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), 151–153, 175–177.

⁷⁹⁵ Mansour and Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", 14–16.

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

backed groups around the holy sites of Najaf and Karbala, reflecting the broader Iranian struggle for control over these significant religious centres.

Although Iranian-backed militias remain more powerful, often holding significant sway due to their military capabilities, they have not fully succeeded in extending Iranian influence into the religious sphere. The persistent resistance from Sistani-aligned militias has played a crucial role in limiting Iran's influence, despite the challenges posed by the superior power of Iranian-backed groups.

5.3.2.3. Shia Iraqist Fight Against Foreign Forces

Like the shrine protection narrative Myth, the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces was discussed in the previous chapter on political authority and, also, in the preceding one on religious authority (where it was phrased slightly differently to address distinct elements: 'united Iraq against foreign forces & religious authority as social leadership'). This Myth is strongly centred around 'anti-occupier' rhetoric and has deep historical antecedents which have permeated into the Iraqi collective imaginary, acquiring strong symbolic resonance, just as the anti-British fight in the 1920s and 1930s. In the chapter on religious authority, I provided a detailed historical review.

The Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces Myth within the PMF, while representing a form of resistance against Iranian penetration, also exemplifies a significant contradiction indicative of the self-other nexus between Iraq and Iran. This contradiction underscores how the Iraqi self, while resisting, remains deeply entangled in and dependent on the Iranian other. Saraya al-Salam, Moqtada al-Sadr's militia, serves as a key example. Although Sadr now vehemently opposes Iranian influence, promoting this Myth as a form of resistance, his past reliance on Iranian support for his previous militia, the Mahdi army, reveals the populist political manoeuvre behind this anti-Iranian rhetoric. This apparent contradiction is reflective of the broader dynamic where Iraqi factions simultaneously resist and remain dependent on Iran.

The instability resulting from clashes between Saraya al-Salam and PMF Iranian-backed militias ultimately benefits Iran by keeping Iraq weaker and dependent. Further details on the case of Sadr and his militias will be provided in the following paragraphs.

Moqtada al-Sadr's first militia in post-2003 Iraq was the Mahdi army, which benefited from Iranian support during the 2003–2007 civil war.⁷⁹⁷ During this period, Sadr maintained ties with Iranian Commander Qassem Soleimani, though he has never fully clarified the nature of their relationship.⁷⁹⁸ Sadr's initial political stance was marked by pronounced Shia exclusiveness, with the Mahdi army allegedly committing serious sectarian crimes against non-Shia Iraqi communities.⁷⁹⁹

When the Mahdi army was still active, the Shia Iraqist fight against foreign forces Myth, as articulated by the Sadrist movement, was primarily directed against US forces occupying the country. "The United States has succeeded in making us enemies," Sadr declared in 2006. "We shall never be oppressed. Do everything to resist the American idea called democracy".⁸⁰⁰

At the time, his resistance goals aligned with those of Iranian-backed militias, which were also fighting US troops as part of their broader anti-Western struggle and their principal aim in Iraq of establishing a Shia-aligned government during the 2005 national elections. When the Shia coalition won the 2005 elections, Sadr's movement secured several parliamentary positions leveraging on the help received by Iran in the post-invasion struggle.

As a populist political leader, Sadr has shifted from his earlier stance of pronounced Shia exclusiveness at the expense of other Iraqi ethno-sectarian communities and, since the pre-2018 parliamentary elections campaign, he has adopted a nationalist, cross-sectarian and anti-Iran political discourse.⁸⁰¹ Consistent with Sadr's new stance, Saraya al-Salam is a Shia nationalistic, disciplined, state-aligned auxiliary force, articulating strong nationalism against Iran due to its deep penetration into the Iraqi security forces. Because of Sadr's rejection of Iranian-backed militias within the PMF, he sometimes even claims that Saraya al-Salam is not part of the PMF.⁸⁰²

⁷⁹⁷ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 123–125.

⁷⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126–127.

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128–130

⁸⁰⁰ Nir Rosen, "Anatomy of a Civil War. Iraq's Descent into Chaos", *Boston Review*, November 8, 2006, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/rosen-anatomy-civil-war/>. Accessed July 2022.

⁸⁰¹ Mansour and van den Toorn, "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?".

⁸⁰² Mansour and Jabar, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*, 15.

Saraya al-Salam is in all ways weaker than the well-funded and better-armed Iranian-backed militias, however. Although the faction's leaders claim Saraya al-Salam has the virtual capacity to build a 100,000-strong army, they note that their actual capacity is constrained not by the number of volunteers but by a lack of resources – specifically money and military hardware.⁸⁰³ In essence, Sadr's militia was more powerful when it could rely on Iranian help.

This tension has led to violent confrontations, such as the clashes in Basra in August 2022, where Saraya al-Salam engaged in deadly skirmishes with the Iranian-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq,⁸⁰⁴ and similar clashes a few weeks earlier in Baghdad with other Iran-aligned groups.⁸⁰⁵ During these conflicts, Sadrists stormed the headquarters of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, setting the building on fire and burning images of Qassem Soleimani, a significant symbolic act of defiance against Iranian influence.⁸⁰⁶

5.3.3. Security: Symbolic Violence in IR & Iran's Isolation as an Institution

In this section, I shall analyse how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, as it pertains to the agency cluster under examination, namely post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups as exemplified by the PMF, has shaped what I consider as the third core-construct of a state's collective identity: Security.

In the previous chapter on political authority, I analysed in detail how the PMF Iranian-backed militias have led to the Iraqi state's fragmentation of the monopoly of violence. To avoid repetition, in the following sub-sections, I shall focus on the international arena.

In the first sub-section, I shall explore the concept of symbolic violence as it is projected in the international arena. Although symbolic violence is traditionally associated with sociology and domestic contexts, I argue that it offers valuable theoretical insights for the field of International Relations (IR) as well. Using the

⁸⁰³ Mansour and Jabar, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*, 14.

⁸⁰⁴ Azhar Al-Rubaie and Alex MacDonald, "Iraq: Four killed in Basra clashes between Sadr and Iran-backed groups", *Middle East Eye*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-iran-backed-asaib-ahl-haq-closes-offices-basra-violence>. Accessed January 2025.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

empirical example of the PMF's fight against ISIS, I shall delineate its main theoretical components.

In the second sub-section, I shall discuss how Iran's isolation from the international community has become an institution – a collective understanding of how the international system functions, based on shared perceptions and interests among states – and examine the implications of this for the Iraqi state.

5.3.3.1. Symbolic Violence in IR & the Case of the Fight Against ISIS

In the following paragraphs, I shall first demonstrate how the distinctive form of violence employed by PMF Iranian-backed militias against the Iraqi state, its population, and other PMF militias – violence that has been normalised in its repressive characteristics – took on a symbolic dimension when extended to the international stage during the campaign against ISIS. Using this conflict as an example, I shall thus explore how the concept of symbolic violence, typically applied within sociology to domestic settings, can be adapted to the field of IR by drawing on the following theoretical concepts: bio-power;⁸⁰⁷ *homo sacer*; the zone of indistinction; and cultural violence.

Sociological literature typically views symbolic violence as a concept confined to the dynamics within a single society and its domestic politics.⁸⁰⁸ I contend, however, that it can also be projected in the international arena. In the IR context, the enactment of symbolic violence does not necessitate acquiring symbolic power in the political or military fields, as it is exercised on the international field.

The Power and violence that have been exerted in the post-2003 Iraqi military field is normalised repressive violence, as described in the section on Power. When this violence, however, was projected into IR during the fight against ISIS, it acquired symbolic features. It became “the most economical mode of domination because it best corresponds to the economy of the system”.⁸⁰⁹ In this conflict, the involvement of

⁸⁰⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, Vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 136–138.

⁸⁰⁸ See for instance: Samuel Chris, “Symbolic Violence and Collective Identity: Pierre Bourdieu and the Ethics of Resistance”, *Social Movement Studies* 12, no. 4 (2013): 397–413.

⁸⁰⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 127.

Iranian-backed militias within the PMF was seen as essential to achieving Iraq's military objectives. Their ideological and operational approaches were perceived as "right – or at least not wrong",⁸¹⁰ as their military capabilities were deemed necessary to secure victory.

During the fight against ISIS, in fact, the whole PMF popularity including its Iranian factions enjoyed considerable popularity, even among the Iraqi populace.⁸¹¹ As recently as 2024, a decade after the PMF's establishment and the reclamation of major territories from ISIS, Iraqi leaders condemned a US airstrike in the Musayib in Babil Province which killed four members of the Iranian-backed militia Kataib Hezbollah.⁸¹²

Major General Yehia Rasool, a spokesperson for Iraqi Prime Minister al-Sudani, described the strike as "a heinous crime and blatant aggression."⁸¹³ He further stated that the attack "can significantly undermine all efforts, mechanisms, and frameworks of the international effort to combat the Islamic State".⁸¹⁴ ISIS, in fact, is still present in some pocket areas and the threat of resurgence remains.⁸¹⁵

These declarations can be interpreted as reflecting Iran's penetration into the Iraqi security framework and, ultimately, the Iraqi state. As argued in the previous section on Power, Iraqi leaders find themselves in a challenging position, as the presence of Iranian-led factions within their primary military force complicates Iraq's diplomatic relations with the US.⁸¹⁶ However, it is undeniable that Iranian-led military efforts have been perceived as essential to fight ISIS and other international conflicts Iraq may face. It is, in fact, precisely this perception which renders Iranian-led violence symbolic, placing Iraq in a difficult geopolitical position. The fact that this stems from

⁸¹⁰ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291.

⁸¹¹ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 41.

⁸¹² NY1, "Iraq condemns deadly U.S. strike on Iran-backed militia", July 31, 2024, <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/international/2024/07/31/us-strike-iraq-iran-kataib-hezbollah>. Accessed January 2025.

⁸¹³ *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸¹⁵ Selman Almohamad, "Not a Storm in a Teacup: The Islamic State after the Caliphate," *German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) Focus Middle East*, No. 3, 2021, <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/not-a-storm-in-a-teacup-the-islamic-state-after-the-caliphate>, [accessed July 7, 2022].

⁸¹⁶ *Baghdad Today*, "Sudani: Iraq Has Distinguished Relations with Iran and the US", April 17, 2024, translation from Arabic of the author, <https://baghdadtoday.news/247338-السوداني-العراق-يمتلك-علاقات-متميزة-مع-إيران-وأمریکا.html>.

Iran's deep penetration into the Iraqi state and security forces does not negate this reality.

I argue that symbolic violence as projected in the international area is featured with some distinctive elements: bio-power (or bio-politics); *homo sacer*; zone of indistinction; and cultural violence. In the following lines I shall present each of them.

Symbolic violence in IR can be defined as violence against other states or self-proclaimed entities like ISIS, which is perceived by those who perpetrate it as the expression of a needed established order and hierarchy in the international community. This violence is one constructed around the concept of bio-politics, which emphasises the violence against those classified as a threat to the life and the well-being of a governed society.⁸¹⁷ Within this framework, war is framed as essential for the "existence of everyone",⁸¹⁸ positioning it as a means to protect and sustain life among one state's citizens.

"Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilised for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital."⁸¹⁹

When Sistani issued his June 2014 fatwa against ISIS, which led to the establishment of the PMF, he defined "bearing arms and fighting terrorists", "defending their country and their people and their holy places", as a "holy purpose".⁸²⁰ "He who sacrifices for the cause of defending his country and his family and his honour will be a martyr",⁸²¹ he added. In 2014 and during the years of the fight to regain territories against ISIS, the PMF fighters were mythologised.⁸²² The lore surrounding the PMF was built upon the image of idealised, selfless fighters who embodied the group's vital role to defend the existence of Iraq, its citizens and all those who were threatened by

⁸¹⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 136–138.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁰ Raheem Salman and Isra Al-Rubeii, "Iraq's Top Shiite Cleric Issues Call to Fight Jihadist Rebels", *Reuters*, June 13, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iraq-s-top-shi-ite-cleric-issues-call-to-fight-jihadist-rebels-idUSKBN0EO0AY/.reuters.com>. Accessed February 2025.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*

⁸²² Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 38.

the regional menace that ISIS constituted.⁸²³ They were truly perceived as martyrs who were fighting for a holy cause.⁸²⁴

Sistani not only presented war as a necessary means for Iraq's survival, but by labelling ISIS fighters as "terrorists", and their opponents as "martyrs", he also drew a moral, religious and existential line between the Iraqi citizens called to arms and ISIS fighters, framing the latter as fundamentally different and unworthy of the same moral or religious standing. ISIS members were rendered as *homo sacer*: human beings whose lives were stripped of legal protection and societal value, existing outside the bounds of both divine and human law.⁸²⁵ Ending their lives was not just permissible but was presented as a duty imbued with religious significance.

I argue that, when symbolic violence is projected in the international arena and war is waged "on behalf of the existence of everyone", as in the fight against ISIS, the enemy becomes perceived as *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* are excluded from civil rights and legal protections, making their lives expendable within the socio-political order. In the context of war, this dehumanisation justifies extreme measures and acts of violence against those labelled as threats to the collective well-being. The international arena that is inhabited by the *homo sacer* – where war is deemed necessary for the community's preservation – is a zone of indistinction: the *situs* that embodies the "sovereign state of exception", a threshold in which the laws that regulate the domestic environment are suspended, but rules still exist.⁸²⁶ In this space, domestic legal norms are set aside to address perceived existential threats; actions typically deemed unlawful become permissible and, in fact, even lawfully permitted. "The sovereign exception [...] is the presupposition of the juridical reference in the form of its suspension".⁸²⁷

⁸²³ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 38.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8–39.

⁸²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 83.

⁸²⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1979), 19.

⁸²⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 21.

To make violence against other states or self-proclaimed entities like ISIS “look and even feel right – or at least not wrong”⁸²⁸ – the construction, thus, of symbolic violence – Power builds on the pre-existing violence within society. It draws upon what I refer to as its ‘cultural’ manifestation, which is deeply ingrained in the minds of individuals.

Cultural violence refers to any element of culture unique to a community that can be used to legitimise violence against other states based on ideology, religion, national interests at a given moment, and other factors.⁸²⁹ It serves as the legitimising force for both direct violence, where an actor enacts violence with societal approval,⁸³⁰ and structural violence, which is rooted in social structures like social injustice.⁸³¹

This process can sometimes unfold over an extended period,⁸³² though it is not always the case. Rapid changes can occur due to historical events that quickly alter the social environment. For example, when an enemy engages in actions such as declaring war or violating a state’s sovereignty, it forces a sudden adaptation. Such situations can result in a collective trauma.⁸³³ Traumas can lead to the rapid development of aggressive narratives against the enemy, which, in a relatively short period, can transform into symbolic violence.

In the case of ISIS, I would argue that both a gradual construction of symbolic violence and the experience of collective trauma occurred. By the time Sistani issued his June 2014 fatwa, ISIS had already occupied key Iraqi cities, including Mosul, Tikrit, and Fallujah,⁸³⁴ leaving the Iraqi military seemingly incapable of confronting this formidable threat. Thus, ISIS represented a profound trauma for Iraq.

However, this situation did not arise in a vacuum. The civil war from 2003 to 2007 had already deeply scarred the country, and Iranian militias had maintained a presence in Iraq ever since. The reliance on militias and the corruption fostered by Iranian patronage had become entrenched practices within Iraqi political and military

⁸²⁸ Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” 291.

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸³⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸³¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸³² *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸³⁴ Raheem Salman and Isra al-Rubei, “Iraq’s top Shiite cleric issues call to fight jihadist rebels”, *Reuters*, June 13, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-cleric-idUSKBN0EO0AY20140613>. Accessed February 2025.

environments. For the Iraqi population, its political and military elites, and its religious authorities, including Sistani and his clerical circle, the cultural foundations for constructing symbolic violence against ISIS had existed since the immediate aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

The shift in Sistani's discourse, as reflected in his fatwa, should be viewed in this context: it was both an acknowledgment of post-2003 Iraqi reality and a response to a collective trauma. Although Sistani had consistently opposed the use of militias and championed Iraqi independence from foreign influence, he recognised the necessity of issuing the fatwa, fully aware that it would empower Iranian-led militias in Iraq.

5.3.3.2. Iran's Isolation from the International Community as an Institution

In the following paragraphs, I shall demonstrate my argument that Iran's isolation from the international community constitutes a contemporary institution – a collective understanding of how the international system functions, shaped by shared perceptions and interests among states that have become established over time.

Following a theoretical overview of the concept of institution, I shall articulate how Iran's revolutionary ideology results in destabilising effects, and how the latter have led to shared perceptions of Iran as a persistent regional and global threat and, consequently, to the institutionalisation of its isolation from the international community. Given Iran's significant influence within the PMF and the Iraqi security framework, I shall also argue how Iranian isolation has crucial implications on Iraq's ability to play a significant role on the global stage.

An institution is defined as a “relatively stable set or ‘structure’ of [states'] identities and interests”.⁸³⁵ The identities of states form the basis of their interests, which are shaped through the intersubjective construction of meanings attributed to situations they encounter.⁸³⁶ States interpret situations based on established

⁸³⁵ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425, 399.

⁸³⁶ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It”, 398.

institutions, which provide a stable framework to guide their actions in the international arena.⁸³⁷

Institutions are collective understandings of how the international system works.⁸³⁸ They do not exist independently of the collective knowledge held by state actors. This knowledge is the product of intersubjectively constructed meanings around certain situations, such as a state's actions or its foreign policy. As states share perceptions and construct meanings based on their interests, these shared perceptions become patterned over time, forming a "relatively stable set" of interests.⁸³⁹

This does not mean that "institutions are not real or objective, that they are 'nothing but beliefs'".⁸⁴⁰ As collective knowledge, institutions are experienced as ontological entities that exist "over and beyond the individuals who 'happen to' embody them at the moment".⁸⁴¹

Due to the destabilising effects of Iranian revolutionary ideology since the 1980s, I argue that the shared perception of Iran as a persistent threat to regional stability and global security has led to its isolation from the international community becoming an institution. This perception is driven by the international community's interest in undermining Iranian efforts in the region. By 'international community', I am referring to the US, the European Union (EU), and their allies in the region, particularly Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Notably, Russia and China are not included in this group, as their complicated relations with the other members of the international community often position them as outliers. Russia, more than China, represents a crucial ally of Iran, though this aspect falls outside the scope of this study due to its limited, if not virtually absent, role in Iraq since 2003. In the following paragraphs, I shall explore the details of Iranian revolutionary ideology and the reasons why it has been perceived as destabilising.

⁸³⁷ In some cases, these situations are unprecedented, requiring states to construct new meanings. Herbert Blumer, "The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism," in *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 404.

⁸³⁸ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," 398.

⁸³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴⁰ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 58.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Due to the Iranian strategy of providing military support to Shia groups across various countries, financing militias like Hezbollah and Hamas, pursuing nuclear capabilities, and countering US interests in the Middle East, the international community – particularly the US, the EU, Israel, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies – views Iran as a major source of regional instability. The US has labelled Iran a “leading sponsor of terrorism”,⁸⁴² and Israeli leaders have cited Iran as the greatest threat to regional and global security,⁸⁴³ emphasising concerns over its nuclear ambitions and support for militant groups. The EU has echoed these concerns, particularly regarding Iran’s missile programme and its involvement in conflicts in Syria and Yemen, seeing these actions as violations of international norms and threats to regional stability.⁸⁴⁴

Institutions may or may not be codified in formal rules or norms.⁸⁴⁵ In this case, the perception of Iran’s threat has been institutionalised through formal rules, such as embargoes, and through norms, such as limiting its nuclear capabilities.

The specific historical account of international sanctions on Iran is beyond the scope of this study.⁸⁴⁶ However, to demonstrate that Iran’s isolation has become institutionalised, it is sufficient to note that the first US sanctions were imposed in 1979 following the Islamic Revolution and have continued consistently to the present day. The United Nations and the EU have also implemented numerous resolutions targeting Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs.⁸⁴⁷

⁸⁴² U.S. Department of State, “Department of State Daily Press Briefing - August 5, 2024”, August 5, 2024, <https://video.state.gov/detail/videos/press-briefings/video/6359947293112/departments-of-state-daily-press-briefing---august-5-2024>. Accessed March 2025.

⁸⁴³ Yoav Gallant, “Israel Calls Iran ‘Biggest Threat to World's Future’, Urges US to Counter It”, *Iran International*, June 25, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202406256742>. Accessed March 2025.

⁸⁴⁴ Council of the European Union, “Iran: Council Prolongs EU Restrictive Measures in View of Iran's Military Support for Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine and for Armed Groups and Entities in the Middle East and the Red Sea Region”, *European Council Press Release*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/15/iran-council-prolongs-eu-restrictive-measures-in-view-of-iran-s-military-support-for-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-and-for-armed-groups-and-entities-in-the-middle-east-and-the-red-sea-region/>. Accessed March 2025.

⁸⁴⁵ Wendt, “Anarchy is what...”, 399.

⁸⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15983302>

⁸⁴⁷ The first sanctions were imposed by the US in 1979, following the Islamic Revolution, and have continued consistently to this day. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the EU have adopted various resolutions targeting Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs over the years. In 2012, the EU imposed a comprehensive oil embargo on Iran, banning imports of Iranian crude oil and petroleum products, marking one of the most significant economic pressures on Iran’s economy. In 2015, diplomatic negotiations between newly elected Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the P5+1

Iran's institutionalised isolation has significantly affected Iraq's ability to assert a meaningful role in regional and international contexts. Due to Iran's deep penetration into Iraq's security framework, Iraq's position towards the US and other regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia, has often been ambiguous. Iraq has been caught between attempting to present itself as a neutral mediator and serving as the battleground for Iran's struggles against these actors.

During the fight against ISIS, for instance, Iraq cooperated with the US, which launched Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in 2014 to reclaim territories occupied by ISIS. OIR involved airstrikes, intelligence sharing, and the training and equipping of Iraqi security forces, including the Iraqi army. However, cooperation with the PMF was limited due to the presence of Iranian-backed militias within the PMF, which complicated Iraq's position in its international alliances.

Iraq has also attempted to act as a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Beginning in 2021, Iraq facilitated a series of talks between Iranian and Saudi officials aimed at reducing tensions and improving diplomatic relations between the two regional rivals.⁸⁴⁸ These negotiations were seen as a significant diplomatic achievement for Iraq, showcasing its potential role as a bridge between conflicting powers in the Middle East. The talks focused on regional security issues, including the war in Yemen, and were part of broader efforts to ease hostilities in the region.

countries (the US, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This agreement lifted numerous international sanctions in exchange for Iran agreeing to limit its nuclear program and allow inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, in 2018, US President Donald Trump announced the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and, as part of his "maximum pressure" strategy, re-imposed sanctions targeting Iran's oil, banking, shipping sectors and metal exports, and designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation. Under current US President Biden, efforts have been made to revive the JCPOA, although challenges remain to date. Numerous analysts have emphasised that adopting a different approach toward Iran could be highly beneficial in preventing the escalation of conflicts involving the country. (See for instance: Philippe Droz-Vincent, "L'Iran n'a ni les moyens, ni le souhait d'aller à la confrontation", *Le Monde*, October 9, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/10/09/philippe-droz-vincent-politiste-l-iran-n-a-ni-les-moyens-ni-le-souhait-d-aller-a-la-confrontation_6347367_3232.html. Accessed February 2025). Furthermore, I argue that, given the deterrent nature of nuclear weapons, the characterisation of Iran as an irrational actor unlikely to adhere to the principles of deterrence is largely inaccurate. The imposition of sanctions on Iran aims to limit its status as an international actor, but it is crucial to acknowledge Iran's role as a major regional power. Therefore, it is imperative to seek a common ground that balances international security concerns with Iran's legitimate interests. As this topic lies beyond the scope of this work, no further details will be provided.

⁸⁴⁸ Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraq Has Hosted More Than One Round of Saudi-Iranian Talks: President", *Reuters*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-has-hosted-more-than-one-round-saudi-iranian-talks-president-2021-05-05/>. Accessed March 2025.

However, despite Iraq's efforts, the mediation process did not lead to a lasting resolution, and the talks eventually stalled, reflecting the deep-seated complexities and rivalries in the region.⁸⁴⁹

5.4. The Tying Nexus of the Three Constructs: The Symbolic Cluster

In the previous sections, I have explored how the post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus has shaped the core elements of the Iraqi state's collective identity in relation to non-state armed groups: Power, Myth, and Security. These analyses have been crucial in addressing the first sub-question of this study – how post-2003 Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups, as the 'self', are constructed through the Iranian security and military apparatus, as the relevant 'other' – and the second interrelated sub-question – how to describe the identity of Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups in the post-regime environment.

Before moving on to a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Shia identity on Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations – encompassing an examination of the agency clusters of non-state armed groups, religious authority and political authority, as discussed in the previous chapters – this section will present a cohesive argument on the state's collective identity as it manifests in relation to non-state armed groups, focusing on what the Symbolic Cluster.

According to my model, the Symbolic Cluster serves as the nexus that ties together the three core constructs: Power, Myth, and Security. It represents the central thread running through these constructs and forms the ultimate core of the state's collective identity. This Symbolic Cluster encompasses the interplay between symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence.

Building on the arguments presented in the previous sections, in the following sub-section I shall explore how post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups are both materially dependent on Iran and marked by an unresolved symbolic competition, and how this leads to apparent paradoxes.

⁸⁴⁹ Renad Mansour, "Fragile Agency: Iraq's Potential as an Intermediary for Regional Dialogue", *Chatham House*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/iraq-20-years-insider-reflections-war-and-its-aftermath/fragile-agency-iraqs-potential-0>. Accessed March 2025.

In the sub-section that follows, I shall argue that this unresolved symbolic competition mirrors the broader dynamics within the post-2003 Iraqi Shia political field, and how Iraqi non-state armed groups and Iraqi political authority have formed a distinct social system. This system has increasingly diverged from broader Iraqi society, operating under its own set of norms, rules and values that are not aligned with those of the general Iraqi population and its religious authority.

5.4.1. Dependence on Iran & Unresolved Symbolic Competition

Due to Iran's deep penetration into the Iraqi security framework, post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups – exemplified by the PMF – have become increasingly dependent on Iran. However, their ideological and operational identity remains marked by unresolved symbolic competition, reflecting divergent interests and conflicting visions of what the Iraqi military should embody: its priorities, whose interests it should serve, the means by which these interests should be pursued, and the roles Iraq and Iran should play in the regional and international arenas.

Despite this dependence, the penetration of Iranian influence does not equate to Iranian-backed militias acquiring symbolic capital and power within the PMF or the broader Iraqi security framework. On one side, there is the Iranian vision for Iraq. On the other side, there is a contrasting Iraqi perspective that envisions the Iraqi military as a force of an independent state, guided by national interests and sovereignty. However, this Iraqi perspective is fragmented by internal divisions and competing symbolic visions of what Iraq should represent, preventing a unified symbolic identity from emerging. Sistani-aligned militias and Saraya al-Salam (Moqtada al-Sadr's militias), for instance, hold significantly different views on Iraq's priorities and strategic goals. In contrast, PMF Iranian-backed militias possess a unified symbolic vision rooted in their Iranian identity. They pursue Iranian revolutionary principles, follow the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, and conceive of Shia communities as a unified entity led by Iran. Consequently, they share a consistent symbolic understanding of Iraq's role in the regional and international arenas –one that is fundamentally aligned with and dependent on their Iranian patron.

The unresolved symbolic competition within a framework of material dependence creates significant paradoxes. The normalisation of repressive violence exerted by Iranian-backed militias, as evidenced by the ongoing cycle of bargaining, accommodation, negotiation and transaction between these militias and other PMF factions or the Iraqi army, leads to the paradoxical adoption of violent practices that, although symbolically similar, remain perceived as repressive.

Similarly, while the PMF's Myth-spectrum encompasses the Sistani-aligned narrative of shrine protection and Saraya al-Salam's Shia Iraqist opposition to foreign forces, including Iran, the substantial symbolic material embedded within the Myth of Iranian Shia imperialist projection into the international arena has been pervasive. This influence has shaped the other Myths, with Iraqi PMF units often fighting under the banners of Iranian symbols, such as portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and Hezbollah's flag, thereby aligning themselves with Iran's broader symbolic struggle on the international stage.

The case of the fight against ISIS, where the PMF's violence acquired a symbolic dimension, may seem to contradict this argument but, I argue, it actually aligns with it. In 2014, Iraqi non-state armed groups and the Iraqi army faced an unprecedented territorial threat in the form of ISIS, which they were ill-equipped to confront independently. Under these circumstances, the profound reliance on Iran took on a symbolic dimension: cooperation with Iran was deemed as the viable course of action to overcome the existential threat posed by ISIS.

5.4.2. Iraqi Non-State Armed Groups & Iraqi Political Authority: A Distinct Social System

I argue that the Symbolic Cluster of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups reflects the broader dynamics of the Iraqi Shia political field, characterised by dependence on Iran and unresolved symbolic competition. This cluster also mirrors Iraqi politics in its evolution as a distinct social system. As examined in the previous chapter, Iraqi political authority has become increasingly detached from its popular constituency, operating according to its own set of rules, norms and values, which no longer align with those of broader Iraqi society. A key factor enabling Iraqi political authority to persist in practices that are widely perceived as illegitimate by the Iraqi

people and religious authority has been precisely their militia affiliates. Non-state armed groups, therefore, constitute a critical component of this distinct social system.

According to my model, the core-constructs of Power, Myth and Security with the Symbolic Cluster representing their core-intersection, permeate into social structures. The duality of structure (DS), whereby agency and structure impact on one other, is the dynamic that explains how individuals who have joined the PMF have become integrated into this distinct social system, whose norms and values are not shared by the wider Iraqi society. In the following paragraphs, I shall deconstruct these arguments to provide a full explanation.

Post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups are closely linked to Iraqi political authority, not only because many of their leaders have infiltrated the Iraqi parliament, but also because they serve as militia affiliates of political factions vying for dominance in post-2003 Iraq. Their symbolic understanding of the role and identity of the Iraqi military – its domestic and regional interests, its allies, and the strategies by which these interests should be pursued – is shaped by the political entities they represent. The Iraqi Shia political field has been increasingly penetrated by Iranian influence, a trend mirrored in the Iraqi security framework, where Iranian-backed militias have gained substantial power. The unresolved symbolic competition that characterises Iraqi politics is thus reflected within the PMF. Although the PMF ostensibly operates as a unified military entity, it is composed of disparate groups, each possessing its own distinct symbolic understanding of the Iraqi military's role and purpose.

As discussed in the previous chapter on political authority, the Iraqi Shia parties that have dominated the government since the first national elections in 2005 have evolved into a distinct social system. This system operates by its own set of rules, norms and values, increasingly disconnected from broader Iraqi society. Their standardised practices to achieve governmental power – including militia violence and political corruption, fuelled by reliance on Iranian patronage – lack legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people and religious authority. A key factor enabling Iraqi political authority to persist in these practices, despite widespread popular protests and calls for change, has been the actions of their militia affiliates. Non-state armed groups, therefore, constitute a critical component of this distinct social system, playing a key

role in suppressing dissent on multiple occasions, such as during the October 2019 protests, as detailed in the previous chapter.

In this context, the social properties that emerge from the constructs of Power, Myth and Security, with the Symbolic Cluster at their core intersection, form the foundation of distinct social structures within this system. These structures may not align with the broader Iraqi society but, as social structures, they contribute to a degree of stability over time in the collective identity of post-2003 non-state armed groups and Iraqi political authority. This stability is sustained by the duality of structure (DS), a principle that governs the relationship between structured social properties and agency. According to this principle, agency and structure influence each other; “rules and resources are drawn upon by actors in the interaction, but are thereby reconstituted through such interaction”.⁸⁵⁰ Thus, the structures within this distinct social system are both shaped by and shape the actions of those within it.

The DS principle – wherein actors entering a distinct social system adopt behaviours that would differ outside of that system – is evident in various PMF units, particularly the Sistani-aligned militias. When Sistani issued his religious fatwa in 2014, many volunteers joined with the primary aim of defending holy shrines, viewing it as a sacred mission. Initially, the leaders of these units planned to disband after completing their mission. However, once integrated into the distinct social system described earlier, these militias not only remained intact, but also became involved in frequent clashes, including those with Iranian-backed militias.⁸⁵¹

The shifting popularity of the PMF over the years strongly supports the argument that Iraqi non-state armed groups and Iraqi political authority have evolved into a distinct social system, increasingly detached from the broader Iraqi society.

In a 2016 survey conducted in Karbala, 96 percent of Shia pilgrims chose to donate to the PMF, and 99 percent expressed their support for the group.⁸⁵² However, by 2019, the situation had changed drastically. A survey across five governorates

⁸⁵⁰ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 1984), 68.

⁸⁵¹ Haddad, “Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units”, 40–43.

⁸⁵² Survey in Karbala 2016, conducted by the Iraqi research institution Peace Paradigms, quoted in Haddad, “Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units”, 39.

revealed that 50 percent of respondents viewed the PMF's role in their area negatively, with criticism reaching over 75 percent in some regions.⁸⁵³

This shift in public opinion illustrates how the PMF initially enjoyed strong support during the fight against ISIS but, as the PMF became more integrated into the state and its association with the political elite grew more evident, its public image and reputation sharply declined. Considering the violent repression of the October 2019 protests and subsequent demonstrations in 2020 and more recent years, this decline in popularity has likely intensified further.

The distinction that Iraqis often draw between the PMF and Iranian-backed militias – despite the latter being fully integrated into the PMF and holding command positions – illustrates how the PMF, as part of a distinct social system, operates differently from the broader Iraqi population's expectations. While many Iraqis reject Iranian-backed militias, some still see the PMF as part of a shared national struggle, particularly against ISIS and the political establishment.⁸⁵⁴ A popular 2015 protest slogan, "You fight for my sake, I demonstrate for yours",⁸⁵⁵ captures this sentiment. As a young protester from Basra remarked in November 2019, "[The political elite] are trying to blend the PMF with the parties. The PMF is what its name says: the popular mobilisation. Not you parties... The PMF is the people".⁸⁵⁶ However, as analysed in this chapter, the realities of the dynamics within the PMF present a different picture, revealing a more complex and less aligned relationship with the broader aspirations of the Iraqi populace.

5.5. Post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian Inter-State Relations Under Shia Commonality: Iraqi Non-State Armed Groups, Religious Authority & Political Authority

⁸⁵³ Survey in Iraq 2019, conducted by the Iraqi research institution Peace Paradigms, quoted in Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 39.

⁸⁵⁴ Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", 40

⁸⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵⁶ See the Twitter status of @Al_Mirbad, posted on 25 November 2019, available at: https://twitter.com/Al_Mirbad/status/1198887295421685761. Accessed February 2022. For a similar message from another protestor directly challenging al-Muhandis and reclaiming ownership of the PMU away from the Iranian-backed militias ("We're the PMU... the sons of the poor... We're the ones who liberated the western region"), see the Twitter status of @irqdubaissi, posted on 2 November 2019, available at: <https://twitter.com/irqdubaissi/status/1190303705104605186>. Accessed February 2022.

In the previous sections, I have analysed the core constructs of the state's collective identity – Power, Myth, and Security – and the Symbolic Cluster that intersects these elements. This analysis has enabled me to answer the key sub-questions that guide this study as formulated according to this chapter's agency cluster: how to describe the identity of post-2003 Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups in the post-regime environment, and how these groups, as the 'self,' are constructed through the Iranian security and military apparatus, as the relevant 'other.'

Integrating the findings from the analysis of non-state armed groups with those related to religious and political authority, as explored in previous chapters, this section aims to present a final, comprehensive argument on how the Shia notion of identity has shaped inter-state relations between Iraq and Iran in the post-2003 context. By synthesising the elements previously analysed in the agency clusters of religious authority, political authority, and non-state militias, I shall demonstrate how post-2003 Iraqi Shia collective identity has been constructed through its interaction with Iran as the relevant other and how Shia commonality has impacted inter-state relations between the two countries.

Post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran have been marked by a significant dependence on the latter, largely due to the deep penetration of Iranian military and political actors into the Iraqi Shia political and military fields. Shia commonality has played a crucial role in shaping these dynamics.

Iran has consistently capitalised on its Shia Iraqi counterparts, offering military support to assist them in their internal power struggles. This has enabled Iran to pursue its primary objectives in Iraq: keeping Iraq in a dependent position, securing substantial influence in the region, achieving strategic depth and countering any actions that might threaten Iranian interests.

While Iran has pursued its strategic goals, Iraqi actors have relied on Iranian military assistance to secure and maintain governmental positions from 2003 through to the present day in 2024. This alignment of interests, rooted in the Shia commonality shared between Iran and the Iraqi actors who have held power since the first national elections in 2005, has resulted in ongoing instability, further reinforcing this cycle of dependence.

Shia commonality has also played a crucial role in Iran's efforts to extend its influence within the religious sphere. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian religious authority, embodied by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has held significant institutional power, making it a key actor in advancing Iran's political interests in Iraq. While Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, representing post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, has maintained its stronghold in the Iraqi religious field enjoying widespread support among Najafi clerics and the broader population, his political vision for Iraq, which emphasises the defence of Iraqi sovereignty and the rejection of Iranian interference, has been substantially challenged by the broader Iraqi political and security frameworks. Faced with the complex realities of post-2003 Iraq, Sistani has been compelled to adapt his political discourse. This adaptation is evident in his June 2014 fatwa, which called for the fight against ISIS and led to the establishment of the PMF. This move inadvertently empowered Iranian-backed militias within Iraq's security forces, thereby further complicating Sistani's efforts to assert his vision for an independent Iraq free from external influence.

The Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, which is behind the construction of post-2003 Iraqi Shia collective identity and its main constructs of Power, Myth and Security, and the Symbolic Cluster as the core intersecting of these elements is one where Iran, as the other, has strategically aimed to keep Iraq, as the self, in a dependent position and has largely succeeded in doing so. Consequently, Shia collective identity in post-2003 Iraq is fragmented, with conflicting factions unable to effectively resist Iranian interference. The construct of Power, shaped by this nexus, is marked by continuous struggle, with no single group having won the symbolic competition – that is, promoting a vision for Iraq and its future which is shared and considered legitimate by the wider Iraqi society. Iraqi Shia religious authority, while embodying symbolic power in the Iraqi religious field, that is, in the clerical Najafi and Karbala circles, has not managed to exert his influence in the political arena.

Post-2003 Iraqi Shia Myths, also shaped by the self-other nexus with Iran, are deeply entwined with themes of resistance rooted in Iraq's history of opposing foreign oppression and interference. However, these Myths have also been profoundly influenced by Iran's deep penetration into Iraq's government and security framework, leading to the infusion of Shia exclusivism and belligerence, which marginalises other

segments of Iraqi society and exacerbates instability. Furthermore, when these Myths of resistance are articulated in anti-Iran discourses, they often appear as mere populist tactics. For example, Moqtada al-Sadr, who has promoted an anti-Iran and cross-sectarian rhetoric since the pre-2018 elections campaign, previously maintained close ties with Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and pursued a highly Shia exclusivist agenda during the 2003–2007 post-invasion civil war, with his Mahdi Army militia committing sectarian violence.

The construct of Security has been the primary arena where Iran has exerted its efforts to keep Iraq in a dependent position, leading to the fragmentation of Iraq's monopoly on violence and the integration of Shia Iraq into Iran's regional and international strategies. These strategies, rooted in Iran's institutionalised isolation, are driven by the international community's shared perception of Iran as a threat to regional and global stability and their collective interest in undermining Iran's influence. Consequently, Iraq, through its close ties with Iran, is also affected by this isolation, further complicating its own regional and international relations. During the fight against ISIS, the violence exerted by the PMF, in which Iranian-backed militias hold command positions, acquired a symbolic dimension. This violence, though material in its impact, was framed within a narrative of existential threat and survival, positioning the PMF Iranian militias' actions as a necessary response.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi populace, consistently calling for change, particularly in resisting Iranian interference and establishing a state capable of meeting basic needs, has grown increasingly alienated from a political elite that has evolved into a distinct social system. This elite operates according to its own rules, norms and values, detached from broader Iraqi society and heavily reliant on its militia affiliates, which have thus become a key component of this distinct social system.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on Iraqi non-state armed groups as the third and final empirical site of observation, addressing the main research question of how Shia commonality has impacted post-2003 inter-state relations between Iraq and Iran. The analysis was structured around two interrelated sub-questions: first, how post-2003

Iraqi Shia non-state armed groups, as the 'self', have been constructed through the Iranian security and military apparatus as the 'other'; and how to describe the identity of these groups in the post-regime environment. These inquiries allowed me to formulate a comprehensive argument on how Shia commonality has shaped the identity of post-2003 Iraqi militias and, in turn, how this identity has influenced Iraq-Iran relations. Since this chapter represents the final empirical examination of the study, I have integrated these findings with those from previous chapters on religious and political authorities.

Applying my constructivist model to the PMF as a representative example of post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups, I concluded that Iran has deeply penetrated Iraq's security framework, with Shia identity playing a pivotal role. Iran, as the 'other', has acted as an exogenous and subversive force, aiming to keep Iraq in a dependent position, with Iranian-backed militias serving as its primary instrument. Iraq, as the 'self', has leveraged Iranian support to navigate its internal power struggles. Merging these findings with earlier analyses, I have provided a comprehensive answer to the main research question: post-2003 Iraqi inter-state relations with Iran have been marked by significant dependence on Iran, driven by the deep penetration of Iranian military and political actors into Iraqi Shia political and military spheres. Shia commonality has been central to these dynamics.

6. Advancing the Study of State Identity: Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

6.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the implications of this study's findings for the existing literature in International Relations (IR), particularly regarding constructivist approaches to state identity, inter-state relations, and the role of symbolic structures in shaping political and security dynamics. Having established how Shia commonality has influenced post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian relations and demonstrated how Iraq's Shia collective identity has been constructed through its interaction with Iran, this chapter reflects on how these insights contribute to the broader theoretical and empirical debates that framed this inquiry.

This study set out to answer the central research question: how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran. To conduct this enquiry, the central question was broken down into two interrelated sub-questions: how the identity of the self is constructed through the identity of the other, and how a state's collective identity can be described.

By engaging with key constructivist perspectives on the self-other nexus, drawing on the foundational contributions of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann, and integrating insights from Levinas, Bakhtin, Derrida and a wide range of authors to conceptualise the constructs of Power, Myth and Security, this study has developed a theoretical model that enriches current scholarship by providing a systematic framework for describing a state's collective identity and its impact on inter-state relations. The model requires the selection of what I have termed 'empirical sites of observation': a state's agency clusters whose patterns of behaviour, discourse, and interests are specifically linked to the identity under investigation. While this study has applied the model to post-2003 Iraq to examine the construction of Iraqi Shia collective identity and its impact on Iraq-Iran relations, the model has been designed for broader application to other cases.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, which underpins the construction of post-2003 Iraqi Shia collective identity and its main constructs of Power, Myth and Security, along with the Symbolic Cluster that binds them, has been shaped by Iran's strategic efforts to maintain Iraq in a position of dependence. As a result, Shia collective identity in post-2003 Iraq has remained fragmented, with conflicting factions unable to effectively resist Iranian interference.

The construct of Power, shaped by this nexus, has been marked by continuous struggle, with no single group securing symbolic dominance – that is, the ability to promote a vision for Iraq's future that is widely accepted and legitimised by Iraqi society. While Iraqi Shia religious authority holds symbolic influence in the Najafi and Karbala clerical circles, it has struggled to exert power in the political arena.

The construct of Myth, similarly shaped by the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, has been deeply entwined with narratives of resistance, rooted in Iraq's historical opposition to foreign dominance. However, these myths have also been influenced by Iran's deep penetration into Iraq's government and security structures, reinforcing Shia exclusivism and sectarian belligerence, thereby marginalising other segments of Iraqi society and exacerbating instability. When these myths are repurposed in anti-Iran discourses, they often serve as mere populist tactics.

The construct of Security has been the primary arena where Iran has exerted its influence, contributing to Iraq's dependence by fragmenting its monopoly on violence and integrating Shia Iraq into Iran's regional security strategies. Iraq, through its close ties with Iran, has also been affected by Iran's institutionalised isolation, further complicating its regional and international relations.

At the same time, the Iraqi population has increasingly distanced itself from the political elite, whose reliance on Iran has solidified its separate social system: one that operates according to its own internal rules, norms and values, detached from the broader Iraqi public. This has led to growing calls for change, particularly against Iranian influence, while the elite's dependence on Iran-aligned militias has reinforced the political and security status quo.

By conceptualising state identity through Power, Myth, Security, with the Symbolic Cluster as the tying nexus between the three, this study has expanded theoretical debates by developing a systematised model that offers a structured method for analysing the impact of identity on inter-state relations. It has also demonstrated how symbolic violence can be exercised not only within domestic politics but also in the international arena. While previous research has explored symbolic violence in domestic contexts, this study extends its application to inter-state relations, showing how Iran has strategically leveraged symbolic influence to shape Iraq's political and security landscape.

The following sections will outline the key areas where this research challenges or refines existing theories, highlighting its implications for future scholarship on state identity, symbolic structures and Middle Eastern politics. To facilitate this, in each of the section, I shall summarise the authors and works discussed in the chapter *Research Question and Its Place in Relation to Core Literature*, alongside the outstanding theoretical questions that this study has sought to address.

I shall begin this review with a section on the theoretical foundations of this study to then, in the second part of this chapter, focus on religious authority, political authority and non-state armed groups, the empirical sites of observation selected for the analysis of post-2003 Iraq and its relations with Iran.

6.2. Theoretical Feedback: Reassessing State Identity and Inter-State Relations

Following the introductory section, where I restated the research question – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – and its interrelated sub-questions – how the identity of the self is constructed through the identity of the other, and how a state's collective identity can be described – I shall now critically reassess the theoretical foundations that framed this inquiry. This section evaluates the extent to which my research has contributed to, refined and challenged existing perspectives on state identity and inter-state relations.

I shall begin by examining the constructivist contributions of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann, whose works provided the foundational basis for the model I developed to address these questions. While their conceptualisations of the self-other nexus and state identity as a social construct were central to this study's theoretical framework, my findings offer a more structured approach to tracing how state identity operates in contested political environments. In particular, I demonstrate that state identity is not only relational but also structured through persistent competition, symbolic reproduction and institutional entrenchment – elements that extend beyond traditional constructivist assumptions.

I shall then move on to the works of other key scholars whose contributions have been instrumental in shaping this study's theoretical model, focusing on those whose perspectives on Power, Myth and Security informed the conceptualisation of state collective identity. By engaging with the limitations and strengths of these frameworks, I assess how my findings address or challenge existing debates on the interaction between symbolic structures, state identity and inter-state relations.

6.2.1. Expanding Constructivist Theories of State Identity: Revisiting Wendt and Neumann

In examining the core literature related to this study's research question – how Shia commonality impacts inter-state relations between post-2003 Iraq and Iran – the works of Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann provided a crucial theoretical foundation. Their contributions to constructivist IR theory, particularly their emphasis on the self-other nexus and the social construction of identity, informed the theoretical model developed in this study. However, while their frameworks offer valuable insights, they leave open critical questions regarding how collective identity is constructed in practice and how it translates into inter-state behaviour. The model proposed in this study directly addresses these gaps.

Wendt's argument in "Anarchy is What States Make of It" (1992)⁸⁵⁷ challenges neorealist assumptions by asserting that state behaviour is shaped not only by

⁸⁵⁷ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

material structures but also by intersubjective understandings.⁸⁵⁸ States do not operate in a predetermined anarchic system; rather, they actively construct their interests and identities through social interaction.⁸⁵⁹ State's behaviour is based on interests, and interests are based on identity.⁸⁶⁰ Identity is "inherently relational",⁸⁶¹ meaning that a state's self-perceptions and interests are defined through its engagement with others.

Wendt's framework is critical for understanding how Iraq and Iran, as states with sectarian and historical ties, co-construct their roles in regional politics. However, Wendt's model does not fully operationalise how these identities evolve over time, nor does it provide a structured method for describing their identities and tracing their formation within specific political and security contexts.

Neumann expands on Wendt's relational approach in "Self and Other in International Relations" (1999),⁸⁶² highlighting that identity is formed through dialogical rather than merely dialectical interactions.⁸⁶³ He argues that IR should be understood as a series of self-other relations, where states shape their collective identities in response to significant others.⁸⁶⁴

While this perspective is valuable for explaining the interdependency of Iraqi and Iranian identities, it remains largely descriptive, leaving open key methodological and analytical questions: how does the self-other nexus shape state behaviour? Through what mechanisms does identity translate into political and security dynamics? How can identity be systematically analysed beyond abstract theoretical assumptions?

This study has addressed these gaps by systematising the concept of state identity into an operational model, providing a structured framework for understanding the formation of collective identity and its impact on inter-state relations. The proposed model conceptualises three core constructs – Power, Myth and Security – interwoven

⁸⁵⁸ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It", 399.

⁸⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶² Iver B. Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations", *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 2 (1996): 139–174.

⁸⁶³ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 166–168.

by the Symbolic Cluster, which acts as the binding tie through which identity is shaped and projected.

Power is conceptualised as relational, contested and normalising. Drawing from Foucault's and Bourdieu's theories, this study situates power struggles within symbolic competition, where actors compete for legitimacy through symbolic capital. Wendt and Neumann's constructivist framework acknowledges that power is not purely material, but it lacks a structured means of analysing how power relations manifest within identity construction. The model proposed here provides this structure, demonstrating how Iraqi state actors negotiate power through their relationship with Iran, simultaneously contesting and reinforcing their dependency.

Myth is defined as a culturally embedded symbolic repertoire, which serves as a collective identity marker. While Neumann suggests that identities are historically constructed, he does not address the role of myths as mobilising narratives that shape both domestic legitimacy and external relations. The model developed in this study accounts for this, showing how Iraqi Shia myths of resistance and sovereignty are co-opted, contested and reshaped in response to Iran's influence.

Security is conceptualised within this model through the intersection of securitisation theory and symbolic violence. Wendt and Neumann discuss identity security but do not fully theorise how security perceptions influence inter-state dependency and the legitimisation of violence. This study extends their framework by demonstrating how Iraq's security dynamics – particularly through the PMF and state-militia relations – are constructed through symbolic violence, reinforcing Iran's influence within Iraq's security field.

The Symbolic Cluster, which binds these three constructs together, serves as the ultimate structuring force behind identity formation. This notion moves beyond Wendt's and Neumann's focus on the relational construction of identity by incorporating symbolic power, resonance and violence as fundamental to the identity-formation process. It provides a systematic approach to analysing identity not just as a process of interaction, but as an evolving structure embedded in political and security practices.

Finally, this study addresses the methodological limitations of Wendt's and Neumann's frameworks by introducing the 'empirical sites of observation': a state's agency clusters, whose patterns of behaviour, discourse and interests are relevant for the notion of identity under observation. By applying this model to Iraq's religious authority, political authority and non-state militias, this study demonstrates how identity operates through tangible mechanisms, rather than remaining an abstract theoretical construct.

In sum, while Wendt's and Neumann's constructivist theories provide an essential foundation for understanding the relational and processual nature of state identity, they leave unresolved questions regarding the concrete mechanisms through which identity is shaped and projected. This study builds upon and refines their contributions by offering a structured theoretical model that explains how a state's collective identity develops through symbolic structures and impact inter-state relations. By bridging the theoretical and empirical dimensions of state identity, this model offers a systematised approach that extends beyond the Iraqi-Iranian context, providing a framework for analysing how a specific notion of identity impacts a state's inter-state relations with a relevant other.

6.2.2. The Self-Other Nexus: Beyond Dialogism and Toward Structural Impact

The self-other nexus lies at the heart of constructivist approaches to state identity, shaping how states define themselves and their roles in the international system. In the literature review, the works of Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida were examined for their insights into the mutual and processual construction of identity. Levinas highlighted the ontological dependence of the self on the other, stressing that recognition and alterity are fundamental to identity formation.⁸⁶⁵ Bakhtin expanded this view by conceptualising identity as dialogical, meaning that meaning emerges through ongoing interaction.⁸⁶⁶ Derrida further destabilised the notion of fixed identities, arguing that identity is continuously deferred

⁸⁶⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

⁸⁶⁶ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

through an evolving process of differentiation⁸⁶⁷. While these perspectives provide valuable theoretical grounding, they remain limited in their applicability to state identity and do not inform in how identity influences inter-state power asymmetries and strategic interests.

This study extends and systematises the self-other nexus by demonstrating how it operates not merely as a process of recognition and exchange but as a structuring force that influences inter-state relations. While Levinas, Bakhtin and Derrida emphasise the fluid, dialogical and non-hierarchical nature of self-other interactions, this model accounts also for situations where one state deliberately seeks to structure and control the other, using identity to achieve this aim. In this respect, the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus provides a case where identity is mutually constituted but asymmetrically reinforced, with Iran leveraging shared Shia identity to sustain Iraq's dependence.

6.2.2.1. Structuring the Self-Other Nexus: Power, Myth & Security in State Identity

This study refines the self-other nexus by showing that, while intersubjective, dialogical and non-hierarchical in theory, it is often strategically manipulated in practice. By introducing Power, Myth, Security and the Symbolic Cluster as key constructs of the self-other nexus, this model demonstrates that a state's identity is not only negotiated through discourse but also embedded in Power structures, Myths and Security concerns that shape inter-state behaviour.

While Levinas, Bakhtin and Derrida conceptualise identity as fluid and constantly evolving, this study introduces structuration theory to explain why identities, despite being continuously renegotiated through the self-other relation, maintain some stability over time. Structuration ensures that certain identity formations persist, even within an evolving self-other dynamic, as identity constructs become institutionalised within domestic political fields and inter-state relations.

⁸⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

The self-other nexus remains non-hierarchical in theory, as neither the self nor the other holds an inherent position of superiority. However, in practice, states may adopt strategies that create asymmetrical power relations. In the case of Iraq and Iran, while their identities are mutually constituted, Iran has actively pursued policies that reinforce Iraq's dependence, shaping Iraq's political and security landscape in ways that maintain its strategic influence.

Traditional constructivist approaches acknowledge that state identity shapes state interests, but they do not systematically explain how identity becomes embedded in Power dynamics. This study integrates insights from Foucault and Bourdieu to conceptualise identity within a field of competition, where actors accumulate symbolic capital to reinforce legitimacy and influence. In the Iraqi-Iranian case, Iran has consolidated its role as the dominant other, constructing Iraq's identity in a way that maintains its strategic influence. This expands the notion that self-other relations are dialogical, showing that they can be actively structured to maintain asymmetrical interdependence.

While Bakhtin and Derrida emphasise the fluidity of meaning, this study argues that Myths serve as stabilising mechanisms, providing identity with a degree of continuity over time. Myths are embedded within the Symbolic Cluster – the interrelation of symbolic power, resonance, and violence – which shapes identity beyond discursive interactions. The Iraqi case illustrates how myths of resistance and sovereignty, while historically embedded in the Iraqi imaginary and directed against foreign occupation, have been co-opted to serve Iran's strategic interests, reinforcing Iraqi Shia political factions that align with Iranian narratives.

The securitisation of identity is another key process missing from traditional self-other analyses. While Levinas and Derrida highlight the ontological role of the other, their work does not provide a framework for analysing how the other is framed as a security threat or ally. Through the construct of Security, this study integrates securitisation theory and symbolic violence to show how identity is maintained through narratives of existential threat and protection. Iraq's post-2003 security landscape, shaped by the presence of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and its affiliated militias, reflects how security discourses are deeply intertwined with identity. These

dynamics reinforce Iran's position as both a strategic partner and a dominant external actor in Iraq's security field, demonstrating that the self-other nexus is not only relational but also embedded in security structures.

6.2.3. Reassessing the Constructs of State Identity: Power, Myth & Security

Having established the self-other nexus as the foundation of state identity formation, I now turn to a critical reassessment of the theoretical works that informed my conceptualisation of Power, Myth and Security as the core constructs of a state's collective identity. These constructs provided the analytical framework through which I examined how Shia commonality shapes Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations.

This section evaluates the key contributions of the scholars whose work underpinned this study's theoretical model. While Foucault⁸⁶⁸ and Bourdieu⁸⁶⁹ were instrumental in shaping the conceptualisation of Power, Anthony D. Smith⁸⁷⁰ provided the foundation for Myth, and Wendt's institutional approach and securitisation theories from the Copenhagen⁸⁷¹ and Paris⁸⁷² Schools framed the discussion on Security. While these perspectives have provided essential insights, my findings highlight certain gaps and limitations when applied to contexts where power struggles, competing symbolic narratives, and transnational influences shape state identity and inter-state relations.

By engaging with these theoretical perspectives through the lens of my empirical analysis, I will demonstrate how this study expands, refines and challenges existing approaches to state identity, particularly in contexts where internal and external actors simultaneously shape political, religious and security landscapes.

⁸⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁸⁶⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); and Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

⁸⁷⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁸⁷¹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

⁸⁷² Thierry Balzacq, ed., *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London: Routledge, 2011).

The following sections will examine each construct. I shall begin with Power, to then switch to Myth, Security and the Symbolic Cluster and the process of structuration. Finally, I shall move on to the second part of this chapter, which will be dedicated to the empirical analysis of religious and political authorities and non-state armed groups.

6.2.3.1. Power and State Identity: Beyond Repression and Normalisation

This study refines the conceptualisation of Power in state identity by moving beyond Foucault's repressive and normalising power and Bourdieu's field theory and symbolic capital to offer a model that accounts for the structuration of power in inter-state relations. While both theorists provide essential tools for understanding how power operates within social and political structures, their frameworks do not fully capture the dynamics of power struggles in multi-layered and transnational contexts. By integrating their insights into a model that emphasises competition and symbolic reproduction, this study provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding how power shapes identity in inter-state relations.

Foucault's analysis of repressive power (RP) and normalising power (NP) explains how power functions through coercion and the internalisation of norms, producing regimes of truth that shape knowledge, legitimacy and governance.⁸⁷³ However, while these concepts are valuable for understanding domestic power structures, they do not fully address contexts in which multiple, competing power claims coexist, as in post-2003 Iraq, where state and non-state actors, religious institutions and external forces all compete to define political legitimacy.

Foucault's framework assumes that power is either exercised through direct repression or embedded within institutions and discourses that normalise social behaviour.⁸⁷⁴ However, this study argues that power is not merely exercised through repression or normalisation but is fundamentally relational and structured through ongoing contestation. In environments where political authority is fragmented and

⁸⁷³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 23–35.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*; and Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208–226.

legitimacy is contested, Power does not simply consolidate into a hegemonic discourse but remains constantly reshaped by competing actors.

The Iraqi case demonstrates this dynamic: while Sistani's discourse has established a regime of truth in the religious field, this authority has not extended to the political domain, where Iran-aligned factions, nationalist actors, and militia groups contest political legitimacy. Unlike Foucault's framework, which implies that regimes of truth eventually stabilise into dominant power structures, this study highlights the persistence of fragmented power struggles and the role of competition in shaping identity.

To address these limitations, Bourdieu's concept of the field provides a necessary extension of Foucault's framework by conceptualising power as an arena of struggle, where actors compete to accumulate symbolic capital and define the terms of legitimacy.⁸⁷⁵ Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital provides a valuable framework for understanding how actors compete for legitimacy within a given field.⁸⁷⁶ His emphasis on the struggle for symbolic power explains how social and political hierarchies are maintained through recognition and legitimacy rather than mere coercion. However, his model is primarily focused on national contexts and does not fully address the complexities of transnational power struggles – a central issue in Iraqi-Iranian relations.

This study expands Bourdieu's insights by demonstrating how fields are not enclosed, but interlinked and contested also across national boundaries. In Iraq, the political field is not self-contained but is shaped by external influences, particularly Iran's interventions, funding networks and ideological frameworks. Iran has embedded itself in Iraq's political field not by dominating it outright but by sustaining an environment where no single Iraqi faction can consolidate symbolic power. This prevents the emergence of a unified symbolic order, ensuring that Iraq's political identity remains structurally dependent on Iranian influence.

⁸⁷⁵ David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 9.

⁸⁷⁶ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 148.

Moreover, while Bourdieu's model assumes that actors accumulate symbolic capital to achieve dominance,⁸⁷⁷ this study highlights that symbolic capital is not always accumulated for consolidation: it can also be fragmented and redistributed to sustain instability. The post-2003 Iraqi political field exemplifies this, as Iran-backed actors, nationalist factions and religious authorities all engage in competing struggles, ensuring that Power remains fluid rather than stabilised.

By combining Foucault's insights on power-knowledge production with Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and competition, this study provides a model that better explains how power operates in contested political landscapes, where external and internal forces shape legitimacy simultaneously. By moving beyond Foucault and Bourdieu, this study presents Power as a structuring force in inter-state relations, not merely as a tool of domestic governance or elite competition. While Power remains contested and relational, it also introduces a degree of continuity to state behaviour, as the political and security structures in which Power operates reinforce certain patterns of interaction and political dependencies over time.

This is evident in the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus, where Iran has leveraged power asymmetries to structure Iraq's political field in a way that sustains long-term influence. Unlike models that assume that Power eventually consolidates into a fixed hierarchy or dominant discourse, this study highlights how power structures in inter-state relations are continuously renegotiated, yet embedded within institutional and security frameworks that ensure relative continuity. Thus, rather than treating power as either a tool of repression (Foucault) or a means of achieving dominance in a field (Bourdieu), this study conceptualises power as a structuring mechanism that shapes identity through persistent competition, symbolic reproduction and inter-state entanglements.

6.2.3.2. Myth and State Identity: A Constructivist Reconceptualisation

Following the feedback on Power, I shall now turn to the second construct of state collective identity in my model – Myth – by summarising the key works that

⁸⁷⁷ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 148.

informed its conceptualisation and outlining how this study advances the existing literature.

While Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism provides valuable insights into the role of myths in shaping national identity,⁸⁷⁸ his approach seems to remain static and historically deterministic, treating myths as fixed cultural inheritances rather than fluid, evolving constructs. In contrast, this study advances a constructivist conceptualisation of Myth, defining it as any cultural or political notion embedded with a symbolic repertoire. Myths, in this framework, are not stable, pre-existing entities but are continuously reshaped through the self-other nexus, adapting to shifting political and social contexts.

Smith's model explains why certain Myths endure,⁸⁷⁹ but it fails to account for their transformation in response to political contingencies, treating them as pre-existing symbolic structures. This study challenges that assumption, which risks portraying Myths as passive frameworks. In contrast, this study conceptualises Myths as contested and politically rearticulated constructs, neither fixed nor predetermined, but continuously redefined as political elites, factions and external actors compete to shape and control their meaning.

In post-2003 Iraq, Myths have been reframed, repurposed and contested, shaping competing visions of national identity and sovereignty. Shia identity, for example, has been articulated through different and sometimes contradictory Myths, some reinforcing sectarian exclusivity, others promoting anti-occupation narratives, and others legitimising transnational political alignments. Myths, therefore, do not merely reflect identity but actively shape it through contestation and power struggle.

This study moves beyond ancestry-based narratives,⁸⁸⁰ which are central to Smith's framework, by incorporating ideological and political Myths that may not be tied to common ancestry but still play a crucial role in shaping state identity and inter-state relations. Moreover, as constructs of the self-other nexus, Myths are not solely

⁸⁷⁸ Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*.

⁸⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 25–31.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

generated within the state but are also shaped by external actors. Iran, for instance, has actively influenced the symbolic articulation of post-2003 Iraqi identity. In fact, the Iranian Revolution's narrative of Shia transnationalism has shaped how Iraqi Shia political factions position themselves towards Iran, demonstrating that Myths are not just internally generated but also shaped by inter-state relations and regional power dynamics.

By moving beyond Smith's ethno-symbolism, this study conceptualises Myths as structuring forces that both stabilise and evolve. While Myths provide continuity by embedding identity within a symbolic repertoire, they are also constantly renegotiated and rearticulated. Myths do not simply function as historical reference points but as active instruments of power, used to justify policies, reinforce alliances and frame security threats.

In conclusion, rather than treating Myths as fixed ethno-symbolic legacies, this study conceptualises them as fluid, contested and structurally embedded narratives that evolve through the self-other nexus, shaping state identity and inter-state relations in dynamic and strategic ways.

6.2.3.3. Security and State Identity: A Constructivist Perspective

Following the feedback on Power and Myth and before moving to the Symbolic Cluster and structuration, I shall conclude this section on the constructs with my model's third core construct of a state's collective identity: Security.

Security is not only a core concern in IR but also, in this study's conceptualisation, a fundamental dimension of a state's collective identity, shaping its perception of stability, threat and survival. Rather than viewing security as a material reality or a fixed construct, this study conceptualises it as a fluid, relational process embedded in intersubjective meanings and symbolic structures. Security is both a pragmatic concern and a discursive tool, instrumentalised to frame political and military actions, justify policies and shape inter-state relations.

As a construct of the self-other nexus, Security is ontologically necessary for collective identity, as states define themselves through the construction of boundaries that separate the self from the other. This means that danger is also necessary: a state's identity is reinforced through the identification of external and internal threats that justify protective and pre-emptive measures. Security, therefore, is not merely about preserving the self from external threats but also about defining the self in relation to these perceived dangers.

While traditional security studies focus on material threats and military power, constructivist scholars, particularly within the Copenhagen and Paris Schools, have expanded the concept of security to include socially constructed dangers and securitisation practices. The Copenhagen School argues that security threats are constructed through speech acts that justify exceptional measures,⁸⁸¹ while the Paris School emphasises the role of bureaucratic and administrative practices in creating security discourses.⁸⁸²

This study builds on these insights but extends them further by demonstrating that securitisation unfolds through competing narratives rather than a single dominant discourse. In post-2003 Iraq, multiple actors engage in competing security discourses, sometimes reinforcing each other and sometimes operating at cross-purposes. The 2019 Iraqi protests illustrate this dynamic. Moqtada al-Sadr simultaneously engaged in repressive and symbolic violence – his militia used force against protesters while his rhetoric framed the protests as a foreign conspiracy, legitimising repression in the name of national security.⁸⁸³ This demonstrates how securitisation can involve overlapping and contradictory narratives, where violence is both coercive and symbolically justified. By highlighting the coexistence of repressive and symbolic violence, this study advances securitisation theory by showing that security discourses

⁸⁸¹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 24–26.

⁸⁸² Thierry Balzacq et al., "Forum: What Kind of Theory – if any – is Securitization?", *International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2015): 1–41; and Didier Bigo, "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no. 1 (2002): 63–92.

⁸⁸³ International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box," *Middle East Report* 223, July 26, 2022, 1–25, 20 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>.

in fragmented political environments are contested, layered and strategically adapted by different actors.

This study further contributes to security studies by extending the concept of symbolic violence, traditionally applied to domestic power structures, into international relations. Rather than treating symbolic violence as an isolated phenomenon within national contexts, this study conceptualises it as a process through which states legitimise war, intervention and exclusionary practices at the international level.

Building on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, this study integrates insights from Foucault's notion of bio-power,⁸⁸⁴ Galtung's theory of cultural violence⁸⁸⁵ and Agamben's concepts of the zone of indistinction and *homo sacer*⁸⁸⁶ to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding how symbolic violence operates in inter-state relations. By synthesising these perspectives, this model argues that states do not merely project material power but also weaponise symbolic narratives to structure security perceptions and justify political actions.

Bio-power explains how states regulate life and justify violence in the name of protecting the population. Cultural violence highlights how ideological and religious frameworks legitimise war and repression. The zone of indistinction and *homo sacer* illustrate how states construct enemies whose sovereignty and rights can be suspended, reinforcing security narratives that present war and exclusion as ontological necessities for state survival. By advancing a framework that integrates these elements, this study provides a novel approach to analysing how security is constructed beyond the state level.

This study also builds on Wendt's work by postulating that the isolation of Iran from the international community constitutes an institution in the contemporary international system. This institutionalised isolation has significant implications for

⁸⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge, Vol. 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁸⁸⁵ Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence", *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291–295.

⁸⁸⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Iraq's position within international relations, as Iraq remains deeply intertwined with Iran through economic, political and security dependencies.

Rather than operating with full strategic autonomy, Iraq's behaviour is shaped by the structural constraints imposed by Iran's marginalisation. The institutionalisation of Iran's isolation affects Iraq's diplomatic engagements, economic alignments and security policies, reinforcing a dynamic in which Iraq is structurally dependent on Iran while simultaneously navigating the pressures exerted by the broader international system.

In conclusion, by integrating constructivist securitisation theories with the concept of symbolic violence, this study presents a comprehensive model of Security as a core component of state identity. Rather than treating security as an objective or fixed category, this study conceptualises it as a process through which identities are formed, Power is exercised and inter-state relations are structured. By demonstrating the coexistence of competing security discourses and the embeddedness of security in symbolic structures, this study offers a more dynamic and relational understanding of how states define threats, justify policies and construct their place in the international order.

6.2.3.4. The Symbolic Cluster & Structuration: A Framework for Stability in Identity Formation

Following the feedback on Power, Myth and Security, I shall now turn to the final component of my model of state collective identity: the Symbolic Cluster. As the ultimate core of identity formation, the Symbolic Cluster constitutes the binding nexus that ties together Power, Myth and Security, ensuring their interrelation and mutual reinforcement. At this level, structuration occurs, allowing identity constructs to persist over time despite the continuous renegotiation of the self-other nexus.

The Symbolic Cluster is the interrelation of symbolic capital/power, symbolic resonance and symbolic violence. Symbolic power allows actors to impose meanings and define collective understandings; symbolic resonance ensures these meanings gain traction within society, and symbolic violence enforces and legitimises them, shaping perceptions of legitimacy and exclusion. The self-other nexus continuously

generates and transforms these symbolic dynamics, yet the structuration process stabilises them within institutional, political and social frameworks.

As identity evolves through contestation, structuration ensures that certain patterns remain embedded in the political field, security structures and societal discourses. This does not imply permanence but rather a framework within which change occurs within identifiable parameters. The duality of structure, as formulated by Anthony Giddens, explains this process: identity is shaped by structures, yet it also reshapes them over time through agency.⁸⁸⁷

In post-2003 Iraq, this dynamic is evident in the persistence of sectarian narratives, security dependencies and elite political practices, despite shifting political configurations. While Iraqi society has contested foreign influence and corruption, the political system has structurally absorbed and reproduced these elements. The reliance on Iranian patronage, for instance, has become institutionalised, not merely as a temporary alignment but as a structurally embedded political practice. Even when new political actors emerge, such as those from the Tishreen movement, they find themselves constrained by pre-existing structures, demonstrating how structuration limits agency even in moments of change.⁸⁸⁸

Conversely, in the religious field, structuration has operated differently. The symbolic authority of Sistani has reinforced an independent Iraqi Shia identity distinct from Iranian clerical influence. Even when he shifted his position in 2014 to endorse the PMF, this did not destabilise his legitimacy; rather, it was understood as an evolution within an existing symbolic framework. This contrast between the political and religious fields illustrates how structuration does not function uniformly: it stabilises identity where symbolic resonance is strong but remains more fragmented where competing symbolic claims persist.

⁸⁸⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge and Maiden: Polity Press, 1984).

⁸⁸⁸ Taif al-Khudary, "The Fragmentation of Iraq's 'Protest Parties' Attests to the Muhasasa System's Resilience", *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, June 7, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/06/07/the-fragmentation-of-iraqs-protest-parties-attests-to-the-muhasasa-systems-resilience/>. Accessed June 2022.

By introducing the Symbolic Cluster as the ultimate core of state identity and selectively applying elements of Giddens's structuration theory to symbolic meaning,⁸⁸⁹ this study advances the understanding of state identity as both processual and structured. Rather than adopting structuration in full, it focuses on how symbolic power, resonance and violence stabilise identity within political and social structures. While the self-other nexus remains fluid, identity retains relative stability through its embeddedness in structured symbolic relations, institutionalised practices and symbolic reinforcement. In this sense, this study contributes to structuration theory by demonstrating how symbolic relations function as stabilising mechanisms, ensuring continuity within an evolving self-other dynamic.

6.3. Empirical Feedback: Reassessing Religious, Political and Security Structures in Post-2003 Iraq

Having demonstrated how my research enriches and advances scholarship on key theoretical issues relevant to my research question – how Shia commonality impacts post-2003 Iraqi relations with Iran – and its sub-questions – how the identity of the self is constructed through the identity of the other, and how a state's collective identity can be described –, I shall now turn to the empirical findings.

While the previous section focused on theoretical contributions, this section critically reassesses how my research engages with and refines existing scholarship on post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, political authority and non-state armed groups, the agency clusters selected as empirical sites of observation for this study.

Following the structure of the theoretical feedback, I shall begin by briefly introducing the key authors and works that have been central to this analysis before evaluating the extent to which my research confirms, challenges, or advances prevailing interpretations. In the next sub-section, I shall examine the agency cluster of religious authority, engaging with the works of Laurence Louër,⁸⁹⁰ Caroleen Marji

⁸⁸⁹ Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 71–72.

⁸⁹⁰ Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008).

Sayej⁸⁹¹ and Harith Hasan al-Qarawee.⁸⁹² I shall then assess the scholarship on political authority, particularly the contributions of Charles Tripp,⁸⁹³ Toby Dodge,⁸⁹⁴ and Fanar Haddad,⁸⁹⁵ before concluding with an analysis of Faleh A. Jabar, Renad Mansour⁸⁹⁶ and Fanar Haddad's work on non-state armed groups.⁸⁹⁷

By integrating these perspectives, this section situates my findings within broader debates on Iraq's evolving political and security landscape, offering a reassessment of how religious, political and paramilitary actors shape post-2003 Iraqi Shia collective identity and influence its impact on inter-state relations with Iran.

6.3.1. Empirical Feedback: Reassessing Religious Authority in Post-2003 Iraq

Having established the theoretical foundations of this study, I shall now critically reassess the role of religious authority in shaping post-2003 Iraqi state identity and its impact on inter-state relations with Iran.

This section engages with the contributions of Laurence Loüer, Caroleen Marji Sayej, and Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, assessing the extent to which my findings confirm, challenge or advance their analyses. While their works provide crucial insights into the role of Shia religious authority, my study moves beyond their scope by applying the model developed in this research to reassess the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus and its impact on religious authority.

⁸⁹¹ Caroleen Marji Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs: Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁸⁹² Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja: Shii Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 481–497; Harith Hasan Al Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", *Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief* 105 (2023); Harith Hasan Al Qarawee, "The Subtle Power of Sistani", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 14 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80346>.

⁸⁹³ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸⁹⁴ Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2012); Toby Dodge, "'Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad': Explaining Hybrid Political Identities in Iraq", *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2018): 1381–1400.

⁸⁹⁵ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011).

⁸⁹⁶ Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future* (Beirut: The Carnegie Middle East Center, 2017).

⁸⁹⁷ Fanar Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State", *The Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2018.

6.3.1.1. Laurence Loüer: The Historical Self-Other Nexus and Post-2003 Developments

Laurence Loüer's *Transnational Shia Politics* (2008)⁸⁹⁸ offers an extensive historical analysis of the relationship between the Najafi and Qom *hawzat*, tracing the evolution of Shia clerical authority from the 10th century to the early 2000s.⁸⁹⁹ Her study contextualises the *marjaiyya* doctrine within broader transnational networks, highlighting the differences in clerical approaches between the Iraqi and Iranian religious establishments.⁹⁰⁰ Loüer underscores how the Iraqi clergy historically maintained a position of independence from political authority, while Iranian clerics integrated into state structures, particularly following the Safavid era.⁹⁰¹ These historical trajectories, she argues, shaped the post-2003 political landscape, influencing Sistani's stance on governance and his opposition to Iran's theocratic model.⁹⁰²

While Loüer's work provides a foundational understanding of the self-other nexus between the Iraqi and Iranian *hawzat*, it does not systematically examine the mutual influences between these institutions in the post-2003 context. The mechanisms through which this relationship evolved in the wake of Iraq's political fragmentation and Iran's growing influence remain underexplored.

My study builds upon Loüer's insights but moves beyond a historical account to examine how the self-other dynamic has evolved in the post-2003 period. By applying my model, I demonstrate that while the Najafi *hawza* has retained its symbolic independence, its interactions with the Iranian religious establishment have undergone significant shifts due to Iran's active engagement in Iraqi politics and security.

Moreover, Loüer's focus on transnational networks does not fully capture the policy-religion interplay in post-2003 Iraq. My analysis demonstrates that Iranian religious influence extends beyond clerical discourse into concrete political strategies,

⁸⁹⁸ Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*.

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68–60.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 79–82.

⁹⁰² *Ibid.*, 265.

particularly in shaping the Iraqi political elite's alignment with Iran. The transformation of Iraqi Shia religious authority cannot be understood solely through historical continuities; rather, it must be analysed as part of the broader self-other nexus that constructs Power, Myth and Security.

6.3.1.2. Caroleen Marji Sayej: Sistani's Nationalism and the Evolution of His Discourse

Caroleen Marji Sayej's *Patriotic Ayatollahs* (2018)⁹⁰³ provides a detailed account of Sistani's role in Iraq's state-building process, focusing on his nationalist rhetoric, opposition to occupation and emphasis on religious authority as a guardian of Iraq's unity. Sayej argues that Sistani consistently upheld Iraq's sovereignty by rejecting both American and Iranian interference, advocating for a civil state rather than a theocracy.⁹⁰⁴ Her analysis highlights key elements of Sistani's discourse, such as his rejection of militias, commitment to democratic processes and emphasis on religious authority as a moral rather than political guide.⁹⁰⁵

While Sayej's work successfully contextualises Sistani's nationalist orientation, it does not systematically analyse the evolution of his discourse over time, particularly regarding his stance on militias. My study addresses this gap by demonstrating that Sistani's position on militias, though seemingly consistent in principle, has undergone significant shifts in response to the self-other dynamic. His 2014 fatwa calling for volunteers to fight ISIS led to the formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), including Iranian-backed militias. This marked a departure from his previous opposition to paramilitary forces and necessitates an analysis of how such adaptations fit within his broader discourse of independence and national unity.

By applying my model, I argue that Sistani's pragmatism must be understood in relation to the fragmented nature of Iraq's social and political structures. While his vision for Iraq remains embedded in a nationalist framework, the Iraqi political elite has come to constitute a social system on its own, operating according to distinct rules,

⁹⁰³ Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs*.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 40–99.

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 127–163.

norms and values that are not shared by the broader Iraqi society. This divergence has constrained Sistani's ability to fully translate his ideological stance into effective political action. His discourse resonates strongly within Iraqi society, yet the political and security realities of post-2003 Iraq have required strategic recalibrations, compelling him to engage with a political elite that follows different imperatives.

The apparent contradiction in his stance on militias, particularly following the 2014 fatwa, should thus be understood within this fragmented landscape. Sayej's emphasis on nationalism, while insightful, does not fully capture these structural dynamics, which are essential to understanding how religious authority navigates Power and Security in post-2003 Iraq.

6.3.1.3. Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee: The Institutional Role of the Najafi Hawza and its Divergence from Iran

Harith Hasan's "The 'Formal' Marja: Shii Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq" (2019) and his consultancy reports (2023)⁹⁰⁶ offer a nuanced exploration of the evolving role of the Najafi *hawza* following Iraq's post-2003 political trajectories.

Hasan highlights Sistani's extraconstitutional authority, his influence over political developments and his resistance to sectarianism and political corruption.⁹⁰⁷ He also examines the ideological divergence between Sistani and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, particularly regarding clerical involvement in governance.⁹⁰⁸

Hasan identifies three key areas where Sistani and Khamenei diverge: their approach to Shia empowerment, their stance on political authority and their position on militias.⁹⁰⁹ While Iran has actively fostered Shia paramilitary networks, Sistani has maintained a cautious stance, advocating for state-led governance.⁹¹⁰ However, as

⁹⁰⁶ Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", *Middle East Brief* no. 105 (2023), Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University; and "The Subtle Power of Sistani", *Diwan* (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80346>.

⁹⁰⁷ Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja".

⁹⁰⁸ Al-Qarawee, "Sistani, Iran, and the Future of Shii Clerical Authority in Iraq", 2–3.

⁹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

my study demonstrates, Sistani's efforts to limit militia influence have been only partially successful. His fatwa against ISIS, while aimed at national defence, inadvertently strengthened Iran-aligned militias, complicating his long-term vision for a unified Iraq.

Building upon Hasan's insights, my study argues that the Najafi *hawza's* authority operates within a structured symbolic framework that is shaped by the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus. While Hasan focuses on the formal authority of the *marjaiyya*, my research extends this analysis by demonstrating how symbolic power, resonance, and violence interact to shape religious authority in contested political environments.

Sistani's discourse, while influential, has been constrained by the structuration of Iraq's fragmented political field, where Iranian-backed actors exert considerable influence. My study thus advances Hasan's work by integrating structuration theory and the Symbolic Cluster model to explain why religious authority, despite its ideological independence, remains embedded in broader power struggles.

6.3.1.4. Conclusion: Religious Authority, Symbolic Power & the Limits of Influence in Post-2003 Iraq

By critically engaging with the works of Löüer, Sayej and Hasan, this study demonstrates that post-2003 Iraqi religious authority cannot be understood solely through historical legacies or nationalist narratives. Instead, it must be analysed through the self-other nexus, where Power, Myth and Security interact to shape religious leadership and its political ramifications.

Through the application of my model, this study offers a structured analysis of how religious authority functions within Iraq's contested political landscape. While Sistani's symbolic power has shaped Iraqi collective identity, the structural realities of a divided state and external pressures – particularly from Iran – have constrained his influence. This study thus provides a nuanced understanding of the limits of religious authority in shaping Iraq's political and inter-state dynamics.

6.3.2. Feedback: Reassessing Post-2003 Iraqi Political Authority

Following the examination of religious authority, I shall now turn to the second empirical site of observation: post-2003 Iraqi political authority. This section critically reassesses the contributions of Charles Tripp, Toby Dodge and Fanar Haddad to the study of Iraqi Shia political identity and its relationship with Iranian political authority.

6.3.2.1. Charles Tripp: Historical Continuities & the Political Economy of Power

Charles Tripp's *A History of Iraq* (third edition, 2007)⁹¹¹ remains one of the most authoritative accounts of Iraq's historical trajectory, offering a detailed analysis of the history of Iraq since the Ottoman times to the post-2003 transformations. His work is invaluable for understanding the political and economic structures that have shaped Iraq's governance and its complex intra-Shia rivalries in the post-invasion period. Tripp highlights the role of patronage networks, the legacy of authoritarianism, and the instrumentalisation of sectarian identities in Iraq's power struggles.⁹¹²

While Tripp's study offers crucial insights into the political elite's strategic use of religious and sectarian affiliations, it does not fully address how these dynamics relate to the broader Iraq-Iran self-other nexus. He makes initial remarks on the existence of competing visions of Iraq's future among different political actors,⁹¹³ implicitly acknowledging a symbolic dimension in political identity formation. However, this aspect remains underdeveloped and Iran's role in shaping these competing narratives is not systematically examined.

By applying my model, I argue that Tripp's analysis needs to be expanded to account for the symbolic dimensions of Iraqi political identity formation. The post-2003 Iraqi political landscape has not only been shaped by material power struggles but also by competing symbolic fields, where different factions have sought to legitimise their authority through historical narratives, religious symbolism and sectarian discourse. While Tripp acknowledges Iran's role in shaping Iraq's Shia political elite,

⁹¹¹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*.

⁹¹² *Ibid.*, 252–386.

⁹¹³ *Ibid.*

he does not systematically analyse how Shia commonality has been mobilised as a tool of political legitimacy.

My findings indicate that Iran's influence in Iraq is not merely an extension of geopolitical strategy but is deeply embedded in the symbolic structures of Iraqi Shia political authority. The political elite's engagement with Iran is not monolithic; rather, it reflects a fragmented self-other relationship, where different factions negotiate their positions within the contested fields of Power, Myth and Security.

6.3.2.2. Toby Dodge: Hybrid Political Identities & the Crisis of Legitimacy

Toby Dodge's *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (2013)⁹¹⁴ provides a crucial examination of Iraq's post-invasion political system, focusing on the state's failure to establish legitimacy and the persistence of authoritarian practices. His application of Bourdieu's theory in the article "Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad" (2018)⁹¹⁵ further refines this analysis, illustrating how post-2003 Iraq's political field is shaped by different political groups, which blend sectarian, nationalist and clientelist discourses while putting forward divergent symbolic visions for the country and its future.⁹¹⁶ Dodge's work is particularly relevant for this study's conceptualisation of symbolic capital and power and its role in structuring political authority.

However, while Dodge successfully demonstrates how Iraq's political struggle unfolds on a symbolic level, he does not sufficiently address the transnational dimension of these struggles. My research expands on his framework by illustrating how Iranian political authority has influenced Iraq's symbolically fragmented political field. The Iraqi political elite has engaged in a process of selective appropriation, drawing on Iranian support to consolidate power while simultaneously asserting nationalist credentials to maintain legitimacy. This study argues that Iran's involvement in Iraq should not be seen as a unidirectional imposition but as a negotiated process within Iraq's own internal power struggles. Iraqi Shia political identity is not passively

⁹¹⁴ Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism*.

⁹¹⁵ Dodge, "Bourdieu Goes to Baghdad".

⁹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31–34.

shaped by Iranian influence but is actively redefined through the competing interests of various factions, which engage in both resistance and accommodation.

By applying my model, I highlight how the fragmentation of Iraq's political authority has resulted in an unresolved symbolic competition, where multiple visions of Iraqi sovereignty coexist. The lack of a dominant symbolic power has prevented the consolidation of a unified political identity, contributing to ongoing instability. My analysis demonstrates that Iraq's continuous political crises are not merely a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism but rather a deeper contestation over the symbolic foundations of the state. This is evident in the persistent oscillation between nationalist rhetoric and sectarian mobilisation, whereby some Iraqi leaders simultaneously invoke and reject Iranian influence depending on political opportunities.

6.3.2.3. Fanar Haddad: Sectarianism, Myth & Competing Political Visions

Fanar Haddad's *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (2011)⁹¹⁷ provides a critical analysis of how sectarianism has shaped Iraq's post-2003 political landscape. His work is particularly valuable for this study's conceptualisation of Myth, as he examines the competing historical narratives that underpin Iraqi national identity.

Haddad argues that both Sunni and Shia political discourses claim to be the true embodiment of Iraqi identity, resulting in a form of 'antagonistic unity' where national belonging is asserted through sectarian exclusivity.⁹¹⁸

While Haddad's analysis offers a compelling account of Iraq's fragmented national identity, he does not fully explore the role of external actors, particularly Iran, in shaping these competing narratives. My study extends his framework by demonstrating how Shia commonality has functioned as both a unifying and divisive force in Iraqi politics. On the one hand, shared religious identity has facilitated Iranian penetration into Iraq's political sphere, allowing Tehran to cultivate alliances with key Shia factions. On the other hand, the very notion of Shia commonality has been contested within Iraq, with different political actors advancing divergent visions of what

⁹¹⁷ Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*.

⁹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25–29.

it means to be both Iraqi and Shia. This study argues that the Iraqi-Iranian self-other nexus is not a simple binary of alignment or opposition but a complex field of negotiated meanings, where identity is continually redefined through political practice.

By incorporating the concept of Myth, my research illustrates how competing political factions construct different symbolic narratives to legitimise their authority. The myth of 'Shia resistance' against foreign occupation, for instance, has been deployed both to justify Iraqi sovereignty and to legitimise Iranian-backed militias. Similarly, the myth of 'Iraqist nationalism imbued with an exclusivist Shia assertion' has been used to rally support for nationalist Shia parties while excluding Sunni actors from the political sphere. These competing Myths demonstrate that Iraqi political identity is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and contested construct where sectarian and nationalist discourses intersect.

6.3.2.4. Conclusion: The Fragmentation of Political Authority & the Iraq-Iran Nexus

By integrating the insights of Tripp, Dodge and Haddad with my theoretical model, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of post-2003 Iraqi political authority. While existing scholarship has extensively analysed Iraq's internal power struggles and sectarian divisions, my research highlights how these dynamics are embedded in the broader Iraq-Iran self-other nexus. The fragmentation of Iraq's political authority has resulted in a landscape where different factions navigate their relationships with Iran in ways that are simultaneously pragmatic, strategic and symbolic.

This study advances the understanding of Iraqi political identity by demonstrating that Shia commonality has not produced a cohesive political vision but has instead fuelled intra-Shia competition. While Iran's influence is undeniable, its impact is mediated through Iraq's own internal struggles, where different actors contest the meaning and implications of Shia identity. The failure to establish a dominant symbolic authority has contributed to Iraq's persistent instability, as no single faction has succeeded in fully consolidating power or defining a unifying national narrative. In this sense, the Iraqi-Iranian relationship is not simply one of dependency

but of mutual instrumentalisation, where both states engage in a continuous process of negotiation, competition and symbolic realignment.

6.3.3. Empirical Feedback: Reassessing Post-2003 Iraqi Militias

Finally, I shall turn to the scholarship that has provided critical insights into the last agency cluster examined in this study: non-state armed groups. In this subsection, I shall engage with the works of Faleh A. Jabar, Renad Mansour⁹¹⁹ and Fanar Haddad,⁹²⁰ whose analyses of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), which this study has taken as a case study for post-2003 Iraqi militias, offer foundational perspectives on its structure, role, and political significance. Two crucial elements concerning non-state militias and security in post-2003 Iraq have been analysed in previous theoretical sections and will not be reiterated here to avoid redundancy: Iran's isolation from the international community as an institutionalised reality within the contemporary international system, and the fight against ISIS as a cogent example of symbolic violence projected onto the international arena.

6.3.3.1. Faleh A. Jabar & Renad Mansour: The PMF's Internal Fragmentation and Iran's Role

Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour's *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future* (2017) provides a foundational analysis of the PMF's formation, internal divisions, and evolving relationship with the Iraqi state. Their study categorises PMF factions based on their alignment with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr, illustrating the complex internal structure of the organisation. They highlight the dominance of Iranian-backed factions, which possess superior military resources and wield considerable influence over Iraq's security policies.⁹²¹

However, while Jabar and Mansour effectively map out the PMF's internal structures, their analysis remains a starting point rather than a comprehensive investigation. The divisions within the PMF are more numerous than their

⁹¹⁹ Jabar and Mansour, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*.

⁹²⁰ Haddad, *Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units*.

⁹²¹ Jabar and Mansour, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*, 12–14.

categorisation suggests, and their work does not fully explore how Shia identity functions within these militias or how Iran's influence extends beyond material support. My findings indicate that the PMF is not merely a fragmented security force where Iranian-backed militias hold superior strength; rather, it has served as a crucial instrument for Iran, which has used Shia commonality to entrench itself within Iraq's security framework and, more broadly, the Iraqi state.

At the same time, Iran has not secured an uncontested symbolic hegemony within the PMF, leading to a dynamic of bargaining and accommodation rather than outright subordination. While Iranian-backed factions dominate militarily, resistance persists among key Iraqi Shia factions, either due to ideological divergences or as a strategic manoeuvre to maintain domestic legitimacy. This study demonstrates that the PMF's internal struggles are not only about competing military power but also about the contested symbolic narratives that define its legitimacy within Iraq's security and political landscape.

6.3.3.2. Fanar Haddad: The PMF as a Hybrid Security Actor

Fanar Haddad's *Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State* provides a more in-depth analysis of the PMF's dual role as both a state-affiliated and non-state actor. He illustrates how the PMF operates within Iraq's security framework while maintaining independent command structures, political objectives and transnational affiliations, particularly with Iran.⁹²² His study offers critical insights into how PMF factions engage in bargaining and accommodation rather than outright conflict.

Haddad's insights are crucial for understanding the PMF's structural hybridity and its implications for Iraq's broader security environment. However, his analysis does not fully explore the role of Shia identity as an instrument of Iranian penetration or the broader impact of the Security construct in shaping Iraq's post-2003 inter-state relations. This study expands on Haddad's framework by applying its theoretical model to demonstrate that, while Iranian-backed militias dominate in terms of military

⁹²² Haddad, *Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units*, 40–43.

capability, they have not acquired uncontested symbolic power. Their influence and repressive violence have been normalised within the security landscape, fostering a dynamic of accommodation and resistance rather than clear-cut subordination.

Moreover, by investigating the Myths that have dominated the PMF landscape – specifically, the shrine protection narrative, the struggle against foreign occupation, and Iran’s projection of Shia imperial power –, this study reveals the competing ideological forces within the PMF. It shows how Iran has attempted to co-opt these narratives to consolidate its influence, while Iraqi forces, despite facing material constraints, have resisted full absorption into Iran’s sphere of control. This contestation reinforces the idea that the PMF is not merely an extension of Iran’s security apparatus but an arena of ongoing symbolic competition, where different factions use Shia identity both as a means of resistance and as a tool for further integration into Iran’s strategic vision.

6.3.3.3. Conclusion: The Militarisation of Governance and Iraq’s Security Fragmentation

While these scholars highlight the PMF’s evolution and Iran’s strategic influence, this study advances the discussion by arguing that, since 2003, Iran has sought to maintain Iraq in a dependent position, using non-state armed groups as primary instruments of influence. Unlike conventional narratives that frame Iraq’s engagement with Iran as a straightforward case of subordination, my findings suggest a more complex dynamic of bargaining and accommodation rather than outright control.

Iranian-backed factions dominate militarily, yet some Iraqi Shia PMF components resist Iranian hegemony, either due to ideological divergences or as a populist manoeuvre to maintain domestic legitimacy. However, Iraq’s security apparatus, including the Iraqi army, often aligns with Iranian directives despite engaging with other international actors such as the United States.

More importantly, this study argues that Shia commonality has served as a vehicle for Iran’s penetration into Iraq’s security apparatus and, ultimately, the Iraqi state. The construct of Security has been the primary arena where Iran has exerted

influence to maintain Iraq in a dependent position, leading to the fragmentation of Iraq's monopoly on violence and the entrenchment of Iranian-backed militias within its security framework. This fragmentation has prevented the consolidation of a unified Iraqi security identity, reinforcing a security landscape where violence, rather than institutional authority, dictates power.

Furthermore, this dynamic has not only reshaped Iraq's internal power structures but has also integrated Shia Iraq into Iran's broader regional and international strategies. These strategies, rooted in Iran's institutionalised isolation, are driven by the international community's shared perception of Iran as a destabilising force and their collective interest in containing its influence. Consequently, Iran's engagement with Iraqi militias is not solely a matter of regional politics but a reflection of its broader struggle to circumvent international constraints and sustain its position within an adversarial global order.

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how this study advances the existing literature by providing a structured model for analysing a state's collective identity and its impact on inter-state relations. By systematising the self-other nexus through the constructs of Power, Myth, Security and the Symbolic Cluster, it moves beyond abstract relational concepts found in constructivist scholarship to offer a concrete analytical framework for examining inter-state dynamics.

Each section has summarised the relevant theoretical and empirical works from Chapter 2 – *Research Question & Its Place in Relation to Core Literature* – before discussing how this study has refined, expanded or challenged existing perspectives. Through this engagement, this study has introduced an operational model that bridges theoretical debates on identity with empirical analysis, allowing for a more structured understanding of how identity shapes inter-state relations.

In the first section, I examined the constructivist foundations of this study, particularly how Wendt and Neumann emphasise the role of identity in shaping state behaviour and the self-other nexus as central to identity formation. While their insights

provided a foundation, my study systematises these concepts into an operational model, offering a structured framework for understanding how collective identity is formed and impacts inter-state relations.

Building on this, I explored how Levinas, Bakhtin and Derrida conceptualise the fluid, dialogical and non-hierarchical nature of the self-other relationship. My study extends these insights by demonstrating that the self-other nexus is not merely a site of recognition and exchange but also a structuring force in inter-state relations. The Iraqi-Iranian case shows how identity, while mutually constituted, can be asymmetrically reinforced, with Iran leveraging shared Shia identity to sustain Iraq's dependence.

By introducing Power, Myth, Security and the Symbolic Cluster as key constructs of the self-other nexus, this study demonstrates that state identity is not only discursively negotiated but also embedded in power structures, myths, and security concerns that actively shape inter-state behaviour.

In the section on Power, I engaged with Foucault's concept of power-knowledge production and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and field competition. By integrating their insights, this study presents Power as a structuring force that remains contested yet persistent, shaping identity through competition, symbolic reproduction and inter-state entanglements.

In the section on Myth, I revisited Smith's ethno-symbolism, which provides valuable insights into historical continuities in identity formation but remains static and deterministic. This study advances a constructivist conceptualisation of Myth, arguing that myths are not fixed cultural inheritances but fluid constructs reshaped through political and strategic processes.

In the section on Security, I engaged with securitisation theories from the Copenhagen and Paris Schools, extending them to show that security discourses are not singular but contested and overlapping. By combining Foucault's bio-power, Galtung's cultural violence and Agamben's zone of indistinction and *homo sacer*, I applied symbolic violence to international relations, conceptualising it as a mechanism

through which states legitimise intervention and exclusion. This study also introduced Iran's institutionalised isolation as a contemporary institution in the international system, affecting Iraq's strategic behaviour. By framing Iran as an internationally isolated state, this study highlights how Iraq's entanglement with Iran is structurally reinforced by global constraints.

This study introduced the Symbolic Cluster (SC) as the binding nexus between Power, Myth and Security, conceptualising it as the core of a state's collective identity. By selectively applying Giddens's structuration theory to the SC, I demonstrated how symbolic structures provide stability within a constantly evolving self-other nexus.

In the second part of this chapter, I applied this theoretical model to empirical sites of observation – religious authority, political authority and non-state armed groups – demonstrating how these agency clusters shape Iraqi Shia collective identity and, consequently, Iraq-Iran relations.

For religious authority, I built on Loüer, Sayej and Hasan to show that post-2003 Iraqi clerical leadership must be analysed through the self-other nexus. While Sistani's symbolic power remains strong, the realities of fragmented state structures and Iranian influence have constrained his authority, highlighting the limits of religious leadership in shaping state identity and inter-state relations.

For political authority, I engaged with Tripp, Dodge and Haddad, demonstrating that Iraq's fragmented political landscape and Iranian penetration into the Iraqi state are embedded in the Iraq-Iran self-other nexus. My study advances existing scholarship by arguing that Shia commonality has been a vehicle for Iran's strategic influence in Iraq but has not produced political cohesion, instead fuelling intra-Shia competition. The unresolved symbolic struggle reinforces Iraq's political fragmentation.

For militias, I built on Jabar, Mansour and Haddad, demonstrating that Iran has used militias to entrench itself within Iraq's security framework and, ultimately, the Iraqi state, with Shia commonality serving as the main instrument of penetration. However, some Iraqi PMF factions continue to resist Iranian influence. Given the military

superiority of Iranian-backed militias, Iraqi PMF factions opt for bargaining and accommodation rather than outright conflict. This dynamic underscores that Iran has successfully penetrated Iraq's security apparatus but has not secured uncontested symbolic dominance. I also argued that the military field has increasingly absorbed other societal fields, and the persistent instability of post-2003 Iraq is a consequence of this militarisation.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated how this study advances existing scholarship by providing a structured model for analysing identity formation and inter-state relations. By bridging theoretical debates with empirical findings, this research offers a systematised approach to understanding how identity shapes state behaviour.

By applying this model to post-2003 Iraq, this study provides a more nuanced account of how collective identity operates through the constructs of Power, Myth and Security, with the Symbolic Cluster ensuring relative stability to a state's identity despite the continuous redefinition of the self-other nexus. These findings extend beyond Iraq, offering a structured method for analysing state identity in other inter-state relations.

7. Conclusion

Shia Commonality and Iraqi-Iranian Inter-State Relations

This thesis set out to examine how Shia commonality has shaped post-2003 Iraqi-Iranian inter-state relations by conceptualising identity as both a structuring force and a processual dynamic. Through the development and application of a theoretical model centred on the self-other nexus, this study has demonstrated how Power, Myth and Security interact to shape state identity and foreign policy behaviour. By applying this model to the empirical cases of religious authority, political authority and non-state armed groups in Iraq, this research has provided a nuanced understanding of how Shia commonality has been both a vehicle for cooperation and a site of contestation in Iraq-Iran relations. In doing so, this study has contributed to the definition and analysis of the concept of a state's collective identity and its impact on inter-state relations, offering a structured framework for examining the role of identity in shaping foreign policy and domestic governance. Moreover, the model's broader applicability allows it to be used beyond this case, providing an analytical tool for studying inter-state relations structured by shared identity elements, ideological opposition or enmity practices in other contexts.

Situating the Research Within the Literature

Chapter 1 – *Research Question & Its Place in Relation to Core Literature* – established the scholarly foundation of this study by situating its central research question within broader International Relations literature. It engaged with constructivist approaches to state identity, building on Alexander Wendt and Iver Neumann's conceptualisation of identity as a relational construct while refining this framework through insights from Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jacques Derrida. These perspectives underscored the self-other nexus as a structuring force in inter-state relations, highlighting the dialogical and non-hierarchical nature of identity formation.

The study further integrated Michel Foucault's power-knowledge structures and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of symbolic capital and field competition to analyse Power dynamics as one of the three core constructs shaping the self-other nexus, alongside

Myth narratives and Security concerns. Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist approach was presented as fundamental for understanding the role of historical narratives in identity formation; however, this study moves beyond static interpretations, demonstrating how Myths are continuously contested and reinterpreted in politically volatile environments. Additionally, securitisation theories from the Copenhagen and Paris Schools required expansion to account for competing narratives in fragmented political contexts such as post-2003 Iraq. To this end, Johan Galtung's concept of 'cultural violence' and Giorgio Agamben's notions of the zone of indistinction and *homo sacer* were incorporated. Finally, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory was examined to conceptualise identity as both processual and structured, maintaining relative stability while evolving through inter-state interactions.

Constructing State Identity: The Theoretical Model

Chapter 2 – *Constructing State's Collective Identity: A Model* – introduced the theoretical model that forms the core of this study, offering a structured framework for analysing how a state's collective identity impacts its inter-state relations with a relevant other. The self-other nexus conceptualises identity as a processual and dialogical dynamic, where the self is continuously shaped through its interaction with a significant other. This model identifies three interdependent constructs of the self-other nexus – Power, Myth, and Security – as the core dimensions of collective identity, bound together by the Symbolic Cluster, which integrates symbolic capital/power, resonance and violence.

By integrating constructivist, structuralist and symbolic dimensions, this study advances the conceptualisation of state identity as simultaneously structured and fluid, maintaining stability through structuration processes while being continuously reshaped through interaction with the other. Finally, this theoretical framework is designed for broader applicability beyond the Iraq-Iran case, offering a tool to examine inter-state relations structured by identity commonalities, ideological oppositions or contested symbolic fields.

Applying the Model to Post-2003 Iraq Religious Authority

Chapter 3 applied this model to post-2003 Iraqi religious authority, focusing on the Najafi *hawza* and the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as the central force both shaping and manifesting Iraq's Shia religious identity. While Sistani's authority remains deeply rooted in the Iraqi clerical tradition and widely accepted within Iraqi society, it has not translated into decisive political influence. The fragmented nature of Iraq's political elite and Iran's sustained influence have constrained his ability to enforce his vision of a sovereign Iraq resistant to external interference. The Najafi-Qom self-other nexus has historically been shaped by both exchange and rivalry, reinforcing Iraq's clerical independence while simultaneously enabling Iran's broader political and military foothold.

Political Authority

Chapter 4 applied the model to post-2003 Iraqi political authority, examining how Iraq's political elite has navigated its self-other nexus with Iran. This analysis revealed that, while Shia political identity has been a defining feature of post-2003 Iraqi governance, it has also served as a crucial vehicle for Iranian penetration into Iraq's political sphere. Iraq's social fragmentation has deepened, with the political elite constituting a self-contained social system largely disconnected from the wider Iraqi population. Iranian patronage and militia networks have entrenched elite survival patterns that do not align with broader societal interests, further alienating the ruling class from the Iraqi public.

Non-State Armed Groups and Iran's Influence

Chapter 5 applied the model to post-2003 Iraqi non-state armed groups, focusing on the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) as a case study to examine how Shia identity in its military dimension has shaped inter-state relations between Iraq and Iran. This chapter introduced two key theoretical contributions: the concept of symbolic violence as projected in the international arena and the framing of Iran's institutionalised isolation as a contemporary institution. The analysis illustrated how PMF military actions against ISIS acquired a symbolic dimension that reinforced Iran's geopolitical positioning. Furthermore, Iran's international isolation was reinterpreted as a structurally embedded condition shaping Iraq-Iran relations.

Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

Finally, Chapter 6 – *Advancing the Study of State Identity: Theoretical and Empirical Contributions* – evaluated the broader impact of this study on existing scholarship, demonstrating how the theoretical model developed in Chapter 2 advances debates on identity formation and inter-state relations, while the empirical research enriches the existing literature on post-2003 Iraq.

This study introduces symbolic violence in international relations, extending theories of bio-power and cultural violence (Foucault, Galtung, Agamben) to demonstrate how symbolic legitimacy can justify intervention, exclusion and repression within global politics. Additionally, it conceptualises Iran's institutionalised isolation as a contemporary institution, framing its exclusion from the international community as a structurally embedded condition shaping Iraq-Iran relations. These conceptual contributions refine existing theories of securitisation and structuration, integrating symbolic elements as essential to state identity formation.

By demonstrating how identity functions as both a structuring force and a field of contestation, this study provides a systematised approach that extends beyond Iraq, offering a structured method for analysing state identity in inter-state relations shaped by ideological affinities, contested narratives or symbolic competition.

Future Research and Broader Implications

This study has demonstrated how identity, far from being an abstract or purely discursive construct, actively shapes inter-state relations through structured mechanisms of Power, Myth, Security and the Symbolic Cluster. By developing a systematic model that integrates the self-other nexus with symbolic structures, this research has provided a concrete framework for analysing how state identity is both produced and sustained over time. While applied to the case of Iraq-Iran relations, the model's conceptual foundations extend beyond this specific context, offering a structured approach to understanding inter-state dynamics shaped by ideological affinities, contested narratives and symbolic competition.

The introduction of symbolic violence in international relations and the conceptualisation of Iran's institutionalised isolation as a contemporary institution further illustrate how identity operates at both domestic and international levels, reinforcing structures of influence and dependence. These insights contribute to a broader discussion on how identity structures foreign policy, domestic governance and global power relations.

As identity remains a key force in shaping global politics, future research could apply this framework to other cases where states navigate complex identity dynamics, whether through shared ideological frameworks, historical enmities or competing national myths. David Campbell's *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* provides a valuable foundation for such studies, demonstrating how foreign policy serves as a site of identity construction and reinforces political hierarchies. Further research could build on Campbell's approach, integrating the model developed in this study to examine cases where identity-driven inter-state relations influence regional security, political legitimacy and symbolic power structures.

By offering a structured framework for studying identity in inter-state relations, this research advances theoretical debates on identity formation and inter-state dynamics while laying the groundwork for further investigations into how identity structures continue to shape the international system in an era of increasing geopolitical fragmentation.

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