

# Conflict Dynamics in Post-2003 Iraq: A Security Dilemma Perspective

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## Abstract

A decade and a half since the U.S. invasion, Iraq remains affected by complicated and increasingly changing uncertainties. Intrastate division and lack of social stability are expressed in ethnic and sectarian hostilities. In view of different reasons, 16 years after establishing the new Iraq, this paper asks: why has Iraq been marked by instability, transformation, and inability to maintain stability and peace? This paper explains the ethno-sectarian interactions in Iraq with the help of the theory of security dilemma and explores the derailment of Iraq's transformation process and the beginning of a new period of confrontation from a security dilemma viewpoint. The findings suggest that the security dilemma and ethno-sectarian conflict are further intensified by Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni groups attempting to assess the threats posed not only by enemy militias but also by the presence of all groups in close proximity.

**Keywords:** Security Dilemma, Ethnic Conflict, Post-Invasion Iraq, Identity, Sectarian Politics.

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores Post-2003 Iraq Conflict Dynamics. The purpose of the paper is to illustrate the crucial problems affecting the relationships between ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq. The paper also seeks to consider the causes and the leading factors to the ethno-sectarian dispute in Iraq through the prism of the security problem and argues that in the ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq, the security dilemma plays a critical position.

Iraq is deeply divided. People do not share the same loyalties, any sense of the Iraqi community is weak, and civil war and communal conflict never seem to end. This has provoked various opinions over the most suitable mechanisms to mitigate and transform the ongoing humanitarian crisis and ethno-sectarian conflicts.

Thus, the article investigates the consequences of intervention in Iraq after 2003, focusing on the intense security dilemma and the intrastate ethnic and sectarian conflicts in Iraq from 2003 to 2020. The condition of the security dilemma, and every case of international intervention, have significant implications; if cases such as that of Iraq are not carefully studied and the lessons learnt, the risk will be run of the continuity of this instability and its replication elsewhere.

The study thus attempts to identify factors that have contributed to conflict ever since 2003. As a result of the ongoing conflicts and suffering of Iraqis of all ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, the posing of conflicts is a matter of urgency, for without understanding being provided, there is little hope of a brighter future for Iraq. While academic literature has explored Iraq's post-2003 plight from a range of angles, as discussed below, this paper presents a fresh perspective through the use of the theory of the security dilemma, which it is hoped, may contribute to the development of more effective solutions to the conflict, which has so profoundly scarred Iraq.

In 2003, the Saddam regime was overthrown, and a power vacuum was created, leading to a power struggle involving sectarian and other groups in Iraq, which were supported by the regional powers. The ethno-sectarian groups felt the

urgent need to ensure their security and ensure their survival in an anarchic situation then existing in Iraq. That lead to suspicions, threat, and anxiety, the more threats and opportunity lead to a more intense security dilemma, and the more intense security dilemma led to more dangerous actions and reactions. Due to the security situation, creating militia ensues when different groups see other groups reinforce cohesion with an outside group or state, different groups do the same, and each group prepared for defense and offence due to uncertainty.

Therefore, this paper will use the theory of the security dilemma by Barry Posen (1993) to explain the situation in Iraq. Historical analysis is too suitable for studies that apply the security dilemma theory to ethnic conflict, as Tang (2011) does in the case of Croatia. Tang states that we should distinguish the existence of a security dilemma from the theory of security dilemmas. Arguing that while "security dilemma" is a term designed to label a specific phenomenon, the theory of security dilemmas is the body of knowledge that attempts to explain the fundamental factors, policies, and consequences behind the appearance of a security dilemma (Tang, 2011). The security dilemma theory will be used in the paper to explain how various Iraqi groups seek security for themselves. The paper uses Barry Posen's approach to explain the relationship between the Kurds in the Kurdistan Regional Government in the north and Baghdad's central authority. The absence of an effective government in Iraq, in the post-2003 period, has created a situation of anarchy in Iraq. As anarchy is central to Posen's approach, this would help explain Iraq's anarchic situation and help argue that historical narratives adopted by ethnic groups are inaccurate and misleading.

This study employs the security dilemma theoretical framework to explore ethnic and sectarian conflict as the consequences of Iraq's intervention since 2003. It explains the changes following the U.S. intervention in Iraq and the role of these changes in inter-ethnic and sectarian conflicts in Iraq the broader Middle East. The consequences of intervention are examined over a 17-year timeframe from the beginning of the intervention in 2003 to 2020. The case study considers the broader geopolitical context of the Middle East, which is crucial for comprehending the forms that Iraq's security dilemma has taken. The resulting methodology is qualitative due to the study's nature, based on narrative and historical analysis, such as face-to-face and telephone interviews with politicians, intellectuals, and other stakeholders in Iraq. Secondary data have been utilized, such as current statistics, newspaper reports, U.N. documents, and state leaders and officials' pronouncements. The method is structured in a focused concern to standardize the collected data, making a systematic accumulation of the case study findings possible.

The approach of this study is more focused upon mass-led ethnic conflict than elite-led conflict. While prior to 2003, the Baghdad-Kurdish conflict generated a security dilemma that was overtly violent and led by elites – Saddam and the Ba'ath Party apparatus in Baghdad, and the leaders of the armed Kurdish national movements in Kurdistan – since 2003, it has been somewhat less violent. This is in line with Kaufman's argument that mass-led conflict is less violent than elite-led conflict (Collins, 2000). A comparison of Iraq's security dilemmas before and post-invasion Iraq in 2003 may be an avenue for future research which sheds light upon this assertion and the failures of post-2003 Iraq's early stages of attempted state-building.

The data for this research were collected from 2019 to October 2020. To optimize the breadth and depth of collected data, a qualitative method approach was adopted, which included: a preliminary review of the existing literature and semi-structured interviews with local and national officials, intellectuals and academics, community and religious leaders, and subject matter experts through face-to-face and telephone interviews. As well, focus group discussions were conducted in cooperation and support from the Standard-Kurd Foundation, an independent organization, and an electronic newspaper in Erbil. These included parliamentary representatives, Iraqi government officials, Kurdistan Regional Government leaders, local civil society actors, and other key stakeholders.

## **2. Ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq**

It is crucial to define theoretically the varieties of conflicts that are analyzed in this article. The researcher investigated conflicts involving both ethnic identity and sectarian identity in an attempt to evaluate the full range of types of existing conflicts in Iraq. Ethnic conflicts that take place within state borders among non-state groups are named internal conflicts, whereas those conflicts that take place between a state and non-state groups are named intrastate conflicts; when the groups receive support from another state, the situation is termed an internationalized intrastate conflict (Yilmaz, 2007). Additionally, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), sectarian conflict implies asymmetrical conflict involving two or more non-state actors representing different groups. When the groups obtain assistance from some other country, they are called intrastate internationalized conflict (UCDP, 2020). Hence, Iraq's conflicts can be described as internal, intrastate, and sectarian conflicts and internationalized intrastate conflicts, especially since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Regarding ethno-sectarian relations, several studies have argued that political chaos, sectarian violence, and heightened insecurity in Iraq derive from the U.S. occupation and its failure to uphold peace and order (Kirmanj, 2013). Eric Davis reflects on disastrous policies such as de-Baathification and the dissolution of Iraqi forces by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) or the U.S (Davis, 2004). Some blame the Iraqi state designer, Britain, through the Sykes-Picot

agreement (Ciment, 2015). Sherko Kirmanj emphasizes the identity factor for instability in Iraq (Kirmanj, 2013); the shortcoming of this argument is that it tends to enlarge the role of one variable in constructing problems and crisis while forgetting to merge or identify the causes of correlated factors that are contributing together for ethno-sectarian conflict. Makdisi in *The Culture of Sectarianism* explains that foreign actors concentrated society to a simple confessional of divisions continued to frame policy from that sociological starting point indeed, advancing sectarian identity added political relevancy (Makdisi, 2000). Also, Fanar Haddad argues that the identity politics in post-2003 in Iraq and sectarian violence have advanced and receded according to more extensive socio-economic and political condition, however, he does not explain the main factors that have led to an escalation of sectarian conflict and factors that affect the relationship among the main ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq (Haddad, 2011).

Debra Miller (2004), in *The War Against Iraq*, stated that American troops failed, at an early stage, to provide security in the face of ethnic and sectarian clashes between Iraq's Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, overlooking the experiences of other smaller minorities such as Yazidis and Christians. Miller writes that the U.S.'s main aim was to prevent Saddam's followers from regrouping in a bid to retake control; she also argues that violence and ethno-sectarian conflict are rooted in Iraq's history, correctly noting that British colonial policies in Iraq worsened this ethnic division and violence. Missing from her work is a consideration of the extent to which U.S. intervention and subsequent policy extended sectarian division. Victoria Fontan argues that sectarian divisions in Iraq were not as deep as believed by the occupation authorities before the invasion and in the spring and summer of 2003; however, after 2003, the ethno-sectarian relations significantly worsened (Fontan, 2008). This hints at the significant role of intervention in sparking and drastically exacerbating conflicts. Caroleen Sayej also argues that the sectarian conflict since 2003 is not related to the apparent historical volatility, and sectarianism was not natural or inherent to Iraqi culture but resulted from various states and non-state actors pursuing their own interests (Sayej, 2018).

Specifically, in Iraq, studies have been authored on how the U.S. and the US-led coalition's behavior has posed a severe challenge to peace and stability. For example, Richard Falk in *The Costs of War* (2007) illustrates the impacts of the Iraq War on international law, the U.N., and world security. Studies by Bidle, Friedman, and Long (2012) have explored the events surrounding the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the effects of the following regime change. However, less has been written on other states' behavior that has intervened in Iraq since 2003 and the role of the interventions' impact on sects within Iraqi society. Studies illustrate that civil war intervention increases violence and instability during conflicts (Foreign Affairs, 2019). However, there has been little acknowledgement of the consequences of the myriad of interventions in Iraq and their implications on the internal conflict; therefore, the present study has chosen to analyze the consequences of interventions with a specific focus on the inter-ethnic and sectarian conflict in Iraq, from 2003 to 2020.

Since Iraq has become another problematic case of military intervention, Iraq's hostilities have captured international attention. Most of the literature has focused on the reasons for the invasion and the duration of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and less on the occupation's aftermath. Limited research has been carried out on the longer-term consequences of the war. In *The Political Road to War with Iraq*, Nick Ritchi and Paul Rogers (2007) explore the details of events and factors leading up to Iraq's intervention by the U.S. They take American national interest into account and illustrate the role of ideology in Iraq's U.S. intervention. They highlight that the war had an effective end for the U.S.; however, Iraqis' war experience has never ended.

It must be noted that some scholars have identified other explanations for the outbreak of sectarian identity-fueled violence. As already alluded to, some blame the modern Iraqi state designer, Britain, through the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which arbitrarily and unilaterally imposed a single state upon a heterogeneous population (Ciment, 2015). Makdisi in *The Culture of Sectarianism* (2000) explains that foreign actors viewed society as a conglomeration of confessional divisions, framing policy from this sociological starting point and thus providing sectarian identity with added political relevancy. Kaufman believes that rivalry over myths and symbols is essential for sectarian identity. Reflecting the complexity of Iraq's ethno-sectarian conflict, he elaborates on factors such as the geographical distribution of ethno-sectarian groups, institutional capacity, language, and cultural differences (Kaufman, 2001). Nevertheless, while Kaufman provides reasoned arguments, he does not identify the most powerful dynamic in sectarian religious identity and relations, the distinct theological mind-sets of Shiite and Sunni Muslims, and the historical, religious, cultural and/or linguistic connections, which bound Iraqis with neighboring countries such as Iran and the Arab states. This article seeks to redress this oversight by accounting for all these issues in as much depth as possible and drawing on the security dilemma between groups when they fear their security. The theory of the security dilemma is explored below.

### **3. The intensity of the security dilemma**

This study's theoretical framework is primarily based on Barry Posen's (1993) conceptualization of the security dilemma, the theory first articulated in the context of international relations between states. Kaufman argues that the security dilemma is a condition where one side can make the other side less secure (Kaufman, 2001). No single theory exists that

can comprehensively clarify the complexity of the inter-ethnic and sectarian conflict in Iraq. However, it may be argued that the U.S. intervention in 2003 intensified the possibility of the security dilemma, which has consequently given rise to ethno-sectarian conflicts in Iraq, which means that foreign patrons to ethnic conflict exacerbate the security dilemma. Therefore, the study develops Posen's theory of security dilemma as it has been applied to ethnic conflicts in the post-Cold War period since it provides valuable insights into the analysis of conflicts such as Iraq's. It is applicable too to the anarchic situation of post-2003 Iraq as anarchy generated fear and uncertainty.

The security dilemma is a fundamental theoretical idea in political science and the study of international relations. It has been used to explain events such as the First World War, by Robert Jervis in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (1976). The concept has more often been used to explain the nature of conflicts between states and not within states, and then a theory was developed by Barry Posen for ethno-sectarian strife within the state. Andrew Wivel defines a security dilemma as a situation in which the actions taken by a state to increase its security cause reactions from other states, which leads to a decrease rather than an increase in the state's security (Badie, Berg-Schlosser & Morlino, 2011).

Mearsheimer explains the security dilemma in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001). Mearsheimer suggests that 'the measure a state takes to increase its security usually decreases the security of other states' (pp. 36). Accordingly, Mearsheimer contends that it is problematic to believe a state may secure itself without threatening another state's survival (Mearsheimer, 2001). This introduces the impression of relative power, a group's degree of power in relation to others. This power is often disproportionately distributed and causes conflict: no group can be sure that another group will not eventually attempt to violate and threaten this power.

Morgenthau's second of his six principles of political realism, in his book *Politics Among Nations*, explains the security dilemma further. The principle proposes a nation's interest as being defined in terms of national power (Morgenthau & Thompson, 1948). This core principle suggests that groups' activities and choices are frequently taken in securing self-interests by employing power. Both Morgenthau and Mearsheimer consider that actors commonly seek an opportunity to maintain power. Morgenthau argues that human nature and domestic factors cause actors to seek power; however, Mearsheimer determines the structure of the anarchic international state (or intra-state, in the case of states such as Iraq) system causes actors to seek power.

In his book John Herz (2003) writes that nations are continually looking to secure their state, indicating the security dilemma's important position in international relations. According to Herz, uncertainty may appear at all levels, including at the individual level; he argues that security underlines all conflicts and can thus be utilised to outline international and domestic ethnic conflicts (Herz, 2013).

The security dilemma was applied to ethnic conflict for the first time by Barry Posen and used by Tang (2009) to explain the outbreak of ethnic conflict in the USSR and former Yugoslavia. The theory of the security dilemma, in this case, concentrates on the nature of the relationship among groups, operating as mentioned in an anarchic system. Posen argues that the security dilemma appears when conditions within the state resemble the international system's anarchy (which is more straightforwardly perceptible). Posen writes that the security dilemma explains 'the special conditions that arise when proximate groups of people suddenly find themselves newly responsible for their own security' (Posen, 1993). The situation arises in anarchy in which different ethnicities are concerned for their survival and have the intention to intensify their self-defense. However, this action becomes a threat to their rivals, and here a security dilemma comes about: 'What one does to enhance one's own security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure' (Posen, 1993). The security dilemmas that Posen shows, arises under two unfortunate conditions: the indistinguishability of offensive and defensive actions and the perception of offensive gains. Consequently, ethnic groups find it difficult to know whether their opponents' actions are for defense or offence. Posen posits that the groups' distorted histories also play a role in conflicts.

Furthermore, different ethnic groups have the perception that an offensive action in conditions of uncertainty increases the probability of pre-emptive war: 'If one side has an advantage that will not be present later and if security can best be achieved by offensive military action in any case, then leaders will be inclined to attack' (Posen, 1993). Security requires power, and as power is a relative concept hard to measure, the accumulation of power becomes a dilemma among groups. For stateless ethnic groups existing in anarchical conditions, they may act the way states act for self-help, thus may accumulate more power than they needed for protection. Furthermore, the security dilemma is related to fear, which leads to uncertainty in an anarchy-like situation.

Posen's concept of "emerging anarchy" will be applied to post-2003 Iraq, as it was marked by chaos in which various Iraqi ethnicities and sects are compelled to provide their own security in the absence of effective government. At the state level, anarchy may refer to a weak authority or absence of a robust operating government, a condition that leads groups to develop concerns about their security. Anarchy is essential in Posen's approach and illuminates Iraq's situation, and reveals how the historical perceptions adopted by ethnic groups themselves are inaccurate and misleading. In other

words, animosity between Iraqi ethnic and sectarian groups is a misleading historical perception. Consequently, groups compete for power and security and are likely to develop their own security capabilities, ironically making the first group feel more, rather than less, insecure in a vicious cycle.

Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites have been involved in a security dilemma in an "emerging anarchy" since 2003, in which each group has had to take care of its security. The Iraqi state has been on the edge of collapse following the U.S. intervention in 2003 and thus has all the hallmarks of an anarchic environment where groups resort to self-help. The paper outlines the internal consequences of the invasion for how Iraq has suffered from large-scale inter-ethnic and sectarian conflicts due to the security dilemma and explores how ethnic and sectarian groups have taken the opportunity to fill the vacuum left by the previous regime through acting on their interests and seeking security, increasing mistrust and competition between groups.

In the recent past, tension and conflicts between different ethno-sectarian groups have intensified, reflecting Iraq's complex dynamics of post-invasion Iraq. Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites experienced a security dilemma in emerging anarchy, in which each group had to take care of its security. There were security drivers for conflicts between the Shiite-dominated central government and its military forces, Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, and other minorities. The Kurds refused to integrate their economy and military forces into those of the central government dominated by Shiites (and previously, under Saddam, by Sunnis) since each group relies on its command of military and economic assets to consolidate and maintain whatever power it may have. Meanwhile, the Sunnis' revival against Shiite dominance may also be said to have instigated insecurity and a Shiite security dilemma, revenge by political and military means, that has again caused conflicts and some Sunnis' support for terrorist groups. The intensification of sectarian clashes paved the way to further interventions by neighboring states. Therefore, this paper investigates how these groups approach power for their security under the security dilemma's appearance in post-invasion Iraq. The study extends the applicability of the security dilemma by discussing how a weak state like Iraq has been unable to provide security for its citizens and sometimes even constitutes a threat to parts of the population.

After the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, circumstances badly affected Baghdad-Erbil relations. In 2012, Baghdad formed a new military force with heavy artillery named the "Tigris Operation Command." Headed by General al-Zaidi, the unit was sent to Kirkuk's south, long disputed between Erbil and Baghdad. This aggressive step by Baghdad was a bold move to control the southern neighborhood of Kirkuk. Responding to this critical situation, the KRG President Masoud Barzani commanded his Peshmerga forces to stand against Baghdad's aggression, and as a result, a limited armed clash took place (Ihsan, 2016). This armed encounter was an attempt by the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki to establish his control in that region of Iraq as the U.S. occupation was over. Baghdad's strategy to solve the issue was by establishing absolute supremacy over Iraq. However, this step's impact was other than expected, as Baghdad's perception of Kurdish leaders, who are expected to submit, proved wrong. The armed clash between the Tigris Operation Command and the Peshmerga forces exacerbated the situation as per the security dilemma and enlarged the gulf between Baghdad and Erbil.

Meanwhile, two other historical events have significantly affected Baghdad-Erbil relations, the first being the rise of ISIS and the second the Kurdish referendum for independence in 2017. The emergence of ISIS in northern and central Iraq and neighboring Syria was a severe challenge for the Kurds. The unpredictable growth of ISIS made the Kurds a reliable partner for the US-led coalition to curb ISIS. The US-led coalition against ISIS heartened the Kurds, who saw an opportunity to liberate land seized by ISIS; this land was also the so-called disputed territory, which Kurds have mostly referred to as "Kurdistani areas," located outside the Kurdish regional administration.

The second event was the 2017 Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum. A large majority of 92 per cent of voters supported 'the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region' becoming an independent state in the September 2017 vote, but the Iraqi government regarded the referendum as illegal and refused to recognise its result (Palani, Khidir, Dechesne, & Bakker 2019; Dalay, 2017).

#### **4. The security dilemma in the ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq**

The theory of the security dilemma provides a highly appropriate analytical tool for conflicts such as Iraq's. However, the case of Iraq can also add further dimensions to the theory. According to Posen, two conditions intensify a security dilemma. The first is related to the indistinguishability of defence and offence (Posen, 1993). However, the researcher believes that another dilemma appears because the observations are of the capacity rather than motivation; therefore, it is essential to focus on groups' motivation more than their capacities.

The second concerns the cause of a security dilemma: the effectiveness of offensive over defensive tactics. According to Posen, this depends on two variables, technology, and geography (Posen, 1993). Technology affects all states and groups' military capability, but geography defines the specific circumstances of any occurrence of a security dilemma. Technology as a factor may be more relevant for the emergency of security dilemmas in the prevailing international anarchy between states, which may have large arsenals and even nuclear weaponry (as seen in the security dilemmas of

the Cold War era), than for ethno-sectarian groups within a state area, which while supplied with weapons (including by state actors), are armed to a far lesser degree.

This is complicated somewhat in the Baghdad-Erbil relationship, which is a conflict between the state actor Baghdad and Erbil's non-state actor. Erbil has been classified as a de facto state by Michael M. Gunter and as a quasi-state by Aram Rifaat (Rifaat, 2018). However, as shown by the lockdown on much of the Kurdistan Region after the referendum of 2017 imposed by Baghdad (and neighboring states), the two's powers are unequal. Thus, the security dilemma between the two deserves to be understood not primarily in technological and military terms but also in political and economic terms. This phenomenon may be germane to considerations of domestic security dilemmas within states in a situation where there is a massive imbalance of military and technological capabilities, and a security dilemma may nevertheless be played out primarily through other channels.

Geographical factors are more immediately relevant for Iraq's case, as this concerns groups' distribution around Iraq. According to the security dilemma theory, ethno-sectarian groups seek to defend themselves against surrounding forces by adopting an offensive strategy. However, the Kurds in Iraq have adopted a defensive strategy, as they are surrounded by the actually or potentially hostile (certainly hostile to the idea of Kurdish independence) states of Turkey, Iran, and Syria (which Syria does not currently pose as much of a threat due to the ongoing Civil War and the presence of Kurdish forces in Syria), as well as the central government in Baghdad. As alluded to above, after the 2017 referendum, Turkey, Iran, and Baghdad closed their borders to the Kurdistan Region. Baghdad even suspended all flights to the Kurdistan Region, including deliveries of aid to help the fight against ISIS; the people of the Kurdistan Region were held hostage (Murdock, 2021).

Most importantly, regarding the conditions of fear and security threat (apprehension of malign intentions), the fears over identity, particularly the fear that one group will attempt to dominate Iraqi identity, leads to the fear of losing other group identities through assimilation or extinction. This reciprocal fear also contributes to creating an ethno-sectarian security dilemma. Among the Kurds, for instance, this fear contributes to the argument for self-determination, deriving from the belief that sovereignty is the protector of national identity when identity depends on the territory. Nationalism on the Kurdish side is an issue of security because it has origin, culture, language, and territory—for example, issues related to of the disputed areas such as Kirkuk. However, for Baghdad, maintaining its control of the disputed area is related to Iraq's identity as an Arab country and Shiites since 2003 with Iraq's notion as a Shiite-dominated country (interview with Dr. Mantk and Dr. Chnar, 2020). Baghdad perceives that accepting this Kurdish demand will result in secession demands (as Kurdish nationalism is still perceived as a secessionist movement). That is why Baghdad is unwilling to implement Article 140 of the Constitution regarding disputed areas' fate, which triggered conflict in 2012 and 2017. In 2012, Baghdad formed a new military force with heavy artillery named the "Tigris Operation Command". Headed by General al-Zaidi, the unit was sent to Kirkuk's south, long disputed between Erbil and Baghdad. This aggressive step by Baghdad was a bold move to control the southern neighborhood of Kirkuk. Responding to this critical situation, the KRG President Masoud Barzani commanded his Peshmerga forces to stand against Baghdad's aggression, and as a result, a limited armed clash took place (Ihsan, 2016). Also, in October 2017, after the referendum, the Shiite PMF escalated its confrontation with a section of the Peshmerga forces, mainly those attached to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (interview with Abdullah, 2020; Dalay, 2017). Later, the Peshmerga forces withdrew from some areas liberated from ISIS, mainly in Kirkuk and around its borders, and the PMF has settled in, confirming Baghdad's supremacy. The military confrontation of October 2017 between the two was such a consequence of reciprocal fear and mistrust as well as competing claims on the so-called "disputed territory"; both sides have highly partisan military forces, and rivalry between the PMF and the Kurdish Peshmerga challenges the prospects for stability in Iraq. The security dilemma helps explain the dynamics that lead to demands for secession among the Kurds. The Kurds' geographic concentration in northern Iraq means that they are the only group that has raised the secession demand. While the Sunni and the Shiite are somewhat more concentrated in certain areas, they are found all over Iraq, meaning it will not be easy to separate them, and no one from those communities has proposed division themselves. There is thus a risk that the "breakup" of Iraq will merely turn out to be Kurdish independence, while Arab Sunnis and Shiites will remain in the same state (and the violence between them will continue).

Additionally, regarding geography, Iraq's ethno-sectarian mosaic makes it prone to conflict. Not every state with a heterogeneous population experiences the same situation because, as Ellingsen explains, the development of conflict and internal security dilemma depends on the size and number of the most significant linguistic groups within a country: a country with the second-largest forming 5 to 20 per cent of the population is at a higher risk of conflict than a country with a smaller minority group. Larger minorities are more troublesome for central governments to regulate and pose a more significant threat to conflict (Ellingsen, 2000). The intensity of the Baghdad-Erbil conflict can partly be explained by the large size of the Kurdish population, who form a quarter of Iraq's overall population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020).

Large ethno-sectarian groups within a state of anarchy is a crucial aspect of the security dilemma. When a regime has been weakened, ethno-sectarian groups seek their security and use their power. The Gulf War in 1991 and the sanctions on Iraq created an anarchy-like situation in Iraq. The Kurds rose against Saddam, a no-fly zone was imposed for their protection, and the Kurdistan Region was established. The end of the 1990s intra-Kurdish civil war between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan further strengthened the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. After the U.S. invasion in 2003, the Kurds participated with the Shiites in the political process, including drafting the Iraqi Constitution in 2005, which recognizes federalism in Iraq, further increasing their power.

Nevertheless, Baghdad failed to implement Kirkuk and oil articles, which triggered the old conflict's restart. The Kurds continue to perceive their opportunity in the new Iraq. In response, Baghdad has adopted an avoidance strategy: ignore the issues and neglect requests, for example, to implement Article 140.

Lastly, there are numerous other factors involved in generating the security dilemma, primarily domestic, such as fear of identity loss, entrenched animosities, the internal structures of groups, and groups' territorial distribution in Iraq. The internal security dilemmas also merge with already-existing regional and global security dilemmas and are mutually reinforcing in Iraqi politics. Understanding this better is crucial for the pursuit of broader and deeper stability.

Political structures within the framework of the security dilemma and the international system's power structure have had a great deal of influence on Iraqi politics, leading to the conflict between ethno-sectarian groups. In essence, with the US-led invasion in 2003, the regime collapsed, and a weak government was established, accompanied by a power struggle and rivalries between Iran and the U.S. and Gulf countries.

Contributing factors already existed before 2003 to influence ethno-sectarian conflict; Saddam's regime epitomised one ethno-sectarian group (the Arab Sunni-dominated Ba'ath) determined to defend its position. However, the situation has changed since 2003. The collapse of the Saddam regime, and the emergence of a power vacuum and anarchy, led regional powers to become deeply involved in Iraq, anxious to protect their interests and security. Regional countries have exercised substantial political, economic, and security influence in Iraq since 2003. Offensive realist theory argues that 'great powers seek to maximize their potential; (Mowle & Sacko, 2007); for instance, Iran after 2003 saw in Iraq the potential to increase their regional influence. In response, the Gulf states fear Iran's influence in Iraq's domestic politics and detect a threat to their own interests. Turkey and Iran also fear the political gains of the Kurds in Iraq. With the new Iraq failing to maintain its sovereignty, Iraq became a ground for regional and global competition. The regime collapse also led internal groups to compete and seek security domestically. These factors exacerbated the ethno-sectarian conflict.

The structural security dilemma illustrates how some groups are hindered by foreign countries or find opportunities to search for security. These structures can be a formal practice that enforces certain groups' marginalization, such as the Sunnis, who were excluded from Iraq's institutions by the US-imposed de-Ba'athification policy. Alternatively, structures can be informal but common practice, such as Baghdad's policy toward the Kurdistan Region through cutting budget allocations, cultural, ideological, or religious conflicts such as the Sunni-Shiite division mutually hostile Kurdish and Arab nationalisms. These all intensify the security dilemma.

However, a difficulty in employing the security dilemma arises from the fact that while the conditions of the security dilemma exist in Iraq, they mainly arise in the broader region that affects the domestic elements; it is imperative to merge the foreign dynamics with domestic factors ethno-sectarian conflict. Merging the second level of a regional security dilemma with Iraq's domestic security dilemma demonstrates how a confluence of factors merges in a particular historical moment to shape a security dilemma's conditions.

Analyzing the security dilemma's structural conditions is essential if policymaking leads to a successful transformation of conflict. The focus should be on mitigating the structural causes of conflict to avert security dilemma; for example, institutional change is essential to eliminate uncertainty, increase expectations of actors' behavior and institutional performance, and set for competition, leading to the mitigation of security dilemma among ethno-sectarian groups. Groups must feel confident of their equality to eliminate the fear attached to identity. It is the role of institutions to accommodate identities; institutions can also play a vital role in allaying the fear of weakness, which is left untended, can trigger the security dilemma.

As these factors and others indicate, like any theoretical frame, the security dilemma limits the researcher's focus; it falls short in explaining all attitudes, historical identities, and perceptions. While incorporating the valuable insights gained from applying the security dilemma as contained in this study, future research also has a range of comparatively unexplored avenues to investigate.

## 5. The Results and Discussion

The paper has shown that the security dilemma appears since there is a lack of state order in Iraq and groups aim to secure themselves. Consequently, the groups seek power, power competition for self-help and security; the security dilemma highlights that the effort to develop one's security in anarchic circumstances, where the stronger ruling

government is absent, makes others feel insecure. The paper illustrates that the stronger ethnicity and sect creates uncertainty. Consequences include: intended consequences for more power to a group and less for the state of Iraq, and unintended consequences (conflict and disputes), such as the disputes and conflicts between the Kurdistan Region with the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. The military confrontation in October 2017 was as a result of fear and mistrust over "Disputed Territory" between Baghdad- Erbil as both sides have biased military forces and a rivalry among Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the Kurdish Peshmarga, which challenges the prospects of stability in Iraq. The paper offers the context of rivalry between Kurds, Sunni, and Shiite leaders using traditional military force to defend their ethnic group by utilizing the security dilemma approach. As the Shiite has dominated, the government and Iraqi military forces are the Shiite population's primary security providers. The Kurds have depended on Peshmerga forces to maintain security; the biased military forces, mistrust, and a rivalry among the force still undermines prospects of a peaceful Iraq.

The resultant approach was qualitative, focused on narration and historical interpretation due to the study's essence. Primary data includes face-to-face discussions with leaders, intellectuals, and other stakeholders in Iraq. Secondary data such as recent estimates, media interviews, U.N. records, and state officials' pronouncements were used. The approach is organized. A focused set of concerns was asked to standardize the data gathered, allowing a vast accumulation of case study results.

Ethno-sectarian conflict is a useful lens for anyone concerned with the current affairs of Iraq. Ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq has evolved through different periods. The roots of conflict in Iraq go back to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and Iraq's establishment in the 1920s. The repeated interventions of external actors from the U.S. to Iran in Iraq serve nothing but the geopolitical goals of those, directly and indirectly, involved in the Iraqi ethno-sectarian conflicts. Ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq after 2003 with all its historical dynamics, due to the groups' geographical and structural size, has impacted political life across Iraq and beyond. Thus, this conflict's resolution would have positive implications for Iraq's democracy and all socio-economic factors, and indeed across the region.

This paper focused on the domestic causes of ethno-sectarian conflict, the structural factors which have resulted in an anarchic situation, old fears connected to groups' identities, and misperceptions that cause groups' actions and reactions. These three elements are essential in generating a security dilemma, which leads to a vicious cycle, further worsening the relationships among ethno-sectarian groups. The geographic variable mostly concerns the distribution of ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq. This explains the Kurds' geopolitical vulnerability as they are surrounded by hostile forces and the Iraqi Kurdish ties with Kurdish populations in other countries. The Shiites' geographical and ideological ties with Iran have also determined the ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq.

Put simply, the security dilemma is manifested where groups (Iraq's ethnic, sectarian, political, religious, and cultural groups, and so on) pursue security guarantees that, ultimately, make the group less secure. In the context of a failed state (in this case, created by the removal of Saddam's regime from power in 2003), Rotberg in 2004 observed the security problem as one of the failed state factors and a crisis source and conflict. Iraq's citizens, Kurds, and Arabs alike have lost confidence in their institutions, the factors that lead to a violent conflict. In Iraq, what is seen today is that an institution such as the Iraqi Army is seemingly incapable of protecting the country's security and sovereignty. However, Iraq is also unable to protect citizens of various ethnicities and sects in daily life. The Kurds have seen themselves as left with no option but to rely on their own ethnic forces, the Peshmerga, to defend themselves.

Posen's understanding of the security dilemma considered as a suitable approach for the security and military aspects of Iraq's ethno-sectarian conflict between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. However, William Rose's (2000) approach to the security dilemma, focusing on group relations, influenced the Baghdad-Erbil relationship in the post-2003 period. Focusing on the effects of the rivalry between Shiite-dominated Baghdad and the Kurds in the KRI at the national level, some factors affect and exacerbate security issues and the two sides' stability. Iraq's balance and security are heavily dependent on the relationship between these two components, which has been weak at best, hostile at worst since 2003. The antagonism that existed before 2003 between Baghdad and Erbil continues, with aggressive perceptions and coercive force (to a lesser degree), despite Baghdad's change from Saddam's Sunni-dominated Ba'ath to the Shiite political elite. This contributes to the 'indistinguishability between peaceful resolution and management of conflict through force. This is a critical factor in both short-term disputes and the management of deep-rooted issues, such as Kirkuk's status. This group hostility is not unique to Iraq or the Shia Arab-Kurdish conflict. However, it has been a vital factor in escalating the security dilemma, which is also influenced by the Kurds' past and present grievances and the Shiites' desire for power and security due to their suppression under Saddam.

The paper's findings indicate that the groups of Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis further exacerbate the security dilemma and ethno-sectarian strife as mentioned for the events in 2012 and 2017, these groups not only try to evaluate the threats posed not only by enemy militias but also the existence of all groups in close proximity. Suppose the threats presented by the opposing group cannot be ignored (due to malign intentions, poor relations, a sudden change in the forces) or

categorized in security terms (possession of arms and militias, military operation, economic gains). In that case, each group assesses the other's capabilities by the remembrance of historical events. An evaluation of military and economic capability and purpose may also be dependent on a highly contested historical event or perceived cultural connection, such as Shiite cooperation with Iran or Sunni cooperation with other Sunni countries in the region. In other words, while economic and military factors are important, the political context and policymaking capacity of Baghdad and Erbil are especially germane to concerns and their significant disagreements over the Kurdistan Region expenditure allocation, the status of the Peshmerga, political and security relations, the future of the contested territory, the essence of Iraq's federal structure, the redistribution of oil and gas revenues and contracts, and compensation for martyrs' families, among other issues (interview with Chnar, Said, 2020; Mission, & Relations, 2020).

Many of the interviewees questioned for this study began their accounts of Iraq's present problems with historical incidents. The researcher's field visits to Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad, and his life experiences in the Kurdistan Region, demonstrated that many Iraqis could not forget or move on from past incidents of enmity, injustice and oppression, and the experience of conflict, war, genocide, human rights abuses, dictatorship, and continuous regional and international interventions (interview with Karwani, Gardi, Chnar, and Sabah, 2020). Meanwhile, for its part, Baghdad sees the Kurds as potentially disloyal to Iraq. The buildup of forces on both sides results in a security dilemma. The lack of an independent, non-sectarian media in Iraq after 2003, as Bilal Said alleges, has further damaged relationships; much of the media is sponsored by foreign countries, religious sects, and political parties (interview with Said, 2020).

Regional and global interventions have escalated the security issues between Baghdad and Erbil. On one hand, the Shiites are tied to Iran, which offers its assistance to some of the armed Shiite factions; Tariq Gardi assumes that the dominance of the Shiite factions in the Nineveh Plain, Sinjar and Kirkuk, have depended on Iranian interference (interview with Gardi, 2020). Masoud Abdulkhalq has asserted that sectarian Shiites, taking their lead from Iran, have no regard for the international state system and dream of uniting the region's Shiite communities under one banner (interview with Abdulkhalq, 2020). On the other hand, Kurdish ties with international powers, particularly the U.S., may antagonize Baghdad and some of the wider Shiite community. Kurdish-Shiite relations would undoubtedly be more robust if not for external states' interference.

Masood Abdulkhalq, in an interview that a new dividing line was drawn based on the occupation's attitude. There was cross-pollination with other sectarian factors, particularly the fact that the different parties to the conflict mostly represent two sects already conflicting for centuries. This largely excluded the Kurds party from the issue because the Kurds had primarily related to others based on ethnic rather than sectarian religious difference and were based in a geographically distinct region of Iraq; later, the Kurds entered the conflict regarding political and economic, as well as some sectarian, issues (interview with Abdulkhalq, 2020).

The researcher also explored the operation of Iraq's security dilemma in a context of anarchy and self-help, the diverging interests of national and foreign actors in Iraq, and groups' reciprocal fears. The validity of the security dilemma framework is underlined by Iraq's position on the brink of collapse after the 2003 U.S. invasion, and meaning groups existed within an atmosphere of self-defense. Ethnic and sectarian groups filled the vacuum after removing the former regime and tried to maximize their interests and protection, increasing mistrust. Baghdad's central government overthrow required the emerging groups, particularly irregular forces, to calculate risk. The ideal time for them to assert their power was soon after Saddam's overthrow.

As a state, Iraq struggled to protect its different ethno-sectarian groups equally, and Kurds, Sunnis, and Shia existed in a security dilemma and an "emerging anarchy" in which each group was concerned about their own security. The absence of a stable government may be viewed as a driving factor for foreign interference and violent behavior by groups within Iraq. All groups seek support and defence from external powers, further contributing to the security dilemma. The threat of political and military intervention – not humanitarian intervention – became particularly relevant after 2003. Military and intelligence activities in Iraq from regional states such as Iran, the Gulf countries, and Turkey (which has established military bases inside Iraq) increased exponentially.

Regarding the criteria for the emergence of conflict and a security dilemma, the geographical factor is particularly relevant regarding the considerable ethnic Kurds' presence in the Middle East. The Kurds' geographical proximity to regional countries, particularly Turkey and Iran, also contributes to Kurds' reluctance to act aggressively. In the paper, the technological aspect of the security dilemma is superseded by a groups' economic and political capabilities, which, in addition to other variables such as historical grievances, ethnic groupings, extremism, and inflamed tensions, exacerbate the security dilemma.

## 6. Conclusions

The paper sought to offer an in-depth analysis of crucial concerns related to the relationship between Iraq and ethno-sectarian groups. Via the security dilemma lens, it also tried to interpret causes and leading factors in Iraq's ethno-sectarian conflict. In Iraq's ethno-sectarian conflict, the paper suggests that the security dilemma plays a crucial role.

When Saddam's regime was overthrown in 2003, a political vacuum was generated, leading to a power struggle between sectarian and other factions in Iraq backed by regional powers. The ethno-sectarian entities felt the desperate need to guarantee their protection and their existence in Iraq's anarchic environment. This leads to distrust, fear, and apprehension, the more risks and opportunities the security dilemma and the more extreme security dilemma led to riskier behavior and reactions. Because of stability, whenever different groups see other groups affirm solidarity with an outside party or state, separate groups do the same, and each group is prepared for protection and action due to uncertainty.

The security dilemma included in the article illustrates how different Iraq groups achieve self-security. The paper used Barry Posen's methodology to clarify the relationship between the Kurds in the so-called north Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad's central authority.

The study's limitations may be judged to include only one case and the focus on just three ethnic groups, mainly overlooking the experiences of smaller minorities. Groups such as the Turkmen and Christians may experience Iraq's conflicts differently to the larger ethno-sectarian groups; the minorities' comparatively small size means that while government policies may cause them concern, they are not necessarily subject to a security dilemma.

Another methodological limitation is inherent in the way the ethno-sectarian groups have been viewed. For the sake of drawing some coherent conclusions, the researcher has had to have considered the ethno-sectarian communities as mostly monolithic units predominantly however, this is not always the case. As the protests of 2019 demonstrate, there are Iraqis of all classes (especially the youth) who do not think along sectarian lines and thus disagree with the policies articulated by "their" elites. However, the Kurdish youth in the north due to restrictions by security forces, mainly that they are attached to the main political parties KDP and PUK, and the security does not allow the youth to start demonstrations regarding the Sunni youth in other parts of Iraq because their area has been reined and their area controlled mostly by Shiite Militias that prevent them do demonstrate freely. What is important to remember is that these demonstrations and their slogans against sectarianism do not make them cross-sectarian due to the existence of security dilemma, and there substantially were some slogans in demonstrations partly anti-Kurdish as one of their major demands were how to curtail the Kurdish right and how to bring the Kurdistan Region under the umbrella of Baghdad. Also, their demand for constitutional reform focused on curtails the articles gave the Kurdistan Region some rights. They were calling for centralization against federalism. All these and others make them more sectarian. What is evident is that elites manipulate security concerns to solidify positions and extract additional resources; however, the paper considers that the post-2003 Iraqi conflict, is mainly a mass-led conflict in comparison to prior 2003 conflicts, which were elite-led (Saddam and the representatives of the Kurdish armed groups in northern Iraq); therefore, it is essential to understand how elites manipulated security concerns to solidify positions and extract additional resources.

Also, future studies could usefully focus on questions, including whether Iraqi state-building and nation-building efforts constitute a threat to the peripheral communities or whether those communities' fear and suspicions are based upon misperceptions. This is a crucial question for the security dilemma since it concerns the causes of conflict. The article has also provided limited details on the militant groups in Iraq such as ISIS, Shiite militias, and other militant groups because they contribute mainly to the state of insecurity (or anarchy), taken for a granted theory of the security dilemma. To further analyze Iraq's security situation and understand the underlying causes of terrorism in greater depth, there is a need to further explore these groups' backgrounds.

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