



*Understanding Iranian Proxy Warfare:
A Historical Analysis of the Relational Development of the Islamic
Republic of Iran and Iraqi Insurgencies*

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Abstract

In recent years, the IRI has managed to increase its influence in the Middle East. The strategic use of proxy warfare has played a central role as surrounding countries have become destabilised. However, following the positivist logic of structural IR theories, the materially inferior IRI should not be a stronger player in the region's conflicts than the US and its Arab allies. The Iranian success in proxy warfare therefore provides a paradox for the explanatory framework of reductionist IR theories which rely on rational and positivist epistemologies. I argue that this is because these perspectives do not endorse an adequate comprehension of the mutual embedded relations which have served the IRI a strategic advantage in proxy warfare. In a challenge to the parsimonious reductionism of structural IR and security studies, I adopt Feklyunina's constructivist framework for analysing soft power as a relational identity. Thereby, I switch the focus from a top-down analysis of the IRI to a focus including Iraqi insurgencies' acceptance or rejection of the IRI's national identity and foreign policy goals. I argue that identity matter in proxy relations. Hence, I estimate the IRI's strength in proxy warfare based on potential Iraqi insurgencies' compatible identities. I employ a longitudinal historical research design tracing the development of collective identities within Iraq. The study finds that the Iraqi Shi'ites share important common facets of their identity with the IRI and have subsequently been willing to fight as proxies against American and Sunni forces in Iraq. However, identity and legitimacy structures in the Middle East are complex, multifaceted, constantly changing, and dependent on context. Iraqi Shi'ites still preserve some reservation and antipathy towards the Iranian regime due to a nationalist sense of community.

Keywords:

Iranian Foreign Policy, Proxy Warfare, Iraqi Civil War, Relational Identities, Constructivism, Critical Security Analysis, New War.

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List of Abbreviations

Anglo-Persian Oil Company	APOC
Central Intelligence Agency	CIA
Gulf Cooperation Council	GCC
International Relations	IR
Islamic Republic of Iran	IRI
United Kingdom	UK
United States of America	US
Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq	SCIRI
The First World War	WW1
The Second World War	WW2

1) Introduction

With America's military overthrow of established regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and the sweeping wave of state collapses following 'the Arab Spring' in 2011, the balance of power in the Middle East has become destabilised. Several states have been weakened by disintegrated violence amongst ethnic, religious, and ideological factions. Meanwhile, Iran has managed to expand its influence in the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape by supporting foreign insurgencies in the region. The Islamic regime has thus maintained a position as one of the most influential states in the world's most militarised region despite decades of isolation and resistance from the US. However, in material military capabilities, Iran is inferior compared to its adversaries in the region who are supported by the US. The Iranian success therefore provides a paradox to conventional security logic based on state-centric, coercive and material conceptions of power. *New War* theorists and constructivist scholars have challenged these rationalist approaches and instead insisted on the necessity of understanding identity formations in modern conflicts. Thus, in order to better understand the roots of the Iranian strategy of supporting foreign insurgencies, I will explore the following question:

How can the historical development of collective identities in Iraq provide an understanding of Iranian proxy relations in Iraq?

Despite increasing empirical relevance, the issue of proxy-warfare remains under-theorised and under-studied (Rauta, 2018: 450). As I address how to understand Iranian proxy warfare, I challenge the dominant materialist ontology of power and underlying positivist epistemology within security studies. Rather than understanding proxy warfare as an extended military capability of states, I employ a constructivist bottom-up approach analysing the Iranian use of proxy warfare as a product of soft power established through social and historical developments. I emphasise that a materially based conception of power cannot adequately explain the emerging patterns of proxy warfare in the Middle East, and Iraq specifically.

Through a historical case study of the social developments that underpin the Iranian national identity as well as Iraqi insurgencies, this study explores the identities of the fighting factions within Iraq and to what extent their beliefs and adversaries are compatible with Iran. Feklyunina's framework for understanding relational identities is operationalised to measure the extent to which Iran and insurgencies in Iraq have developed a compatible understanding of enemies. Hence, I use scholars and historians accounts to analyse the sociological development that provides the foundation and precondition for external funding and establishment of proxy relations in Iraq. Conclusively, with

an examination of Iran's multifaceted and complex national identity and Iraqi insurgencies' identities, I investigate which foreign policy discourse would be favourable in Iran's relational engagement with proxies in Iraq.

1.1) Structure of the Thesis

First, I will review literature relevant to my study. I will begin by reviewing the dominant theoretical schools' take on the subject: Realism, traditional security studies, and constructivism. Thence, I will introduce area-specific literature on IR's disciplinary challenges in the Middle East followed by literature on how to understand the evolving nature of warfare.

After reviewing the relevant literature, I will present my research design where I describe how I operationalise the introduced theoretical concepts and collect relevant data in order to answer my research question. This section will also include the considerations that inform my methodological choices, and specifically the issues associated with the use of historical data in IR.

Thirdly, I will present the collected historical data in order to determine the most important facets of the Iranian national identity, and to trace the social developments of collective identities within Iraq. This will lead to an analysis and evaluation of the extent that Iranian identity and foreign policy stems from, and is in opposition to, similar norms as those of their Iraqi proxies. Based on this, I briefly discuss how Iran can frame its foreign policy discourse in order to potentially deepen its relational identity with Iraqi insurgencies.

Finally, the thesis will be concluded by a section of concluding remarks. Here, I will summarise and evaluate the central findings of the conducted research and relate it to existing scholarly perspectives. In this section, I will also propose further studies which can add value to the current debates on proxy warfare and Iranian foreign policy.

2) Existing Perspectives on Iranian Foreign Policy

To address the issue of Iranian sponsorship of insurgencies in the region, and the general approach to proxy warfare, academics have asked questions such as: What are the Iranian interests in the region? Why is Iran pursuing this unconventional strategy of proxy warfare? How can we best understand and analyse modern warfare? And, how can the Iranian use of proxies and unconventional warfare be understood?

Various streams of literature have drawn on different theories in an attempt to answer these questions. Realists and traditional security analysts have traditionally drawn on a causal explanatory

framework emphasising the role of the international system's constraints on Iran. This way, the reason that the isolated and vulnerable Iran is maximising its national security through an unconventional deterrence strategy of supporting foreign insurgencies (Ward, 2005; Carpenter and Innocent, 2007; Talmadge, 2008; El Berni, 2018). Constructivist IR scholars, on the other hand, have pointed towards the role of the Islamic Republic's unique ideology and how the distinct national identity has guided foreign policy decisions in order to liberate subordinated Muslims from the dominance of the Western liberal world order (Nia, 2012; Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016).

While these perspectives provide valuable understandings, they carry a limited understanding of the relational social dynamics that enable the emergence of proxy relations. Therefore, I further include the theoretical perspectives of Feklyunina, Hinnebusch, and Kaldor. Although not directly related to the debate of Iranian proxy relations, Feklyunina has provided a valuable constructivist framework for analysing relational power dynamics in IR (2016). Raymond Hinnebusch, an IR scholar specialised in the Middle East, has argued that the often-implicit ontological assumption of congruent nation-states is misleading when studying the Middle East (2018). Hinnebusch's objection to parsimonious system-level analyses is complemented by Mary Kaldor's *New Wars* theory which challenges the traditional ontological understanding of war as well as the underlying positivist logic (Kaldor, 2005, 2010, 2012, 2013).

I will elaborate on these perspectives in the following section in order to present the most influential research that has been published; to position my own argument, and; to present central concepts which will later be included in the analysis.

2.1) Traditional Approaches to Understanding Iranian Foreign Policy and Strategy

To begin the exploration of existing literature relevant to my research, I will present the most traditional perspectives within studies on the dynamics of regional power politics in the Middle East, namely the realist perspectives along with traditional security approaches.

Following Tilly's elegantly simple claim that war makes states and states, in turn, make war, Realism has been attempting to theorise the origins of war among states in the international realm (Tilly, 1985; Waltz, 1990). Based on an ontological conception of the international system being defined by the system's states and their national interests, the realist logic emphasises that states find themselves in an anarchic system with no centralised governing structure (Mearsheimer, 1994: 10). The relative distribution of power capabilities among states therefore makes up structural constraints for states in the anarchical system (Waltz, 1990: 36). However, security dilemmas emerge when states

become insecure about competing states' intentions and capabilities. Although states ought to act rationally in order to not get punished by other states, these insecurities can sometimes lead to misinterpretations, conflicts and even war (Mearsheimer, 1994: 10).

Realist scholars analysing the Iranian foreign policy often note that the Islamic Republic is situated in a security dilemma against the strong regional players Saudi Arabia and Israel, who, in turn, are supported by the external superpower, the US. The constraining role of the US plays a central in most realist analyses on the Iranian foreign policy (Talmadge, 2008; El Berni, 2018). Thus, from a realist perspective, it is essential to note that the Middle East has been of vital geopolitical interest to the US during the Cold War against the Soviet as well as during the unipolar moment that followed (Gause III, 1994: 56; Walt, 2011: 13). After Iran's revolution in 1979, the new Islamic Republic, which had developed strong military capacities during the previous US-supported Shah regime, went from being an important ally of the US to a hostile enemy. Realists, therefore, emphasise that the US strategy in the region has, since the Islamic revolution, focused on the containment of Iranian influence and protection of the global oil market which is highly dependent on regional stability in the oil-rich Gulf (Gause III, 1994: 59-60; Talmadge, 2008: 85; Walt, 2011: 13).

However, as the American unipolar moment dried up in the sand of two unwinnable wars at the beginning of the 2000s, realists have asserted that the emerging multipolar world order has started to project a more fragmented order in the region (Walt, 2011: 10-11). Thus, as American influence is waning, Kausch reasons that Iran has gained much relative regional power as Iraq, a long-term neighbouring enemy, has collapsed due to American aggression, and the Arab Spring has opened up for sectarian conflicts within the territory of Sunni-governed states opposing Iranian influence (Kausch, 2015: 2, 7). Consequently, a new insecure structure is emerging with fierce competition for power and without an established regional hegemon (Kausch, 2015: 12; Fawcett, 2017: 792).

The academic tenure-dollar question among Iranian foreign policy experts has been a structure-agency debate regarding the extent to which the IRI is behaving according to the international system's structural constraints or based on its unique religious identity. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, one of the most cited experts on Iranian foreign policy, argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran has in fact grown largely pragmatic from a realist perspective despite revolutionary discourse (2002: 284). Ehtasmani's estimation is based on a historical process tracing of Iran's foreign policy and the structural constraints that realist perceives to be decisive in the shaping of Iranian foreign policy (2002). In Ehtesmani's assessment, Iran has gradually moved away from an ideological and irrational

Islamic foreign policy, towards an alliance-seeking strategy which is more beneficial given Iran's geopolitical situation and the external constraints that Iran faces (2002: 306-07).

As the realist framework relies on an ontological conception of war as a phenomenon that happens on the inter-state level, proxy warfare has not received much attention in the traditional realist IR analyses. However, some traditional security experts who adopt the underlying state-centric and positivist epistemology of realism have explored Iranian funding of external insurgencies. As an example, Ward, who has analysed official Iranian military journals and domestic military rhetoric, accentuates the importance of understanding Iran's sense of insecurity as the country is facing regional opposition from the militarily stronger Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US (2005: 566). Consequently, Ward argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran has relied on a strategy of unconventional deterrence due to its relative inferior material capabilities (Ward, 2005: 575-76). Iran is therefore supporting foreign proxies as it carries a considerable threat of potential regional destabilisation if the US attacked Iran (Ward, 2005: 567). Barzegar complements Ward's reasoning as he concludes that the asymmetrical use of proxy warfare is a rational, defensive, low-cost deterrence strategy for a relatively weak state in an insecure geopolitical environment (2008: 94).

With realism's intrinsic positivist epistemology focusing on the measurable relative material capabilities of states, it follows that states constantly attempt to get stronger in order to coerce and constrain other states to act according to their wishes. Barnett and Duvall categorise this ontological notion of power as *compulsory power* in their influential taxonomy of power (2005: 40, 50). Hence, when the issue of proxy warfare is included in realist analyses, it is perceived as a rational deterrence strategy involving high risks and relatively low costs (Ward, 2005: 567; Brown, 2016: 244). A thorough relational analysis of both embedded actors engaged in a proxy relation is thus too complex for the parsimonious realist research paradigm.

With the inherent focus on the states in the international system, the study of proxy war becomes a top-down analysis focusing on the material capabilities and intentions of the states involved. Thus, a comprehensive investigation of proxy groups' relations would have to reject the analytical primacy of states and the international system. Moreover, the implicit positivist epistemology of realism would simplistically assume that proxy groups ought to accept the most materially beneficial alliance with the strongest possible state instead of defining relations based on their historical and social identity.

2.2) *A Constructivist Approach to Iranian Foreign Policy*

Instead of giving analytical primacy to the international system's constraints on states' foreign policy like the realist tradition, constructivists have focused on analysing the underlying norms and identities that guide Iranian foreign behaviour (Nia, 2011; Karimifard, 2012; Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016). As Reus-Smit notes, contrary to realism, constructivist concepts do not produce grand generalisable law-like predictions and prescriptions which can be applied across time and space. Instead, the conceptual toolbox of constructivism enables an in-depth analysis of the underlying norms, identities, and ideas that impact context-specific political outcomes (Reus-Smit, 2008: 397-98). Constructivism can therefore explore historical events and political changes which seem irrational or paradoxical to the established positivist theories (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 400). A perfect example to investigate through this theoretical lens could thus be the emergence of proxy relations.

For constructivists analysing the IRI, it is generally agreed that the Islamic revolution, which was a key moment for the Iranian national identity, was ignited by an Iranian resentment towards American domination (Cottam, 1979: 3-4). Iran went from having a western-based secular monarchy to Islamic laws interpreted by the most competent Shia Cleric (Milani, 1993: 88). Constructivists thus emphasise that this change in the Iranian national identity had a significant impact on the IRI's foreign policy (Ashraf, 1993: 88; Karimifard, 2012: 242). Therefore, through an ontology of the social world being construed through social interactions, constructivists have assessed varying overlapping definitions of anti-imperialism, nationalism, Shi'ism, and Islam to better understand Iran's sometimes confusing and self-contradicting foreign policy discourse (Karimifard, 2012: 240; Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 614). As a result of this combination of identities, constructivists argue that the Iranian foreign policy has often been guided by the distinct national identity and defined in opposition to American hegemony and the secularising liberal world order (Duncombe, 2016: 634).

As constructivists interpret ideas, norms and identities rather than measuring material capabilities, the implicit epistemological programme and ontology of what constitutes the social world is fundamentally contrasting to the realist research paradigm. Epistemologically, constructivists analyse how people create and understand meaning through intersubjective social interactions. Ontologically, unlike the realist school, constructivists do not believe that there exists an objectively measurable reality independent from social interpretation. Rather, events reality only the meaning that people ascribe to it. The same event can thus be interpreted and understood differently by different actors (Rezai, 2008: 18, 23-24).

Along these lines, Feklyunina provides a constructivist framework for analysing state's exercise of power in a study of the effect of Russian soft power in the Ukrainian parliament concerning the annexation of Crimea (2016). She further encourages the extended application of her conception of relational soft power to cases involving non-state actors (Feklyunina, 2016: 774). She reasons that a resource-based assessment of power is dominating IR, but that "[i]nstead of focusing on resources per se, we need to examine the ways in which different audiences 'read' an actor" (Feklyunina, 2016: 775). Thus, she encourages the use of an interpretivist epistemology focusing on the audiences and their interpretation of events, discourse, norms and ideas rather than a naturalist causal understanding of the world. Thus, in contrast to IR's traditional adoption of Nye's conceptualisation of soft power, Feklyunina's conception of soft power is relational, rather than a possessional good that states can either have or not have (Feklyunina, 2016: 776). She argues that the focus should be on the audiences' historical interpretation of social events which defines how the audiences perceive themselves in relation to external events. Through a constructivist understanding, Feklyunina thus concludes that:

"Soft power is significantly more likely to be present in a relationship between actors who broadly see themselves as part of the same socially constructed reality, which would entail compatible interpretations of their identities, compatible understandings of their interests and compatible definitions of the situation" (2016: 777).

This analytical conceptualisation of soft power encourages the examination of compatible identities and ideologies between the relevant actors.

This constructivist conceptualisation of soft power provides a welcomed paradigmatic shift to the study of Iranian proxy warfare as it switches the analytical focus towards the audience, the proxy groups, rather than merely the intentions of the IRI. Scholars often note that Iranian soft power plays a prominent role in proxy relations (Fuller, 2007: 147). The interpretivist nature makes the theory more versatile and applicable to different levels of analysis. Contrary to the rigid realist school of thought, the constructivist analysis to proxy warfare is therefore not required to be based on an ahistorical top-down analysis. Nonetheless, a clear and coherent examination of social relations remains absent in the existing literature.

2.3) *Critical Perspectives from Middle Eastern Experts*

Scholars specialised in Middle Eastern studies often point to the inadequacy of system-level theories. They reason that these analyses are based on a false universalism derived from the west-centric assumption of effectively governed Westphalian states.

As Raymond Hinnebusch examines the historical roots of the contemporary proxy conflict in Syria, he notes that the colonial export of Westphalian state structures in fact never aligned with pre-existing governing structures in the region (2018: 392). As colonial powers tried to export their western invention of bureaucratic and centralised state-systems to the territory of the former Ottoman empire, subnational and transnational webs of identity-based legitimacy persisted. As a result, the imported state structures merely became judicial and not congruent societies reflecting effective social contracts (Hinnebusch, 2018: 393). Due to the lack of governing legitimacy, Hinnebusch and other regional experts, such as Louise Fawcett, have therefore classified these state structures as “state shells” (Fawcett, 2017: 795; Hinnebusch, 2018: 392).

Analytically, as many Middle Eastern states do no longer possess absolute Weberian control of their territory after the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the ‘Arab Spring’, Hinnebusch argues that west-centric notions of centralised states with clear social contracts are inaccurate when applied to the Middle East (2018: 339). In a more general critique of dominant IR theories, John Agnew refer to this false west-centric universalism of the western state as *the territorial trap* (1994: 56). He argues that western scholars and particularly IR realists tend to assume that all states are similarly constructed as congruent societies with a clear order-ensuring social contract (Agnew, 1994: 59, 61).

2.4) *The System-Transcending Nature of Proxy Warfare*

Following the criticism of west-centric analyses based on the idea of states as congruent entities, recent scholarship on proxy warfare has further criticised the implicit top-down approach of mainstream IR. In a special edition of the *Small Wars & Insurgencies* journal devoted to the study of proxy warfare, Brown theorises that when analysing proxy wars the structure that defines the political system is essentially *polyarchic* (2016: 255). He reasons that well-organised sub-state and trans-state communities are competing alongside state actors for legitimacy and power. While relying on a materialist ontology of power relations, he argues that this creates a systemic incentive for stronger states to support foreign proxies in existing conflicts (Brown, 2016: 244-46). Loveman has supplemented this criticism as he contests that interstate conflicts have in fact almost gone extinct

(2002: 47). Hughes further argues that IR often overestimate the Weberian monopoly of violence as proxy warfare is not at all a new phenomenon (2016: 198).

In a call for more terminological and conceptual clarity in the undertheorised area of proxy warfare, Rauta has evaluated the analytical approach of existing scholarship (2018). He identifies the most important concepts to be: 1) *the beneficiary*, 2) *the proxy*, and 3) *the target* (2018: 457). By emphasising the empirical prevalence of proxies in contemporary conflicts, recent proxy war theorising has attempted to direct the focus towards the relationship between the *beneficiary* and the *proxy* (Bapat, 2012; Patten, 2013; Rauta, 2018). However, like traditional security studies, the implied ontological conception of power often remains based on material capabilities and rational calculations.

2.5) *Kaldor's Framework for Understanding New Wars*

In order to better conceptualise the changing nature of war which has caused an empirical rise in proxy warfare, Mary Kaldor provides a useful theoretical argument contesting the conventionally accepted Clausewitzian ontology of war. This theory is commonly known as the *new war theory*. Kaldor's primary point of dispute with the conventional reliance on the Clausewitzian understanding of war involving the presumption of inter-army battles. Clausewitz argues that war "is nothing but a duel on an extended scale" (Kaldor, 2010: 272). The winner outmanoeuvres the opponent through superior tactics or capabilities. Informing realism's notion of war, the Clausewitzian war is based on a notion of *compulsory power* where one actor can subjugate another actor to accept an otherwise unwanted outcome through the exercise of direct power (Barnett & Duvall, 2005: 49-50).

Kaldor argues that war has in fact become decentralised from the state, and that warfare has changed fundamentally in terms of *actors, goals, methods, and forms of finance* (2013: 3-4). The *actors* that define today's wars are often detached from the Westphalian state system. Along with traditional uniformed soldiers, the warring parties are comprised of "private security contractors, mercenaries, jihadists, warlords, paramilitaries, etc" (Kaldor, 2013: 3). As violent non-state actors play a larger role in *new wars*, logically the increased potential for proxy-relations is an inherent consequence as well.

Unlike Clausewitz's understanding of war, identity is not merely a means to reach an end in *new wars*. The overall *goal* in *new wars* is to construct new meaningful political communities across sectarian, tribal, or ethnic lines (Kaldor, 2013: 3). Violence therefore serves as an effective tool in order to politicise and control identity-based clefs and create new friend-enemy distinctions (Kaldor,

2005: 493). Conclusively, as the logic of *new wars* is driven by identity and not only rationally calculated interests, assessing the combatants' social affiliation has become more important than the materially defined interests of *old wars*.

Kaldor further argues that this fragmentation of warfare often means that violent conflicts occur in states with limited central governance (Kaldor, 2012: 94). As combatants perceive violence as an end in itself rather than a means to obtain peace, *new wars* tend to last longer and contribute to the disintegration of the judicial state they are taking place in. While combatants in *old wars* were funded by the centralised state, combatants in *new wars* must look to alternative sources of revenue (Kaldor, 2012: 111).

2.6) *Summary of Reviewed Literature*

Realist and traditional security perspectives emphasise the necessary rationality of IRI due to the constraining pressures of the anarchic international system. This emphasises often results in a top-down analytical approach where the behaviour and role of the state are given analytical primacy over the role of the foreign insurgencies. In these studies, proxies are merely perceived as a means to reach a rational end. The implicit positivist epistemology drawing the focus towards measurable capabilities provides an ill-equipped analytical toolbox for understanding why proxies would choose a materially inferior external country to support their cause. Thereby, Iran's recent regional success with a proxy war strategy is not adequately addressed within the realist and traditional security paradigm.

Constructivists, on the other hand, have accentuated that in order to understand Iranian foreign policy behaviour, it is imperative to understand the distinct identity of the IRI, as well as the ideas and social relations that have developed within the region. This ontological understanding of the social world being defined by relevant actors' perception of historical and social developments, enables the examination of socially constructed alliances rather than merely the rationalist behaviour of states. Feklyunina has provided a critical framework for understanding relation power, accentuating the importance of compatible interpretations between relevant actors (2016).

Regional experts have further criticised dominant IR frameworks for relying on a false universalism of the nature of the nation-state. Hinnebusch particularly draws the attention to the complex subnational and transnational legitimacy structures that persist within the Middle East which makes the analysis of the political structures in the region more complex. He argues that state-centric analyses are therefore misguided when examining the regional social and political changes (Hinnebusch, 2018: 392).

Proxy war scholars have further followed challenged the traditional structural IR theories. Brown thus argues that a proper analytical approach to the dynamics of proxy-relations must abandon the system-level, and include several analytically important levels of analysis and entities (2016: 255).

Supporting this notion of a new approach to the study of modern conflicts, Mary Kaldor contests that the decreasing occurrence of inter-state wars is not solely a story of success (Kaldor, 2013). Instead, the development is a testament to the changing nature of warfare which makes the phenomenon more difficult to comprehend and analyse from a parsimonious positivist position. As wars are no longer fought or financed by centralised states attempting to win a decisive battle, Kaldor implicitly encourages an analytical focus towards the collective identities which gain from the continuation of violent conflicts.

3) Methodology

As I have presented the most distinguished and relevant literature to my research, I will now introduce my methodological approach to answering how the historical development of collective identities in Iraq can provide an understanding for Iranian proxy relations in Iraq.

When researching the complex and opaque issue of Iranian proxy relations in Iraq, it is essential to provide a clear methodological framework so other researchers can test the consistency of the argument and reliability of the methodology. In this section I will present the methodological framework for collecting data and present reflections on the limitations that my methodological framework entails.

3.1) The Operationalisation of the Argument

In a rejection of parsimonious and ahistorical structural explanations, I adopt a constructivist approach to address the historical and social roots of Iranian proxy warfare in Iraq. This approach is motivated by Kaldor's theoretical encouragement of the investigation of collective identities in modern conflicts and Hinnebusch's argument of disintegrated Middle Eastern states (2018: 395). As traditional approaches to security studies cannot adequately contain the relational dynamics of both the *proxy* and *beneficiary* in proxy relations, I use Kaldor's more complex understanding of the dynamics of *new wars* to understand the identity-driven role of non-state actors. Consequently, I embrace Brown's notion of a polyarchic system, which expands the system-level analysis to include non-state, sub-national, and transnational dynamics (2016).

Most central to the approach in this study, I draw on Feklyunina's constructivist notion of soft power as a relational concept in order to analyse both the *proxy* and the *beneficiary* in relation to a *target* (2016). Following Feklyunina's conceptual logic, the extent to which identities align, and interests are compatible, provides an understanding of the degree to which a recipient actor accepts and adopts the overarching identity of another actor (2016: 777). However, whereas Feklyunina evaluates the direct consequences of a proposed relational identity, I am merely using the conceptual logic of relational identities to interpret to what extent Iraqi insurgencies have a compatible identity which can have beneficial strategic value for Iran. I am not evaluating direct consequences based on measurable empirical data.

A constructivist approach enables a social and historical examination of the development of the relational identities between the *beneficiary* and the *proxy*. As Reus-Smit has noted, constructivism does not provide universal truths which can be applied across time and space. Instead, the theory focuses on the underlying norms and ideas that impact context-specific developments (Reus-Smit, 2008: 397-98). Constructivism can thus provide answers when the traditional universalist IR theories are faced with issues which appear contradictory to their underlying rational and positivist logic (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 400). The theory therefore allows for the investigation of historical process tracing and the developments of identities, norms, and ideas. Consequently, it is well-suited for analysing how the relatively weak and isolated IRI has won the upper hand in regional proxy warfare.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study will be testing the following hypotheses:

- H1)** Identity matters for the Iranian proxy relations in Iraq. Iran's proxy relations are products of historical conflicts and social disintegration within Iraq.
- H2)** The distinct Iranian national identity largely corresponds with the identity of insurgency groups in Iraq. As a result of their relational identities, Iran and its proxies have common interests, perception of adversaries, and *targets*, which allows for meaningful proxy-alliances.

3.2) *Methodological Choices and How to Use Historical Research*

As I have presented my argument and hypotheses, I will provide a brief outline of the structure of the analysis, explain the advantages and challenges with the chosen methodological framework, and discuss how I approach qualitative historical research as an IR student.

The analysis will consist of three distinct parts as I analyse the identity of both the IRI and the Iraqi insurgencies, and ultimately evaluate the relational degree between the IRI and Iraqi insurgencies. The first part will focus on the historical process that has formed the Iranian national identity. The second part is a case study on the longitudinal historic and social development of collective identity formations within Iraq. The historical scope of the analysis spans from the development of the Iraqi and Iranian nation-states until the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq and the subsequent impact on identity formations. Finally, in the third part, I evaluate the level of relational identity between the IRI and Iraqi insurgency groups based on the historical data presented.

The data analysed in the analysis is collected from secondary sources, mainly from journal articles and academic books. Bowen notes that a document analysis is among the best methods for academics to obtain large and complex amounts of information quickly (2009: 31). Therefore, with the vast historical scope of this analysis, a document analysis is suitable for providing an overview of how scholars have described and interpreted historical events. With the limited space and resources of the study, it is a required necessity to rely on secondary sources in order to gather all relevant historical events and develop an appropriate and accurate narrative.

The study relies on peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books as secondary sources. Thereby, I draw advantage from the critical expertise that the academic community has already used to ensure the credibility of historical accounts (Lamont, 2015: 87-88, 171). However, this alone does not ensure the credibility and reliability of my historic research. Thus, in Thies' pragmatic guide to the use of historical analysis in IR, he emphasises that *unwarranted selectivity* and *investigator bias* are two of the greatest risks for IR academics when conducting historical research through document analyses (2002: 352). *Investigator bias* refers to the risk of looking for sources of information which confirms a pre-existing hypothesis (Halperin and Heath, 2017: 256). *Unwarranted selectivity*, or *selection bias*, occurs when a researcher has to choose between competing interpretations and opts for the one confirming the researcher's pre-existing hypothesis (Lustick, 1996). This is particularly dangerous when only relying on a small number of historical accounts.

Secondary sources represent different interpretations of history and are therefore never objective (Lustick, 1996: 605). It is important to acknowledge that historical accounts are motivated by an underlying theory. They already entail a narrative and subsequent filtration of the data that is presented (Thies, 2002: 360). Thus, it is important to be critical of the underlying narratives and thereby potential selection and bias that secondary sources may contain.

In order to avoid *unwarranted selectivity* and *investigator bias*, I cross-check the historical narratives and interpretations across a broad pallet of sources (Thies, 2002: 360). These sources are explicitly referenced throughout the analysis. Thus, even if I should unintentionally adopt a historian's underlying narrative, this will be explicit in terms of referencing, and should not impact the overall narrative which is balanced among a large selection of secondary sources. Moreover, in my analysis, I do not challenge the dominant interpretation of any manifest events (Thies, 2002: 353-54).

3.3) *Historicist Awareness in IR*

Odell has described that most historical events can be interpreted differently, it is therefore important not to favour events or descriptions which confirm the researcher's guiding theory (Odell, 2001: 164). However, as social science use historic data to make generalisations, trace developments and explain causalities, historians sometimes accuse social scientists of reducing historic complexity to fit parsimonious and theoretically informed research (Quirk, 2008: 523).

Thus, IR as a discipline has adopted the use of historic data but initially without the historicist awareness of historiography. IR's structural theories are reductionist in nature and strive to be applicable across both time and space (Lawson, 2012: 207). The traditional approaches to the study of history have therefore been intrinsically critical towards the structural, universally explanatory focus of IR (Lawson, 2012: 204; Walker, 1989: 172). In Hobson and Lawson's categorisation of different IR approaches to the use of history, they refer to this "mega-macro approach" as "history without historicism" (2008: 421). While structural accounts of IR, such as neo-realism, have in fact been applied across time and space, IR's theoretically informed historicism is often accused of selection bias as well as an excessive reliance on secondary sources (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 426-27).

Larson has added that "[i]t is important to interpret documents within their historical, situational, and communication contexts" (2001: 343). Historians have accentuated this to varying degrees. The most radical branch is associated with Derrida and Foucault who claim that historical accounts need to be fundamentally deconstructed in order to contemplate the deep contextualism of history (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 423). This radical micro-approach to history is irreconcilable with structural IR theories' 'mega-macro' approach since radical historicism insist that history does not produce grand generalisable conclusions which can be disassociated from their original context, time and space (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 424). This micro-approach further implies that these generalising

accounts can, at the most, offer us insights to the normative bias of the author at that particular time and place (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 424). A well-known example among IR scholars is Edward Said's analysis of western secondary sources depictions of the 'Orient' in order to deconstruct the underlying west-centric narrative of the secondary sources (1978).

While this thesis criticises the ahistorical and asociological approach of the structural IR theories, the historical study is effectively useless in the debate on Iranian proxy warfare if abstract generalisations cannot be generated. I will therefore use the historical approach in IR which Hobson and Lawson refer to as "historicist historical sociology" (2008: 427-28). With this historical approach, I seek a middle-ground between the overly micro- and macro- perspectives. While using history to emphasise the necessity for understanding contextuality, I also accept the epistemological notion of generalisable cause and effect when tracing historical development (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 429-30). Consequently, while criticising existing structural perspectives, and acknowledging the limits of my own research, I still propose an alternative approach to better understand the conditions for Iranian proxy warfare in Iraq. The generalisations I make, and which guide my study are informed by the existing theoretical concepts I use. Thus, in this study, I test existing hypotheses through secondary source historical research in order to criticise the ahistorical explanations of structural IR.

3.4) Limitations of the Methodological Framework

The academic integration of Social Science and Historiography is not unproblematic. Especially not when analysing a phenomenon which is intentionally opaque such as the case of Iranian use of proxy warfare. Therefore, I will briefly elaborate on some underlying methodological considerations of the proposed methodological framework.

Firstly, as the historical process tracing of the analysis is necessarily selectively compressed and thereby simplified, I must actively decide which sources and events to include and exclude. Thus, the necessary generalisation and narrative is guided by a constructivist logic focusing on the development of collective identities. I accept and include the most common interpretations of the historical events based on a broad scope of sources. This focus may cause an excessive and simplified focus of the role of sectarian, ethnic, and national identities which is not completely representative of the history. However, as a social scientist guided by the presented theoretical conceptions, I necessarily make generalisations and include events and sources informed by the guiding theories.

Secondly, with the innumerable amounts of different collective identities that Iraq can be argued to encompass, I will focus on the most commonly presented in the literature. Namely, I will focus on

the sectarian Sunni-Shia divide, the ethnic Arab-Persian identities, as well as the national characteristics of Iran and Iraq. While the Kurds have played a significant role as proxies for several states, the analysis will not go into depth with the role of the Kurds. This is because the Kurds are a distinct group defending an established, although not internationally recognised, territory. Thereby they do not play an offensive role in the puzzle of recent Iraqi proxy warfare (Hubbard, 2007: 246).

4) Analysis

As I attempt to answer how the historical development of collective identities in Iraq provide an understanding for Iranian proxy relations in Iraq, I employ Feklyunina's conception of relational identity anchored in collective identities. First, I must define the Iranian collective identity before I can examine to what extent the Iraqi insurgencies accept or reject the Iranian identity. I will therefore start the analysis with a historical understanding of the development of the Iranian national identity to provide a reference point for the relational analysis of Iraqi insurgencies.

4.1) The National Identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is an exceptional case. Due to a strong alliance and heavy support from the US, Iran became perhaps the most prosperous, modern, and secure state in the Middle East during the US-supported Shah rule from 1953 to 1979 (Cottam, 1979: 8). However, the monarchical Shah regime was overthrown and replaced with a traditionalist, doctrinaire, Islamic government in 1979. This profound change in Iran's underlying value system and identity has led academics to focus on the role of the IRI's unique identity in international politics (Ashraf, 1993; Ramazani, 2004; Nia, 2011; Karimifard, 2012; Mohammadpur, Karimi and Mahmoodi, 2014; Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016). Although researchers have debated the appropriate terminological categorisations for describing the most important facets of the Iranian identity. In this study, I will gather the perspectives and categorise the national identity under the umbrella-terms: Iranian nationalism, Iranian Islamism, and Iranian Anti-Americanism.

4.1.1) Iranian Nationalism

While the Islamic Revolution in 1979 did have a significant impact on the national identity of Iran, a sense of cultural superiority due to a proud imperial Persian history has persisted as a characterising

element of the Iranian national identity. This can be described as a sense of Iranian nationalism based on history, culture, ethnicity, and language.

Ashraf writes that there is an important romanticised idea of Persian history within Iran which is implicit in all ideological perspectives of the political debates in Iran (1993: 160). Iranians understand their nation as the heir of an ancient Persian empire defined by cultural and political superiority (Mozaffari, 2014: 34-35). The Persian creed dates back more than 2500 years and the Persian empire was among the first “world states” (Ramazani, 2009: 12). With the civilizational ideas that underpinned the Persian empire, the culture and political ideas of the Persians inspired surrounding civilisations. This is exemplified as the empire was relatively humane and even liberated minorities from oppression (Polk, 2009: 10; Nia, 2012: 47).

In Iran, the Persian ancestry carries a deep national pride and sense of independence (Duncombe, 2016: 633). This sense is accentuated by the fact that Iran was never directly colonised by European colonisers unlike its Arab neighbours (Salem, 2018: 124). Thus, with Iran’s independent history and self-perception as a powerful political player in the region, Iranians have been averse to the presence of foreign powers and dominance in the region, especially within the borders of Iran (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 619; Duncombe, 2016: 634).

The sense of rightful independence and national pride has been challenged by western interference and intensified since the British and Americans overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadegh in 1953 (Polk, 2009: 183-84). During WWII Iran was occupied by the British and the Soviet Union (Ladjevardi, 1983: 226). The British who had colonised much of the Middle East and profited from Iranian oil resources was at this point perceived to be the most malign western power (Ramazani, 2008: 4-5; Rostami-Povey, 2010: 23). At the end of the war, the British decided to dissolve the ruling Shah regime due to some strategically unfortunate “flirting with the Germans” (Skocpol, 1982: 269). As Iran attempted to rebuild a sense of independent sovereignty after WWII and the overthrow of their Shah, Mossadegh was elected as the Iranian prime minister in a newly established democratic parliament (Cottam, 1979: 6-7). Reflecting the nationalist pride and aversion to foreign dominance, Mossadegh had campaigned to nationalise Iranian oil resources (Rostami-Povey, 2010: 57). This was in contradiction with a former agreement that the former Shah had negotiated, which favoured the British-owned APOC (Rostami-Povey, 2010: 23-25).

At this point, the American presence, and America’s liberating ideals, were welcomed and believed to be supporting Iranian aspirations for independence (Cottam, 1979: 5-6). However, Mossadegh’s anti-western, nationalist policy made the US fear the potential rise of communism in

Iran, and thereby a potential alliance with the Soviet Union (Gause III, 1994: 58; Polk, 2009: 177-82). Thus, alongside British intelligence, the American CIA orchestrated a coup against the democratically-elected prime minister, Mossadegh. Motivated by American interests, the coup led to the re-installment of the monarchical Shah as the absolute monarch in Iran (Polk, 2009: 182-83; Akbarzadeh and Baxter, 2018: 98). As America effectively denied the Iranian population a right to sovereign rule, this interference in Iran's domestic politics created a feeling of national victimhood, and a subsequent antipathy towards the US (Carpenter and Innocent, 2007: 68).

While the new Shah emphasised the ancient national pride of Iran and its Persian legacy, his totalitarian rule was completely dependent on support from the US (Cottam, 1979: 3-4). Cottam thus accentuates that already "by 1960 [the Shah] had become the symbol of American domination of Iran" (1979: 7). During the Shah reign, the national discourse became characterised by Iran as a modernised country following its proud national history of regional superiority (Ashraf, 1993: 161; Ajami, 1988: 138). This national identity created regional enemies but enabled a strong alliance with the US, which allowed Iran to prosper economically and militarily (Ehteshami, 2002: 286). As a consequence of totalitarian rule, the Shah's unreserved dependence on the US, and secular policies, a rebellion against "the American Shah" turned into the Islamic Revolution which fundamentally altered the face of Iran (Cottam, 1979: 13; Fuller, 2007: 142; Nia, 2011: 279; Ferrero, 2013: 43). Thus, while the Shah had emphasised the national pride of Iran, this national sentiment led to his own fall as Iranians perceived him to be a willing puppet facilitating American dominance over Iran (Polk, 2009: 184).

While Iran's political structure, foreign relations, and discursive identity changed fundamentally as a result of the Islamic Revolution, the nationalist aspect remained a significant feature. After the revolution, the theocratic Iranian leadership attempted to export the Islamic Revolution. However, instead of joining the Islamic uprising, Iraq launched a war against Iran, supported by the region's Arab states and the US. During the course of the following eight-year war, Iraq mobilised international support from the region's Arab countries as well as from the US (Karsh, 2009: 42). However, instead of Iraq's expected sweep victory, the war became long, and intensified the nationalist sense of victimhood and rightful sovereignty within the IRI (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 619). As the war was started as a response to Iran's Islamic Revolution, the Islamic goals and ideology became integrated with the pre-existing national pride of the IRI, as Iran, once again, became subject to unjust aggression from outside powers (Karsh, 2009: 70-71). With the vulnerable position in the

international system, the proud national legacy of the Persian empire has persisted as a vital part of Iran's national identity and even become integrated with the cause of the Islamic Revolution.

4.1.2) *Iranian Islamism*

With the revolutionary emergence of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Shia Islam became an institutionalised religious foundation for political life in Iran and thereby a fundamental feature of the national identity (Milani, 1993: 87). Shia Islam has nevertheless played an important role in Iranian politics for centuries.

Since the origin of Islam, the sectarian Shi'ite identity has been in conflict with the Sunni sect (Ashraf, 1993: 162; Rostami-Povey, 2010: 133). Shi'a communities have seen themselves as oppressed minorities and demanded justice from the caliphs. Around the 1500s, the Persian emperors consequently accepted a role as "the protector and promoter of Shi'ism" opposing the Ottoman Empire's dominant Sunni sect (Polk, 2009: 39; Rostami-Povey, 2010: 80). Consequently, as Iran *de facto* became a Shia-state, the Shia clergy has been playing a powerful role in Iranian history and society for centuries (Mozaffari, 2014: 67).

Despite sectarian differences, after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the IRI attempted to spread a regional revolutionary wave to spark solidarity among the Islamic community, the *Islamic Umma*, opposing the West (Karimifard, 2012: 243; Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 622). Before the West's export of the system of nation-states to the Middle East, the *Islamic Umma* defined a regional Islamic community in opposition to other empires with different cultures, value-systems and forms of governance (Salem, 2018: 128). Thus, the *Islamic Umma* represents an opposition to the very notion of the western-imposed system of nation-states in the Middle East (Hinnebusch, 2018: 393)

As the revolutionary Iran has used a discourse of an *Islamic Umma*, the religious, cultural, and moral habitus which unifies the Islamic region in opposition to the rest of the world has been accentuated (Ramazani, 2008: 8; Nia, 2012: 48). Iran used this discursive emphasis on a common cultural history to align Middle Eastern countries in a culturally embedded alliance against the US-led liberal world order (Salem, 2018: 126). However, as the Islamic Revolution threatened the regional stability and upset the international world order with the revolution, Iran was met with fierce opposition from the Arab states who feared that their Shi'ite minorities would heed the revolutionary call and revolt against the Sunni-based kingdoms (Karimifard, 2012: 242). Thus, even though Iran has used Islamic discourse to attempt to soften ethnic and sectarian differences in the region, not only is there an ancient identity conflict between Persians and Arabs, there is also a conflictual Islamic

interpretative disagreement between Sunnis and Shi'ites which became amplified by Iran's revolutionary call (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 622).

Despite the limited resonance of the Islamic discourse, the IRI's constitution and identity is still based on a Shi'ite Islamic creed which emphasises the liberation of oppressed people. Iranians believe the moral significance of independence and liberation from foreign domination is universal and not limited to Islamic communities (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 621). Thus, article 154 in the Iranian constitution reads:

“The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the rightful struggle of oppressed people against their oppressors anywhere in the world while completely refraining from any interference in the internal affairs of other nations” (Karimifard: 243).

Consequently, the Iranian use of Islam as moral guidance, and the inherent focus on liberation from oppression almost resembles Marxist inspired Third-Worldism (Clawson, 2004: 20; Duncombe, 2016: 637). Iran's sense of Islamic justice has thus developed to embrace the pre-existing national notion of victimhood combined with cultural pride. Consequently, Iranian Islamism has become a moral codex defined by Shi'ite victimisation, moral superiority, and anti-hegemonism.

4.1.3) Iranian Anti-Americanism

With Iran's anti-hegemonic moral code, the US, whose Middle Eastern policy doctrine has focused on containing Iran, has become the embodiment of hegemonic evil for Iranians. The anti-American aspect of the Iranian identity is perhaps the most evident and certainly consistent part of the country's foreign policy. Consequently, the US is commonly referred to as “the Great Satan” in Iranian foreign policy discourse (Duncombe, 2016: 244).

As described earlier, the hatred towards the US dates back to 1953, when the CIA replaced the democratically elected Iranian prime minister, Mossadegh, with the reimplementation of monarchical Shah rule. Before this point, Iranians perceived the US as the benign Western power supporting aspirations of independence and sovereignty (Cottam, 1979: 5-6; Polk, 2009: 170-73). However, the US instead prioritised its own national interests in the Gulf, and secured an important alliance with the leader of one of the most geopolitically important countries for the US during the Cold War (Ladjevardi, 1983: 225).

The very election of Mossadegh had been motivated by an aversion to Western domination as Mossadegh had been elected to nationalise Iranian oil resources so Iran could profit from its own natural resources (Polk, 2009: 112). Thus, with Mossadegh's overthrow, and the re-installment of the

Shah, it became clear for Iranians that they did not enjoy political independence from Western interference. Consequently, a deep-rooted animosity towards the US developed among the Iranian population as the new Shah's rule was principally maintained through support from Americans, and not from the Iranian public (Cottam, 1979: 4; Summitt, 2017: 562).

The reinstalled Shah was an oppressive dictator who relied on American support and oil revenue to modernise and secularise the Iranian society and economy (Andersen and Seeberg, 1999: 16-17 Skocpol, 1982: 269). He invited foreign investments and subsequently discriminated in favour of wealthy westerners in Iran. The Shah even gave extraterritorial rights to the CIA and the American military on Iranian soil (Andersen and Seeberg, 1999: 41; Rostami-Povey, 2010: 27). While the country profited in absolute terms from this economic modernisation, a deep inequality followed (Rostami-Povey, 2010: 26). In 1979, as Iranians perceived the Shah as a puppet of the US who discriminated Iranians in favour of foreigners, the discontent ultimately culminated in the Islamic Revolution. It was only clear that the Iranians wanted to replace the "American Shah" (Cottam, 1979). The revolution was thus motivated by a deep sense of Anti-Western, Anti-hegemonic, and most visibly, anti-American sentiment.

As a response to the Islamic Revolution and anti-Americanism, the US redirected its Middle Eastern policy to focus on the containment of Iran. The US established a trade embargo and froze all Iranian assets in the US (Carswell, 1981: 247). Once again, concerns over potential Soviet influence and access to the Gulf influenced the American approach to Iran. The US therefore supported Iraq's war against Iran from 1980 to 1988, despite the Iraqi use of chemical weapons (Takeyh, 2008: 16; Duncombe, 2016: 635). Even after the end of the Cold War, the US has continued to support and fund Iranian adversaries in the region in order to contain the influence of the IRI (Gause III, 1994: 61-62). This has further cemented the Iranian notion of unjust oppression from the global superpower.

After 9/11, where Al-Qaeda, a Sunni extremist group with roots in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, crashed two planes into the World Trade Centres, President Bush declared Iran to constitute an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and North Korea (Bush, 2003: 250). The subsequent aggressive and offensive American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been used by the Iranian leadership to reiterate the existential threat that America poses to Iran and other Muslim countries (Yaphe, 2008: 40).

4.1.4) *The Collective National Identity of Iran*

In this section, I have described the Iranian national identity as a combination of nationalism, Shi'ite Islamism, and anti-Americanism. These identity pillars overlap, correspond and contradict in various ways and can be used discursively to unify groups on different levels. While these discourses are used to unify groups, they subsequently construe a sense of 'us' and 'them' which excludes other groups. Hence, the Iranian leadership must carefully determine what identity pillars to accentuate in order to emphasise its relational identity with potential partners and accentuate how compatible identities result in a shared notion of adversaries.

The proud national history and culture plays an important role in the common Iranian consciousness. With decades of foreign dominance and a vulnerable position in the international system, this sentiment has caused a form of Iranian victimisation. This national victimisation corresponds well with the Shi'a narrative of oppression from Sunnis. Thus, the religious teachings of Shia Islam have almost become an integrated part of the nationalist pillar of the Iranian identity. This has created a sense of moral, religious, cultural, and ethnic superiority combined with illegitimate dominance from foreign actors.

Islam is not only used to unify the Iranian nation but also the Islamic community as a whole, *the Islamic Umma*. However, as surrounding states have not embraced the Iranian Islamic call, the Shi'ite identity of Iran has intensified the sectarian cleft in the region where Shi'ites are often suspected of revolutionary intentions and support from Iran.

As a consequence of the anti-hegemonic ideas that permeate the Islamic identity-pillar, the antipathy towards the US, who indirectly ruled the Iranian society and politics until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, has become an important independent national identity pillar which guides Iranian foreign policy discourse as well.

With this combination, the Iranian identity is further accentuated as a victimised nation, which has constantly been subject to unjust aggressions and interference from the US and its allies. The IRI therefore relies on a legitimising notion of moral and religious superiority combined with material inferiority due to external injustice. This national identity carries a strong moral and revolutionary message of liberation for the oppressed. As Iran justifies the use of exceptional means through its unique revolutionary ideology, the Iranian identity can therefore be described as a sense of Iranian exceptionalism.

Due to the strong external pressures that have shaped the Iranian identity, the IRI does not seem to fit Hinnebusch's notion of an internally fragmented Middle Eastern state. Furthermore, unlike its

Arab neighbours, the Iranian nation-state and its borders are a natural consequence of domestic social dynamics and external pressures (Takeyh, 2008: 27). Thus, the Iranian nation-development rather fits Tilly's west-centric description of a state that has evolved in order to protect its citizens from outside pressures (1985: 170).

With the general Iranian perception of unjust interference from foreign powers, and particularly the US, the nationalist sense has been strengthened. The implicit national victimisation alongside a sense of moral and cultural superiority carries a powerful message, which played a significant role in the overthrow of the 'American Shah'. Thus, the Persian legacy, the Islamic revolution and subsequent pressure and aggression from external powers has made Iran a more congruent society, unified against a common perception of external enemies. The national identity hence represents a unified Iran with a collective threat perception of external enemies. Such a unified collective identity justifies the analysis of Iran as a single collective identity in the relational analysis of proxy relations with Iraqi insurgents.

4.2) Social Formations of Collective Identities in Iraq

I have now examined the complex and distinct national identity of Iran based on defining historical events. The Iranian national identity will be used as an analytical reference point when assessing the relational identities between the IRI and Iraqi insurgencies. When analysing the evolution of distinct collective identities in Iraq, the point is to assess to what extent these identities are prone to be influenced by Iran due to relational identities.

I will start by evaluating Hinnebusch's notion of post-colonial Middle Eastern states being incongruent due to colonially imposed borders. By understanding the original development of nation-building, and tracing the historical and social integration of Iraq, a better understanding of the collective identities that underpin the insurgencies in Iraq can be acquired.

4.2.1) The Origin and Integration of Iraq as a Nation

The territory that is now known as Iraq was prior to WWI a part of the Ottoman Empire (Abdullah, 2003: 123). Within the Ottoman Empire, Sunni Islam was the dominant religion. The Ottoman Empire was not a centralised state in the Weberian sense of the word. Inside the empire existed several distinct societies, religions, tribes, and clans constituting a complex web of legitimacy structures decentralised from the empire (Robertson, 2015: 28-30). Hinnebusch describes the territory as an "arid region of trading cities and nomadic tribes" (2018: 393). He notes that, as a consequence of

decentralisation, the *Islamic Umma* was the most unifying identity structure in the fragmented social puzzle of the Arab world (Hinnebusch, 2018: 393). Despite a sense of wider Islamic community, the Ottoman Empire had continuous clashes with the Shia-based Persian Empire over today's Iraqi territory, and the Ottomans gave privilege to Sunnis within their territory (Dabrowska and Hann, 2008: 58).

At the end of WWI, the Ottoman Empire imploded. Mandated by the League of Nations, the French and British colonial powers then divided the territory between them and introduced a Western system of nation-states to the region (Bongers, 2013: 128-29; Salem, 2018: 124). The British were decided to oversee the development of the Iraqi territory as an autonomous nation-state (Dabrowska and Hann, 2008: 61). The newly founded Iraqi nation-state consisted of around 60% Shi'ites, who primarily resided in the south (Yaphe, 2008: 42). The Shi'ite group had close historic ties to the Iranian empire which saw itself as the protector of the Shia religion, and had had several disputes with the Ottoman Empire over the area (Gause III, 1994: 60; Rostami-Povey, 2010: 80, 88-90). Sunnis lived in the middle of the country, while ethnic Kurds resided in the north, and smaller populations of Yazidis and Assyrians lived across the country (Robertson, 2015: 30-34). Accordingly, from the creation of Iraq as a nation-state, these disintegrated groups shared no common history or experience of nationhood (Dawisha, 1999: 553; Zubaida, 2002: 206; Bongers, 2013: 129).

As the UK oversaw the process of nation-building in Iraq, the Britain-friendly Hashemite Kingdom was installed as the monarchical rule in Iraq. However, their Sunni religious background led to favouritism of the Sunni minority and oppression of other ethnicities and sects (Zubaida, 2002: 211-213; Abdullah, 2003: 131). Ajami notes that the Hashemite Kingdom thereby continued the legacy of Sunni dominance which had already existed during the Ottoman rule (1988: 140). Iraq gained formal independence in 1932, although Britain maintained significant influence due to its links with the Hashemite kingdom and interests in the region (Bunton, 2008: 635).

In 1941, the British put pressure on Iraq, as the Iraqi prime minister, Rashid Ali al-Gailani, supported Nazi Germany and attempted to counter British influence in Iraq. With the support of Shia tribes, the British organised a coup to re-install the UK-friendly Nuri as prime minister (Abdullah, 2003: 141-42). This foreign interference triggered a popular discontent with the Hashemite Kingdom's dependence on foreign powers, as well as rising inequality (Bunton, 2008: 638; Robertson, 2015: 268-70). Consequently, pan-Arabist and ethno-nationalist ideologies started to permeate the Iraqi military. With this line of thinking, Robertson describes that Iraqi Jews, Kurds and

Southern Shi'ites were increasingly seen as unwelcome threats to the Sunni-dominated Iraqi nation at the beginning of the 1950s (2015: 273).

4.2.2) The Iraqi Revolution and Ba'athist Rule

In 1958, the Iraqi military had had enough of the discriminatory, Western-friendly, monarchical rule and the subsequent inequality which had followed (Everest, 2004: 61-63). Heeding the Pan-Arabic revolutionary call from Nasser, Egypt's president, the Iraqi military overthrew the monarchical rule and installed a military regime led by Qasim (Bunton, 2008: 638). This regime attempted to redistribute the country's oil wealth and create reforms favouring the poorer part of the population. However, tumultuous years followed in Iran. In 1963, Qasim was dethroned, and in 1968 the Ba'ath party organised a coup to overthrow the government (Bunton, 2008: 638; Takeyh, 2008: 13). The Ba'athist ideology was formally based on secularism, socialism, and pan-Arabism (Abdullah, 2003: 164). However, despite its socialist and secular credentials, the Ba'athist party quickly proved to be extremely oppressive of non-Sunni and non-Arabs in Iraq (Wimmer, 2003: 115; Bongers, 2013: 126).

4.2.3) Saddam Hussein' Rule and the Consequences of the Iran-Iraq War

In 1979, Saddam Hussein seized complete power over the ruling Iraqi Ba'ath party. As the new president, he quickly managed to cement his totalitarian Ba'ath rule in Iraq (Dawisha, 1999: 555-56; Abdullah, 2003: 181; Zunes, 2004: 184). However, within a few months of his rule, he faced his first challenge as a radical Shi'ite Islamic Revolution changed the neighbouring Iran fundamentally (Fawcett, 2015: 651; Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 616).

The newly established theocratic Iranian regime openly urged the Iraqi Shia majority to revolt against Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'ath regime and import the Iranian revolution to Iraq (Dawisha, 1999: 557). As a response, shortly after the Iranian revolution, Saddam Hussein decided to invade Iran which was severely weakened militarily since the new Islamic regime had had to disband large parts of the military loyal to the dethroned Shah (Karsh, 1987: 88-89). The war came to last eight years. Mary Kaldor refers to it as the last conventional type of "old war" (2005: 42). This implies that the war was fought among two nation-states in order to gain territory and power. *Old War* battles are defined by conventional soldiers, fighting for the cause of their country (Kaldor, 2010: 276).

Much like the rest of the Iraqi society, the elite in Iraqi army was dominated by Sunnis while Shi'ites fought the deadly battles on the ground (Dawisha, 1999: 558; Rostami-Povey, 2010: 133; Bongers, 2013: 130). Other Iraqi Shi'ites, especially those belonging to the clergy or those politically

active, were forced into exile in Iran (Rostami-Povey, 2010: 134). However, despite political discrimination during the war, the Shi'ites never turned against the Iraqi state or demanded sovereign rule like the Kurds did (Rostami-Povey, 2010: 135).

As Iraqi Shi'ites fought against Shia Iran, and as the war was primarily divided between state-lines, the national or locally anchored identities proved more important than the sectarian identities for most Iraqi Shi'ites during the course of the Iran-Iraq war (Hiro, 1990: 88-90; Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016: 619). The theocratic rule instituted after the Islamic Revolution in Iran has often been disputed among Iraqi Shi'ites who do not perceive the theocratic rule of Iran to be compatible with Shia doctrines (Guzansky, 2011: 91). Moreover, the identity cleft between Persians and Arabs, Iranians and Iraqis, may also have caused Iraqi Shi'ites to fight against the IRI.

Furthermore, the Kurds also played a significant part in the war. The IRI supported the Kurdish minorities with weapons and intelligence in their effort against Saddam Hussein's oppressive rule (Bongers: 142). Despite open human rights violations against the country's minorities and unjust methods of warfare, Saddam Hussein's war was consistently supported by the other Arab states and the US. It is well-proven that Iraq even used chemical weapons against the Iraqi Kurds and the Iranians during the war (Zunes, 2004: 184-185; Duncombe, 2016: 635). The ideological and identity-based dimensions of the long and bloody war between Iran and Iraq has caused a deep underlying mistrust among the two nations which has persisted even after Saddam Hussein's overthrow (Barzegar, 2008: 48).

Despite the Iraqi Shi'ites national loyalty during the war against the IRI and the unifying, nationalising effect of the war, Saddam Hussein continued to discriminate and oppress Shia and other minorities after the war (Wimmer, 2003: 117; Takeyh, 2008: 20). In 1991, he sent the largely Shi'ite army to invade Kuwait. The Iraqi soldiers were quickly thrashed by the American forces' superior technology as the US defended Kuwait from Iraq's unjust aggression (Perry, 1990: 67). Subsequently, the US encouraged uprisings among the Shi'ites and Kurds, Saddam Hussein responded by attacking several Shia dominated cities in 1991 (Takeyh, 2008: 20). As a response, Saddam Hussein sent the Iraqi army to slaughter thousands of Shi'ites. Mass graves have been found decades later (Zunes, 2004: 192-93; Rostami-Povey, 2010: 135).

4.2.4) The American Invasion's Effect on Sectarian Relations

In 2003, after decades of Hussein's totalitarian and oppressive rule, the US invaded Iraq due to an alleged suspicion that Saddam Hussein was developing nuclear weapons (Bush, 2003: 151; Cheney, 2003). Security experts who encouraged the American invasion reasoned that the US could then

implement a Western-friendly liberal democratic government in Iraq based on the Western model (Cheney, 2003: 300). The logic followed that the overwhelming military power of the US would then encourage other Middle Eastern states to follow suit. Secondly, proponents of the invasion believed that popular pressures would rise in the region favouring liberal democratic transitions following the example of Iraqi democracy (Carpenter and Innocent, 2007: 69-70). Interestingly, despite gross cultural miscalculations, the Americans did in fact consider the role of soft power and ideology in their aggressive campaign in Iraq.

However, Mary Kaldor argues that while the American soldiers quickly won the physical battle, they subsequently lost the social battle of popular support in Iraq (2005: 497). After the American soldiers had won the territorial battle against Hussein's forces, they found themselves in a *New War* theatre where irregular warfare became the norm and insurgencies fought across tribal, sectarian, ideological and ethnic identity lines (Carpenter and Innocent, 2007: 71; Yaphe, 2008: 42-43). Instead of the expected gratitude for overthrowing a brutal dictator, anti-American sentiment intensified among the Iraqi population (Bongers, 2013: 125).

Haddad even claims that "[n]o other event [...] has had as momentous and detrimental an effect on sectarian relations in the Middle East as the war and occupation of Iraq in 2003" (2014: 67). As civil war broke out among pre-existing sectarian and ethnic groups, symbolic and religious symbols were targeted by insurgencies to incite sectarian tensions (Mowle, 2006: 41). The IRI began supporting Shia groups in their fight against Sunni insurgencies and the American occupation (Bongers, 2013: 139). Sunni groups subsequently received funding from the region's Arab Kingdoms who wanted to contain Iranian influence in Iraq (Carpenter and Innocent, 2007: 71).

The IRI established proxy relations with as many Shi'a insurgencies as possible, most prominently: The influential Shia cleric, Al-Sadr, and his Mahdi army, and the Badr Brigade (Mowle, 2006: 46; Zimmermann, 2007: 23). Al-Sadr comes from a long line of influential Shia clerics. His father, and two older brothers were killed by Saddam Hussein in 1999 because of the perceived threat to his totalitarian rule (Hubbard, 2007: 346-47). In the wake of Saddam Hussein's fall and the American occupation, Al-Sadr assembled an army to protect his constituency and fight against the oppressive American invasion (Hubbard, 2007: 347). The other prominent proxy group, the Badr Brigade is essentially the extended arm of the political party SCIRI, the party was established by Iraqi Shi'ites in Iran in opposition to Saddam Hussein's oppressive reign during the Iran-Iraq war (Hubbard, 2007: 347). At the end of the 1990s, the Badr brigade is estimated to have counted up to 8000 fighters in Iraq (Zimmermann, 2007: 13). After Saddam Hussein's fall, the exiled SCIRI and

Badr brigade members swiftly migrated back to Iraq to promote Shi'ite influence in Iraq (Guzansky, 2011: 87). However, although these Iranian supported Shi'ite militias share the same overarching goals in Iraq, they did not follow direct Iranian orders (Zimmermann, 2007: 18). Some factions, such as Dawa and SCIRI supported America's overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and perceived America's democratic ambitions as a way to gain influence in political life (Yaphe, 2008: 41-42). Al-Sadr's Mahdi army, on the other hand, fought fiercely against American occupation (Yaphe, 2008: 44). In fact, the insurgencies have often clashed in violent disputes over territory, power and resources (Hubbard, 2007: 349; Bongers, 2013: 149).

4.2.5) The Consequences of Democratisation of Iraq

As the US had overthrown Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party, they pushed hard to install the promised democracy in Iraq. With the promise of representative democracy, Iraq's Shi'ite majority had initially been largely patient, while Sunni extremists fiercely opposed the American occupation (Takeyh, 2008: 22).

In 2005, the first successful elections were held. However, as the sectarian clefs were severely deepened by the sectarian civil war, Iraqi democracy effectively constituted a representation of the existing sectarian lines (Yaphe, 2008: 37). The Iraqi population consists of around 60% Shi'ites, 20% Sunnis, and 20% Kurds (Bunton, 2008: 631; Yaphe, 2008: 42). Thus, the introduction of democracy in Iraq *de facto* handed power to the Shi'ites who, before 2003, had experienced centuries of Sunni oppression (Haddad, 2014: 84). The three Shi'ite parties that constituted the winning coalition were all supported by the IRI (Barzegar, 2008: 51-52). Next to the formal political engagement, they were all subsequently represented in the civil war with fighting insurgency factions in the form of the Badr Brigade, the Mahdi army, and the Dawa party's military groups.

As the Shi'ites gained political power through US-implemented democratic practises, a growing sense of nationalism among Iraqi Shi'ites started to emerge (Guzansky, 2011: 91; Haddad, 2014: 87). The destabilising presence of Iranian weapons, bribes in elections, infiltration of official agencies, and support of violent groups started to cause widespread distrust among Iraqis, even Shi'ites, towards the IRI (Bongers, 2013: 149). Consequently, as the Iraqi Shi'ites have risen to power, the political elites have had to distance themselves from the IRI in order to ensure confidence from their constituencies. Nonetheless, while the emerging Shi'ite nationalism represents an empowered position domestically, the Shi'a victimisation of Sunni domination as the Iraqi Shi'a government's position is unwanted by the region's Sunni powers (Haddad, 2014: 87).

4.3) Evaluating the Relational Identities

With the examinations of the historic and social development of collective identities in Iraq and Iran, it is evident that identity matters in Middle Eastern politics. A top-down approach cannot adequately explain the phenomenon of proxy relations. Thus, as I have shown through historical data from secondary sources, the dynamics of collective identities within Iraq have impacted insurgencies' willingness to act as proxies for the IRI.

4.3.1) Iran's Relational Identity with Insurgents in Iraq

Based on secondary sources' historical accounts, I have argued that the IRI's national identity is characterised by a complex combination of overlapping, and sometimes contradicting identity pillars. Namely: Nationalism, Islamism, and anti-Americanism. These identity pillars constitute reference points based on which the IRI can emphasise its relational identity in order to impact other actors' behaviour depending on their likelihood to accept or reject the Iranian identity (Feklyunina, 2016: 779). The unique combination of identity pillars has constituted a form of Iranian exceptionalism characterised by religious and culturally derived moral superiority supplemented with a notion of oppressed victimhood. Intuitively, this revolutionary identity must resonate well with 'out-grouped' insurgencies.

With the development in Iraq, it has been evident that the Shi'ite identity of Iran's Islamism has been the most effective relational identity for establishing proxy relations. This relational identity is based on compatible cultural roots, religion, adversaries, and a similar history of oppression from Sunnis. Consequently, this identity pillar has resulted in several successful proxy relations with Shi'a insurgencies who fought against Sunnis and the American occupation during the civil war in Iraq.

Yet, much like during the Iran-Iraq war, the ethnic and national identity cleft between Iran and Iraqi Shi'ites has caused suspicion of the Iranian intentions as well as potentially conflicting interests (Yaphe, 2008: 45). A Shi'ite sense of Iraqi nationalism has been emerging in Iraq which effectively diminishes the relational identity with IRI as national collective identities are constructed through the exclusion of other nations. Following the logic of relational identities, Iraqi Shi'ites may not share the IRI's identity as oppressed or anti-hegemonic to the same extent within Iraq after being assigned democratic power. Moreover, the destabilising effect of Iranian weapon supplies, support for violent groups, and interference in the Iraqi democracy further accentuated the national sentiment among Iraqi Shi'ites, causing a distance to the IRI (Bongers, 2013: 143-145). Despite this, the Iranian ties in

Iraq have remained strong as a Shi'ite Iraqi government will not find many allies in the Sunni-dominated Arab World (Guzansky, 2011: 96).

Ultimately, the Iranian identity of deep anti-Americanism should have made Iran a natural collaborator in the early stages of the American occupation of Iraq. However, as sectarian polarisation defined the enemy lines in the civil war, the anti-American identity was not sufficient to overcome sectarian, ethnic, and national differences in order to establish relations with sectarian Sunni groups who, like Iran, fiercely opposed the American military presence in Iraq (Mowle, 2006: 45; Barzegar, 2008a: 48).

4.3.2) The Applicability of the Conceptual Framework

Even though it is difficult to assess the weight of identity affiliation in a region with such a complex web of identities and legitimacy structures, the concept of relational identity still provides an insight of why the IRI has gained a regional advantage in proxy warfare. After all, while the IRI could not establish viable proxy relations with Iraqi Sunni insurgents due to irreconcilable identities, the US lost support among the Iraqi population, and effectively sparked the civil war (Kaldor, 2005: 497). Despite the physical facilitation of democratic elections, the US has been unable to impact the different parties in the sectarian, identity-laden civil war (Yaphe, 2008: 42-44).

Hinnebusch's notion of incongruence and disintegration in Middle Eastern states provides an important insight for understanding the nature of the Iraqi conflict (2018: 395). The national incongruence of Iraq provided the Iranian regime an important advantage when employing strategies exploiting fragmented collective identities. This highlights the necessity of understanding relational identities of history and culture in conflicts. As conflicts are becoming increasingly defined by non-state actors who fight based on identity, states' relations with local insurgency are bound to constitute an import strategic dimension of contemporary conflicts (Kaldor, 2013: 2).

Ultimately, the durability of mutually beneficial proxy relations in Iraq is best understood as a social construction, a product of collective history, but also conditioned by intersubjective norms which are influenced by, and in turn influence, the perception and identity of actors. Identities do not exist autonomously from their surroundings, rather they are defined in opposition to other identities and in relation to dominant norms (Feklyunina, 2016: 779). Therefore, the interpretation of the Iranian identity is not solely a conscious construction but also defined by the development of norms and identities independent of the IRI.

Consequently, the IRI has not been able to portray itself as an inclusive Islamic nation embracing the entire *Islamic Umma*. Instead, the Shi'a devotion of the IRI has been observed with suspicion and hostility by the region's Sunni majority. The regional and Iraqi sectarian polarisation has subsequently provided the IRI's sectarian identity relational power as Iraqi Shi'ites interpret the IRI as having a compatible Shi'a identity. Thereby, collective identities are not static but deeply contextually interpretive to different audiences. With the American invasion of Iraq, it is clear that the US lacked a contextual historical and social understanding of the Iraqi society which ultimately provided the IRI a strategic advantage based on identity.

5) *Conclusion*

In recent years, the IRI has managed to increase its influence in the Middle East. The strategic use of proxy warfare has played a central role as surrounding countries have become destabilised. However, following the positivist logic of structural IR theories, the materially inferior IRI should not be a stronger player in the region's conflicts than the US and its Arab allies. The Iranian success in proxy warfare therefore provides a paradox for the explanatory framework of reductionist IR theories which rely on rational and positivist epistemologies.

In this study, I have argued that proxy conflicts should not simply be understood as extended military capabilities of states. Instead of the intrinsic top-down approach of structural IR theories and traditional security studies, I have argued that proxy relations are best understood as social constructions where both actors must mutually endorse each other. Hence, by operationalising Feklyunina's conceptual framework of relational identities, I have examined to what extent the unique national identity of the IRI has provided a strategic advantage when establishing proxy relations in Iraq.

Through the use of historical data from secondary sources, it has become evident that the Shi'ite identity constitutes an important relational identity with Iraqi Shi'ites. This sectarian identity was intensified by the American invasion of Iraq. Subsequently, the IRI has had the most success with supporting Iraqi Shi'ite insurgencies. However, while Shi'ism constitutes a compatible identity, the proud ethnic nationalism and experience of the Iran-Iraq war have made Shi'ite proxies cautious and less likely to act in accordance with the wishes of the IRI. Moreover, the democratic rise to power of the Shi'ite majority in Iraq has increased the sense of a Shi'ite, Iraqi nationalism which subsequently defines itself in opposition to Iranian nationalism.

Ultimately, the study emphasises the need for a contextual, social, and historical understanding of collective identities in conflicts. The misguided west-centric nature of structural IR scholarship too often reduces conflicts to be defined by centralised states' competition for power. In reality, the very notion of congruent nation-states is not universally applicable. Instead, a thorough examination of the historical and social developments that define collective identities' interests and behaviour can provide a more appropriate understanding of the nature of conflicts.

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