

SECTARIAN POWER-SHARING AND ITS IMPLICATION IN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IRAQ AND LEBANON

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Political Science at the Faculty of
Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts (M.A.)



by:

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates why Iraq and Lebanon, despite having similar sectarian power-sharing systems, had divergent foreign policy outcomes during the Syrian Civil War. I argue that this divergence is explained by the unique nature of each state's internal fragmentation, which produces a structural logic of underbalancing. Using a synthetic framework of constructivism, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and neo-classical realism, the study finds that Lebanon's foreign policy was subject to "factional capture," where a hegemonic Hezbollah unilaterally undermined and reversed the state's official policy of neutrality. In contrast, Iraq experienced "factional paralysis," where competing militias gridlocked the government, resulting in a "neutrality by default" situation. This research contributes a new comparative framework for analysing foreign policy in hollowed-out states by shifting the unit of analysis for underbalancing theory from the state as a single unit to the intrastate level.

Keywords: *Foreign Policy Analysis, Underbalancing, Sectarianism, State Capacity, Iraq, Lebanon, Hezbollah, PMF, Factional Capture, Factional Paralysis.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to both of my supervisors, Pak A'an and Sam. As their supervisee I have made too many mistakes and errors, but their patience and invaluable guidance have helped me through the challenges.

Then to Pak Siro, Bu Nia, and Pak Ridwan, thank you for giving me the chance to pursue my MA in UIII. To Pak Faisal, your insightful lecture on Foreign Policy Analysis truly helped me during my time writing my thesis. To the great faculty members of FOSS, Bang Syahrul, Bang Zico, Ka Maulida, Ka Sarah, Ka Rida, and Ka Andini, we cannot reach this point without your help and assistance.

To my wonderful friends, the third batch of FOSS, especially Muhammad Maulidan, Rizky Adhyaksa, Habib al-Farisi, and Fina Farhani. Thank you for helping me adapt and learn during our early period of study, you have shown me the ropes and foundations that helped my study.

Finally, to my parents, Sri Pemilusiana and Aan Wiryadi, words cannot express how grateful I am for your love, prayers, and support, thank you for your unwavering support in every decision I have made. To my beloved sister Antania and her husband Dhiya ul-Haq, thank you for letting me stay in your place when I needed an escape, and always helping me with Microsoft issues. You are a life saver.

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ABBREVIATION DIRECTORY

IR	: <i>International Relations</i>
FPA	: <i>Foreign Policy Analysis</i>
PMF	: <i>Popular Mobilization Forces</i>
ISF	: <i>Iraqi Security Forces</i>
KH	: <i>Kata'ib Hezbollah</i>
AAH	: <i>Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq</i>
HHN	: <i>Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba</i>
LAF	: <i>Lebanese Armed Forces</i>
IRGC	: <i>Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps</i>
ISIS	: <i>Islamic State of Iraq & Syria</i>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Problem

The volatile condition in the Middle East is an ongoing and crucial issue of our time, the ever-changing situation within the region has and always will be an important subject to discuss in the discipline of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis. The region has a long history of conflict whether its military, economic, and not to mention identity, which eventually all lead to violence and bloodshed. Identity, particularly religious and ethnic issues have shaped the very core of the region's societal dynamics, what have brought about a significant advancement and bliss, have also brought tragedy that only add up more complexities to the already war-torn region.

Sectarianism, I contend, is a product of said identity; to which many scholars, political actors, and geopolitical pundits have claimed to be the source of every problem that occur in the Middle East. However, as Hashemi and Postel (2017) put it, their arguments are what we call as a "lazy argument," for it tends to rule out any alternative interpretation of this subject that can better explain the various events that took place within the region. Using their framework of sectarianization, I perceive that sectarian issues is best understood as a tool or resource that is actively mobilized by political elites in their competition for power and legitimacy.

It has evolved to a modern political process, no longer a simple religious or cultural one. While the historical and theological differences between Muslim communities, what Arabic tongue refers to with terms like *firq* (groups) or *madhahib* (schools of thought), provide the raw material for these identities, their activation and political significance are results of contemporary struggles for power, often heighten by regional rivalries. Therefore, when we analyse the actions of actors like Hezbollah or the factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), we are not observing the effects of ancient religious belief, but the strategic deployment of identity in a modern political environment. Thus, if one is to be trapped in a primordialist view of sectarian identity, it will depoliticize the issue and obscure its contemporary functions.

Furthermore, it is worth to note that identity means nothing without an individual or a group that adheres and is bound by it. For sectarian conflict in the Middle East today is the perpetuation of political rule via identity mobilization (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 5). Many literatures on sectarianism mainly discuss sectarian power-sharing within the scope of domestic politics, discussing its origin, development, and influence over a certain

state. In this research I seek to explain and understand the influence it has during the decision-making process of foreign policy. It begins with a simple question of how a seemingly divided government-body navigates its national interest within the international systems?

With this question in my mind and as a point of departure for my research, I stumbled upon a rather puzzling situation within several cases of foreign policy decisions, in particular the foreign policy of Iraq and Lebanon during the Syrian Civil War. Before we continue, I realize that some of the readers may ask “why choose Iraq and Lebanon?” and “why the Syrian Civil War?” Iraq and Lebanon practice a sectarian power-sharing system within their government, compared to other Middle Eastern states like Saudi and Iran where each country represents the identity of the majority. On the other hand, Iraq and Lebanon have experienced a far more complex sectarian issue within their very own government, where the proponents of each sect act and behave for the good of their respective sectarian interests, creating an intricate political environment within their borders.

The Syrian conflict emerged as a consequence of the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia and spread across the Arab world. However, the situation in Syria occurred differently. While in other countries, the waves of change and popular uprisings began to decrease with the involvement of regional and international actors, in Syria, efforts to enforce change escalated, narrowly avoiding a military strike that could have sparked a regional or even global conflict. The internal dynamics of Syria were transformed into a battleground for regional rivalries and a global threat. The ideological and military competition for regional dominance among rival states ultimately engulfed the entire region (Hussain, 2013). In other words, the crisis that started as a mere demonstration demanding for change, turned to be a horrific battle-ground of proxy war between sectarian powers seeking for dominance. Even the impact of this crisis can still be analysed until today.

During the Syrian civil war, Iraq and Lebanon are some of the countries within the region that are directly affected by this crisis. Not only through its geopolitical position, but also through the rivalries of sectarian identity, especially sectarian identity. Given the situation at the time, both countries must adjust their stances in the midst of the conflict; in 2012 Lebanon’s government called for “dissociation policy” in the Syrian crisis, refusing to take any part in the war. On the other hand, in 2014 the Iraqi government request for both U.S. and Iranian aid to fend off ISIS movement in the region; both countries are shown to apply a balancing strategy in their respective foreign policies. However, Iraq’s decision, despite its limitations and setbacks, appears to be more effective and working, compared to that of Lebanon’s policy. The former succeeded to halt ISIS movement, whereas the

latter seemed to be struggling and to some extent almost impossible to maintain its neutrality.

This different result presents a critical puzzle; the foreign policy of both states was considered dysfunctional due to their severe internal fragmentation. In Lebanon, the state's official "dissociation policy" collapsed entirely, due to its government inability to maintain and limit the powerful non-state actor Hezbollah, thus allowing it to hijack or capture Lebanon's dissociation policy by intervening directly in the Syrian civil war, which I call as "*factional capture*". Likewise, In Iraq, the state was paralyzed by the competitions between militias and political factions, making it incapable of formulating a single coherent strategy, this phenomenon, I perceive it as a form of "*factional paralysis*".

Yet, these similar forms of dysfunction produced different outcomes. While Lebanon's decision failed and was forcedly reversed, Iraq's dysfunction led to a paralysis that resulted in an outcome that more closely resembled its official stance of neutrality and balancing, or neutrality by default. The Iraqi state, while having said dysfunctionality, was not entirely captured by a single faction's agenda.

1.2 Research Question

Given this situation, I came up with the core puzzle and question of my research; "*Why is Iraq able to formulate a cohesive foreign policy despite its sectarian power-sharing system, while Lebanon struggles to achieve similar unity under the similar governance model?*"

With this question in mind, I argue that the strength of a state affects its susceptibility to ideological influence. Weaker states are more vulnerable, while stronger states can resist external ideological challenges. The presence of multiple ideologies often leads to "underbalancing," where states fail to form expected alliances due to ideological differences, complicating threat perceptions and alliance patterns (Gause, 2023). In this research, I seek to analyse the dynamics of identity and ideology narratives that spread among their government institutions that eventually lead to the situation.

1.3 Research Objective

In this research, I aim to reveal the reason behind the difference of foreign policy outcomes of both countries during the Syrian Civil War crisis in 2012-2014.

1.4 Research Contribution

- (1) In this study I seek to contribute to the existing literatures of realism and constructivism by bridging both theories, and by doing so, I hope it may reveal a

more sophisticated path in understanding future phenomenon within the international stage.

- (2) This research seeks to broaden the scope of the theory of underbalancing by shifting its unit of analyses; from a strict “state as a single unitary actor,” where it only focuses on interstates dynamics to an intrastate factions’ competition, and in the case of this study the competition of religious influence.
- (3) This study aims to contribute in the ongoing discourse of IR and religious issues, adding more to the existing literatures on IR-religion discussions.
- (4) This research, hopefully, will be a fine addition for the sectarianization thesis by Hashemi and Postel (2017); by connecting their thesis with foreign policy analysis, we can see the tangible security issues, revealing how it can cause state paralysis and underbalancing.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Previous Studies

The study of foreign policy in states defined by deep societal cleavages requires a multi-faceted theoretical approach. This thesis delves into a discussion with three distinct but overlapping bodies of academic literature: the foundational theories of consociational democracy, the constructivist part in the analysis of sectarianism, and the analyses of foreign policy in weak and penetrated states in the Middle East. While each of these fields offers crucial insights, a significant gap exists at their intersection, a gap this thesis seeks to fill.

The theoretical starting point for understanding states like Iraq and Lebanon is the literature on consociational democracy, most famously introduced by Arend Lijphart (1969). Lijphart's work challenged the existing notion at that time that stable democracy was only possible in homogenous societies. He argues that societies fragmented by deep religious, ethnic, or linguistic cleavages could nevertheless achieve peace and stability through a set of power-sharing arrangements managed by the political elites of the different segments. The core features of consociational model, grand coalition governments, mutual vetoes for each segment, proportionality in political representation and civil service appointments, and a high degree of segmental autonomy over cultural affairs, were designed to manage conflict by giving each community a stake in the system (Lijphart, 1969, p. 216).

The political systems of both Lebanon and Iraq are textbook examples of consociational engineering. However, the literature on consociationalism has primarily focused on its effectiveness in ensuring domestic stability, with far less attention paid to how these internal power-sharing arrangements, especially when they deteriorate to clientelistic networks, directly shape and constrain a state's foreign policy. This thesis uses consociationalism not to explain stability, but as a framework for understanding the institutional roots of state weakness and foreign policy dysfunction.

The second crucial body of literature addresses the nature of the cleavages themselves. The dominant narrative, particularly in media and policy circles, often treats sectarianism as a primordial, transhistorical force, an "ancient feud" between Sunni and Shi'a. This thesis rejects this simplistic and ahistorical view, aligning with the constructivist framework of "sectarianization," as advanced by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (2017). They contend that contemporary sectarian conflict is a modern political phenomenon,

where elites and state actors actively construct, mobilize, and manipulate religious identities for political gain, often in the service of authoritarian survival or geopolitical competition (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 5).

This perspective allows us to see the sectarian identities in both Iraq and Lebanon not as the deep cause of conflict, but as the tool and medium in which modern political struggles are waged. This literature is essential for explaining why the domestic political dynamics in the two countries are so fractured and why elites perceive threats and interests through a sectarian point of view, rather than a purely national one.

The third body of literature examines the foreign policy of weak and penetrated states in the middle east. Scholars like Raymond Hinnebusch (2014) and Bahgat Korany & Ali Hilal Dessouki (2008) argue that for many Arab states, foreign policy is deeply intertwined with the quest for domestic legitimacy and regime survival. Hinnebusch's "three-level game" framework, for instance, shows how leaders must simultaneously navigate pressures from the domestic, regional, and international arenas, with the domestic level often being paramount (Hinnebusch, 2014, p.5).

This work is vital for understanding Iraq and Lebanon as weak states whose sovereignty is compromised. Furthermore, F. Gregory Gause (2017, 2023) provides a crucial link between domestic ideology and regional geopolitics. He argues that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is not just a mere power struggle in a traditional sense, but it is also an ideological contest, and this competition leads states to "underbalance," to fail to form a logical alliances due to ideological differences and regime security concerns (Gause, 2017, p. 672). This highlights how regional dynamics can worsen internal fragmentation and constrain foreign policy choices.

Finally, this thesis addresses a clear gap at the intersection of these literatures. While existing studies have brilliantly analyzed consociationalism as a domestic model (Lijphart, 1969), sectarianism as a political process (Hashemi & Postel, 2017), and the foreign policy of weak states (Hinebusch, 2014; Gause, 2017), none have systematically connected these threads in a comparative framework to explain how different forms of consociational dysfunction lead to different foreign policy outcomes.

This thesis contributes by: *First*, developing an understanding of how internal sectarian power-sharing dynamics produce specific foreign policy behaviours. It moves beyond a general diagnosis of "state weakness" to identify and name two distinct mechanisms that emerge from decaying consociational systems; *factional capture* and *factional paralysis*. This provides more comprehension of the pathways from domestic structure to external action. *Second*, Shifting the unit of analysis for underbalancing theory,

the application of Schweller's theory of underbalancing is not limited to "states as unitary actors," but shift it to the analysis of the contested, intrastate bargaining process. This, I contend, is a significant theoretical move, as it shows how domestic fragmentation is not just a background condition, but the direct cause of the phenomenon of underbalancing in these cases. *Third*, bridging constructivist theories of identity with neo-classical realist outcomes, it demonstrates the full causal mechanism, from the political construction of sectarian identity (the source of fragmentation) to the tangible security outcome of a dysfunctional foreign policy "underbalancing," thereby offering a more holistic and integrated explanation.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

With the help of these literatures, I contend that the frameworks proposed by Gause (2023) and Hashemi and Postel (2017) provide the most suitable theoretical tool for this thesis. The former, offers a synthesised approach of neo-realism and constructivism, this is shown in the form of underbalancing and state capacity, all the while acknowledging the importance of identity and ideology within the regional dynamics. Whereas the latter provides the theory of sectarianization which helps me analyse how religious identity, narratives, and ideology are constructed to gain legitimacy and strategic ends, especially in the case of Lebanon and Iraq.

This research asks the question "*Why is Iraq able to formulate a cohesive foreign policy despite its sectarian power-sharing system, while Lebanon struggles to achieve similar unity under a similar governance model?*" Based on this question and the previous literature review, the theoretical framework of this research should be capable of explaining how the sectarian power-sharing system and the identity narratives behind its influence in foreign policy-making in Iraq and Lebanon. Therefore, what could better explain the discourse of identity and narrative other than constructivism.

Moreover, with the rooted sectarian identity issues within the region I believe that constructivism could explain what realism and liberalism could not, for they often neglect and abandon the ideological drive that shapes state behaviour. As mentioned by Alexander Wendt in his book "*Anarchy is What States Make of it*" (1992) that core realist view of anarchy (the absence of a central hegemony) does not possess an inherent and fixed logic. It does not directly lead to competitive power politics or "self-help" behaviour. However, according to him, the character of anarchy is a social construct, formed by intersubjective knowledge, shared expectations, and practices of states themselves. States' actions toward

each other are based on the meaning they perceive, and these meanings are built through interaction.

His idea of constructivism in international relations emphasizes that the international system is not inherently anarchic due to material factors alone but is socially constructed through the shared ideas, norms, and identities of states (Wendt, 2003). Thus, we can see that the different foreign policies of both Iraq and Lebanon cannot simply be explained by pointing to the anarchic, chaotic situation in the region. Therefore, one must analyse the specific “culture of anarchy” that exists between each state and its neighbouring states. The distinct trajectories are a product of the different histories of interaction and outcomes of intersubjective understandings that define their relationship with each other. From his theory we ask: what specific actions and interactions led the governments of Lebanon and Iraq to construct their own identity and others in such different ways?

From this point of view, it is clear to me that the definition aligns well with the phenomena of sectarianism, where the constructed identity of sects plays a pivotal role in the conflict ensuing within the Middle East, and as for my case its influence in the outcomes of foreign policy-making.

When it comes to a non-material factor such as, identity and ideology, constructivist approach is better suited to explain states’ behaviours driven by those factors. It is considered superior to the one that treats domestic political terrain as a simple “black box,” for it allows us to explain the source and nature of elite fragmentation that led to underbalancing. The different paths taken by Lebanon and Iraq are rooted within their respective histories of state formation and the different ways sectarian identities were embedded within their political systems. This approach allows us to see Hezbollah and the PMF not just as mere militias, but as powerful actors whose legitimacy and goals come from socially constructed sectarian identities.

I reiterate, if we wish to grasp a better understanding and explanation of sectarian impact in the Middle Eastern political terrain, I perceive that constructivism is the proper theoretical framework for my research. Other than that, when it comes to foreign policy analysis the issue of structure and agency must be addressed. In the discipline of international relations and foreign policy analysis; what differentiate the two is structure and agent, the former refers to the broader and general international system focusing on its effect in state behaviour, whereas the latter refers to individual or group to act based on their very own interest and choices within the boundaries set by the international systems (Hudson, 2005).

The three main theoretical paradigms of IR (Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism) are associated with structure, while FPA is associated with agency. Despite these differences, according to Houghton (2007) among the three main theoretical paradigms of IR, constructivism is the closest to agency, he even claims that early work in FPA “*pre-empts some of constructivism’s later emphasis on agents, subjectivity, and the construction of meaning,*” (p. 27) thus making it compatible and to some extent constructivism and FPA complete each other. Knowing this statement, provide a peace of mind and an assurance of the two frameworks compatibility. However, constructivism alone is not sufficient to explain the entirety of the phenomena; it may provide us with a good explanation on how actors utilize their religious identities, but how will it explain the power conflict at that time?

Therefore, I also intend to employ another framework from the field of realism, which is “underbalancing”. Previously, the concept of underbalancing have been mentioned in a book chapter by F. Gregore Gause III (2023) as a part of the previous study section, where the author perceives it as a phenomenon where “states fail to form alliances that would seem obvious or natural based on balance of power considerations,” Gause’s definition could also be found in other literatures, such as Hutto’s “Underbalancing in a regional world” (2023), T. V. Paul’s “The Sino-Indian Rivalry and Balance of Power Theory” (2024). These authors employ similar definition of underbalancing, where we can trace it back to Randall L. Schweller’s book “Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power” (2006).

In his book, Schweller defines underbalancing as an occurrence or a phenomenon that “took place when states do not balance or do so inefficiently in response to a dangerous and unappeasable aggressor, and states’ efforts are essential to deter or defeat it”. To sum up, it is a situation where states fail to adequately respond to a clear and dangerous threat. The definitions used by the three authors, Gause, Hutto, and Paul, all sourced from Schweller’s idea. Therefore, in this thesis I intend to adopt the same definition of underbalancing from Schweller’s original work.

In his work, Schweller (2006) contends that state’s failure to identify and respond to a threat is not random, it is often caused by domestic political constraints. He identifies two key causal factors for underbalancing: 1. Elite Fragmentation and Disunity, when political actors are deeply divided, they are unable to agree on the nature of the threat or on a common course of action; 2. Low State Capacity, this refers to the inability of state leaders to extract and utilize the necessary resources from society to implement a coherent foreign policy, often because of social incoherence or a lack of institutional legitimacy (pp. 42-47).

His concept of underbalancing serves as an analytical tool to frame the foreign policies of both Lebanon and Iraq, it truly captures how their dysfunctional responses to the threat of regional instability spilling over from Syria due to a fragmented political elite and societies. This framework allows us to perceive that their different policies are, in fact, a form of underbalancing, caused by internal disunity and state weakness.

However, there are several issues and questions regarding this theory's compatibility with my work, which I seek to clarify as follows, first, is it possible to integrate IR theory to FPA scholarly works? Derek Beach in his book "Analyzing Foreign Policy" (2012), contends that it is possible; "*Embedding FPA within the broader study of IR means that many of the theoretical tools of IR can be used to study foreign policy.*" (p. 5) This statement serves as a primary justification to proceed my thesis in such manner, for Beach himself has provided an ample number of examples on how to apply IR theory in FPA scholarship in his book. According to him, FPA is considered as a sub-discipline of IR due to its narrower analysis, thus enabling the unification of both disciplines.

Second, the theory of underbalancing was and will always be a theory from IR, especially from the house of realism, where its trait to treat states as a unitary actor remains strong. This trait is the red line that separate both IR and FPA, as I have mentioned previously, the former often neglects the internal dynamics and struggles within a state, and the latter will heavily tend to the element of agency whether an individual, a group, or any other kind of organizations within a state. With this issue come to our attention, I offer a shift of unit of analyses; from states as unitary actors to individuals or groups that actually mobilize a state, and in my case Iraq-PMF and Lebanon-Hezbollah.

A state-level analysis will likely to (1) conceal the decisive actors, (2) misinterpret the outcome of foreign policies, and (3) it fails to comprehend true agency; therefore, any outcomes of foreign policy will be branded as mere success or fail, but it cannot truly explain the factors behind those results. Furthermore, it misses the arduous internal bargaining that produce those outcomes, and it lacks the ability to identify a sub-state actor, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the PMF in Iraq, where they are considered as an actor with their own interests, and to some extent they have their own distinct foreign policies.

Therefore, by shifting the unit of analyses, it will allow me to move beyond describing policy outcomes to explaining them, because we will see dynamics between factions within states. Next, it will allow for a more sophisticated usage of theoretical frameworks, it broadens the scope of the theory itself, thus expanding and contributing to the existing literatures. I reiterate, employing both theoretical frameworks separately are

insufficient. Only by synthesizing both theories, we can move forward from a mere description to reach a robust explanation.

In this thesis, I perceive that neither constructivism nor realism alone is sufficient to explain the cases of Iraq and Lebanon during the Syrian conflict. Only by synthesizing them can we achieve a robust explanation; constructivism explains why the domestic political landscape is so fragmented, whereas underbalancing theory explains how this fraction leads to specific foreign policy outcomes. As I have mentioned earlier, this thesis shifts the unit of analysis for underbalancing theory, as the Foreign Policy Analysis school insists, we must move beyond treating the state as a unitary actor (Hudson, 2014; Beach, 2012).

This study does not seek to utilize the theory of underbalancing as a whole, for Schweller (2006) himself does not see it as a deliberate policy, but as a phenomenon or a situation. Therefore, in this thesis I intend to apply the “*logic of underbalancing*” not to the state as a unit, but to the intrastate bargaining process among factions within state. This allows us to see the specific mechanisms of *factional capture* in Lebanon and *factional paralysis* in Iraq that produce the final outcome.

2.3 Indicators for The Effectiveness of Foreign Policy Outcomes

In this part, I intend to adopt the indicators of foreign policy introduced by Derek Beach (2012). The author’s idea provides us with a toolbox to analyse and evaluate the efficacy of foreign policies by comparing the policy’s outcome against the goals or preferences of the state, whether it’s (1) security policies, (2) Diplomacy, or (3) Economic Foreign Policy.

Moreover, the author also contends that how we define those goals depends on the theoretical lens we choose to apply, and considering the two nature of my research’s theoretical frameworks, I will provide only the necessary instruments from both Realist and Constructivism, and in the end, I will exclude some of the following instruments to make it more suitable for my thesis.

First, realist instruments, (1) goal: state survival, security, and power maximization. (2) measure of success: Did the foreign policy action enhance the state’s security and its power position relative to rivals? Did it effectively balance against a threat? (3) measure of failure: Did the policy weaken the state, provoke a counter-balancing coalition, or result in a loss of relative power?

Second, constructivist instruments, (1) goal: To act in a way that is consistent with the state’s constructed identity and norms. (2) measure of success: Did the policy reinforce

the state's identity and follow accepted international norms? (3) measure of failure: Did the state act in a way that violated its identity or key norms, leading to international condemnation and an identity crisis?

2.4 Arguments

In this research I argue: *First*, the specific nature of sectarian dynamics in Iraq and Lebanon determines the extent of their state capacity. *Second*, this difference in state capacity makes them vulnerable to factional interference in different ways, which in turn explains their divergent foreign policy outcomes and their distinct forms of underbalancing. In other words, "in comparing states, states with a weaker institutional strength or capacity are more prone to underbalancing compared to states with a stronger institution."

In the case of Syrian Civil War, where demonstration turned to be a full-fledged proxy war between sects to achieve dominant influence, Iraq and Lebanon as countries that apply sectarian power-sharing systems face a hard time in balancing their foreign policies. What initially intended to be a blessing turned out to be an obstacle, the division of power between sects has proven that a certain group within the government may prioritize the interest of their own group. This can be seen in the case of Lebanon during the Syrian crisis; where Hezbollah acted on their own and aided Assad's regime undermining the central government's decision of dissociation, making Lebanon indirectly involved with the conflict.

On the contrary to that, in the early stages of the conflict, major Iraqi Shi'a factions the PMF (Popular Mobilization Force) resented the idea of cooperating with the U.S. however they did not hinder the decision made by the Iraqi central government. Using a constructivist lens, this argument shows that sectarian sentiments still remain in a power-sharing system and could be an obstacle to reach a cohesive foreign policy. I believe by analysing the role of narrative and identity within the fragmented bureaucracy will help us to make sense of such behaviour.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Method

In order to answer my question, this research will employ the comparative historical analysis and process tracing method. As mentioned by Mahoney (2012), comparative historical analysis is a research approach within the social sciences that prioritizes understanding causation, examining processes across time, and employing systematic and context-sensitive comparisons. Rather than adhering to a specific theory or method, it aims to explain significant outcomes by rigorously selecting cases and evaluating causal relationships.

I believe that this approach is suitable for my research for several reasons, (1) its tendency to analyse historical contexts will help me to understand how past events of the two countries shape present circumstances. (2) as its name's sake, the comparative nature of the approach is intended to comprehend broader processes and causal mechanisms by contrasting cases. (3) it emphasizes the importance of causal mechanism, by uncovering causal mechanisms that connect events and conditions to outcomes. (4) comparative historical analysis is known for its flexibility, it acts as a bridge between diverse methodologies and paradigms, this is done by remaining open to the use of various analytic tools and approaches.

Therefore, with this advantage at hand, I also intend to synthesize the process tracing methods to identify and examine causal mechanisms within a case or set of cases. It involves the systematic analysis of sequence events, decisions, or actions to uncover how specific outcomes are formulated (Mahoney, 2012). With this approach I seek to map the sequence of events and decisions leading to foreign policy outcomes in Iraq and Lebanon, and to identify critical moments where ideological or religious narratives played a significant role.

Eventually, these two methods are not separate but are synergize into a single, two-level research strategy. CHA provides the broad historical scope, while Process Tracing provides the refined causal validation. This integrated approach allows the thesis to make a more powerful claim than either method could achieve separately. The foreign policies' different outcomes between Iraq and Lebanon were not accidental, but was a product of specific causal mechanisms forged in their respective histories. This two-level approach is suited to test the central theoretical argument, which, drawing on the work of scholars, such

as Darwich (2016) and Subotic (2016), for it connects state identity, domestic cohesion, and foreign policy behaviour.

In order to do so, I will collect official statements, speeches, and government documents related with their foreign policies as my primary sources. As for the secondary sources, I will use academic articles, books, reports, and media reports detailing events during the crisis to help me solve the question.

CHAPTER IV

THE HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTARIAN STATES

4.1 Introduction

The current political terrain of Lebanon and Iraq are dominated by the deep influence of powerful, sectarian armed political actors; Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The existence of these groups, which act as quasi-state institutions with their own military power, social networks, and political interests, challenges the fundamental and conventional understandings of state sovereignty. In this chapter, I seek to analyse about what kind of historical trajectories and structural conditions that led to the conception of these formidable factions and their rise to power. In order to do so, this chapter provides a comparative historical analysis of Lebanon and Iraq, tracing the diverging paths that led to the current situations.

In this chapter, I contend, despite the fact that both states were born from the Ottoman empire colonial order and had sectarianism institutionally embedded into their internal political struggle, the unique trait of their post-independence conflicts, state-building projects, and experiences with foreign intervention created different ecosystems in which Hezbollah and the PMF could emerge and flourish. In Lebanon, a system of consociational democracy, established to manage the complex sectarian landscapes, ultimately collapsed under the weight of internal and regional conflicts, creating a power vacuum that a coherent and ideologically driven Hezbollah would fill. Whereas in Iraq, a state founded on the principle of Sunni minority rule over the Shi'a majority turned into terrible decades of authoritarianism and brutal sectarian suppression, which, after the state's chaotic fall in 2003, created a security vacuum that various group of Shi'a militias managed to seize control, and later on these groups were known as the PMF.

This chapter will proceed in three parts, utilizing a hybrid of chronological and thematic approach. The first section will analyse the origin of sectarianism in both countries, highlighting the instrumental role of British and French colonial policy in constructing political systems based on the existing sectarian identity, and the following post-independence crises and turbulences that sharpen the division among sects. The second part of this chapter will attempt to apply process tracing to chart the specific origins and consolidation of Hezbollah and the PMF, focusing on the catalysts, key actors, and turning points in their respective evolutions. The third section serves as an early analysis of how the Syrian civil war as a regional catalyst, a critical external shock that tested all the competing factions, cemented their power, and show their divergent roles as regional

and domestic security actors. By tracing their historical background, this chapter establishes the essential empirical foundation upon which the theoretical analysis of state capacity or state strength and foreign policy behaviour in chapter 5 will be built.

4.2 The Origin of Sectarian States: from Colonialism and Crisis

The modern nation-states of Iraq and Lebanon were not born of a natural nationalist movement but were, in essence, parts of colonial constructions assembled from the provinces of the defeated Ottoman Caliphate. In both cases, the mandatory powers, France in Lebanon and Britain in Iraq, not only they recognize existing communal divisions but also actively orchestrated the political systems that institutionalized sectarianism as the primary organizing systems within the two states (Haddad, 2011; Hinnebusch, 2018; Salloukh et al., 2015). This foundational act of political engineering had a deep and lasting consequences, creating structurally weak states vulnerable to internal and external conflicts.

4.2.1 Colonial Legacies and the Engineering of Sectarian States

While the Ottoman Caliphate's *millet* system, which granted religious communities a degree of legal autonomy in matters of personal status, provided a historical precedent for communal organization, it was the post-World War I mandatory administrations that transformed religious identity into the definitive foundation for political power and national life (Osman, 2015). This process, however, occurred differently in Lebanon and Iraq, reflecting the distinct strategic interests and colonial methodologies of France and Britain.

Lebanon: The Construction of a Confessional Republic

In Lebanon, the French project was the culmination of a long history of intervention. The foundation was laid during the middle of 19th century Ottoman period, particularly after the civil strife of 1860 between Maronites and Druze. The European powers imposed on the Ottomans the Regime of the *Mutsarrifiyya* for mount Lebanon, an early example of consociational arrangement governed by a non-Lebanese Ottoman Christian governor, aided by an administrative council where seats were accordingly distributed with a strict sectarian format. This system, effectively invented a political Lebanon separate from Syrian areas and established the principle that sectarian representation was the only legitimate basis for governance (Traboulsi, 2007).

Based on this precedent, French High Commissioner, Henri Gouraud proclaimed the state of "Greater Lebanon" in 1920. This newly proclaimed state was designed with the intention to ensure a demographic advantage for the Maronite Christians, France's

traditional clients in the Levant region (Aboultaif, 2019; Salloukh et al., 2015). By merging the major Muslim cities of Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon, as well as the Shi'a majority regions in the south and the Bekaa Valley, to the historical Maronite Druze capital of mount Lebanon, the French created what Kamal Salibi (1988) famously termed "a house of many mansions," a state consisting of various communities with complex historical narratives and allegiances. This act of manipulation, created a permanent state of political anxiety, especially for the Maronites, who now had to defend their fragile political dominance against a sizable Muslim population, which at that time, hostile to the idea of an independent Lebanese state and seek for a unification with Syria.

The French colonial administration then attempted to codify this sectarian reality into a political system. The constitution of 1926 along with the subsequent electoral laws established a consociational framework where political power, public office, and state resources were meticulously distributed among the recognized religious sects. This process led to the unwritten National Pact of 1943, an agreement between Maronite leader "Bishara al-Khuri" and Sunni leader "Riad al-Solh" that became the core foundation of an independent Lebanon state. The pact conceived a sectarian formula for power-sharing: the president would always be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shi'a Muslim, with a parliamentary ratio of 6:5 in favour of the Christians (Aboultaif, 2019; Hinnebusch, 2018). In exchange, the Maronite would renounce any kind of French protection, or interference; this act is shown as an acceptance of Lebanon's "Arab face," thus the Muslims agreed to leave their aspirations of unity with Syria and unite under one Lebanese state (Salloukh et al., 2015).

Within the scope of constructivist view on sectarianism, this was a clear case of elite-led instrumentalization; identity was not a primordial notion, but a political tool used to bargain for power and privilege. The system was designed not to transcend sectarianism, but to manage it, thereby ensuring its permanence as the central feature of Lebanese political dynamic. The Shi'a community, despite being the third largest sect, was heavily sidelined, receiving the relatively powerless position as the speaker of parliament and being systematically underrepresented in Lebanon bureaucracy and apparatus, a mishap that would rot for decades.

Iraq: The Construction of a Sunni-Hegemonic Monarchy

In Iraq, the British faced a different set of challenges and aimed for a different strategy, but one that was equally consequential in the birth of sectarianism within Iraq. The British state-building project in Iraq was not mainly driven by a desire to empower a certain client community and more for the sake of administrative efficiency and imperial

control (Dawisha, 2009). The state of Iraq was artificially assembled from three distinct Ottoman *wilayets* (provinces): the majority Sunni Arab and Kurdish province in the north, the heavily Sunni Arab province of Baghdad in the centre, and the majority Shi'a Arab province of Basra in the south.

The profound local resistance to this colonial project was made clear during the "Great Iraqi Revolt of 1920," where a massive tribal uprising influenced and led by Shi'a clerics from the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, that united Sunni and Shi'a Arabs against British occupation. The British brutally suppressed the revolt, using air strikes for the first time in colonial policing, an act that created a profound trauma for the new state (Robertson, 2015). After realizing the difficulty of direct rule, the British opted to install a pliable monarchy. They imported Faisal I, a Sunni Hashemite from the Hejaz who had been exiled by the French from Syria, and deliberately placed him as a king of a country where Shi'a Arabs constituted the clear demographic majority (Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett, 2001).

This decision created a fundamental structural imbalance at the heart of the Iraqi state; a Sunni-dominated political and military elite reigning over a Shi'a majority, along with the restless Kurdish minority. In order to strengthen Faisal's reign, the British relied heavily on the class of Sunni which were former Ottoman officers who had served under them during the war. These ex-Ottoman officers were given a position of high authority in the new Iraqi army and the state's bureaucracy, thus effectively creating a "Sunni-officered state" (Osman, 2015). Policies were enacted to cemented this hierarchy; furthermore, the 1925 Nationality Law contained clauses that could be used to strip Shi'ites of Iranian origin (*Taba'iyya*) of their citizenship. Land registration laws tended to favour large Sunni tribal sheikhs who cooperated with the state, depriving many Shi'a cultivators of their lands. Not to mention that military academy admissions were heavily skewed towards the Sunni community (Dawisha, 2009).

Unlike in Lebanon, where the system was built on a flawed principle of sectarian partnership, the Iraqi state was built on a foundation of sectarian hierarchy and exclusion. As Fanar Haddad (2011) argues, the state's official narrative and institutions were thoroughly imbued with a Sunni Arab character, promoting a pan-Arab nationalism that inherently marginalized the Shi'a, which often falsely accused as "Persian loyalties" and actively suppressed the non-Arab identity of the Kurds. This was clearly demonstrated in the "Assyrian Massacre" of 1933, where the Iraqi military, under the command of General Bakr Sidqi, massacred hundreds of Assyrian Christians, a tragedy that served as a brutal announcement of the state's intolerance for the right of minorities (Dawisha, 2009).

4.2.2 Post-independence Crises and the Hardening of Sectarian Identities

The political structures passed down by the colonial powers proved to be deeply unstable. Within the decades after independence, both Lebanon and Iraq were struck by crises that shattered the initial political bargains that led to a violent hardening of sectarian identities.

Lebanon: From Fragile Consensus to Civil War

In Lebanon, the delicate balance of the National Pact began to crumble due to the demographic shifts and regional turmoil, for in the 1960s, Muslims had grown to outnumbered Christians. The 1958 civil war, a brief but sharp conflict fuelled because of President Camille Chamoun's pro-Western alignment with the Baghdad Pact and the rise of pan-Arabism ideology under Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and Syria, exposed the vulnerability of the Lebanese consensus (Rubin, 2009). The crises, which led to a U.S. military intervention, was resolved by an arrangement that installed the moderate general Fouad Chehab as president of Lebanon, succeeding Chamoun.

During the span of 1958 to 1964, which known as the period of Chehabism, the president represented a serious attempt at state-building, aiming to strengthen central institutions, particularly the military's intelligence branch (the *Deuxième Bureau*), and provide services to abandoned regions, the Shi'a majority region in the south. However, these reforms were ultimately resisted by the traditional sectarian oligarchs (*zu'ama*), who saw a strong, impartial state as a direct threat to their clientelistic patronage systems (Aboultaif, 2019; Salloukh et al., 2015).

The fatal blow to the old order was the arrival of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) following its ousting from Jordan in 1970-1971. The Cairo Agreement in 1969, a secret pact between the state of Lebanon and the PLO, effectively relinquished Lebanese sovereignty in parts of the country, allowing the PLO to form a "state within a state" in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut. From here, the PLO launched assaults against Israel, drawing devastating Israeli retaliations that targeted the Shi'a villagers of the south (Rubin, 2009; Wilkins, 2013). The presence of a powerful, armed Palestinian force disturbs the delicate sectarian balance, empowering the state's Muslim and leftist factions who saw the PLO as an ally, while deeply distressing the Maronite communities, who saw it as a threat to their dominance and to the sovereignty of Lebanon (Najem, 2012).

The collective pressure caused by the aforementioned factors, led to the horrific Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). The war was a cataclysm that destroyed the old Lebanon.

The Lebanese army fractured along sectarian lines in 1976, and thus the state ceased to exist, its functions paralyzed by a group of sectarian militias. It was the heat of this civil war that serves as catalyst of a growing Shi'a political consciousness, for a long time marginalized by the government elites, it finally discovers its militant expression. The movement led by the charismatic Iranian-born cleric Imam Musa al-Sadr, the movement of the deprived alongside its militia branch, *Amal*, mobilized the Shi'a community under the slogans of social justice and political empowerment (Daher, 2019).

The war created the necessary political and security vacuum that allowed for the emergence of armed Shi'a movements, later known as Hezbollah. The Taif Agreement, mediated by Saudi Arabia in 1989, finally ended the war. It did not dismantle the sectarian system but transform it, adapting the power-sharing formula to a 50:50 Christian-Muslim ration in parliament and stripping the Maronite presidency of some of its executive authority. Crucially, it legitimized the authority of the wartime militia leaders, transforming them into a new political class (Salloukh et al., 2015). However, the state remained weak, a hollow shell, and the stage was set for a powerful, disciplined, and ideologically committed actor such as Hezbollah to fulfil a dominant role.

Iraq: From Monarchy to Totalitarianism

Iraq's post-independence history was not marked by the collapse of a weak state into civil war, but by the consolidation of an increasingly brutal authoritarianism. The monarchy under Faisal II, the third monarch of Iraq and grandson of Faisal I, was overthrown in a military coup on July 14, 1958. The coup was led by General Abd al-Karim Qasim, ushering in decades of political turmoil and violence (Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett, 2001). The government under General Qasim, was initially considered popular, unfortunately it soon faced internal divisions between communists, Ba'athists, and Arab nationalists. Eventually, he was overthrown and killed in a Ba'athists-led coup in 1963, which was in turn followed by another coup staged by the Arif brothers (Dawisha, 2009; Robertson, 2015). This specific period was characterized by a failure to resolve the fundamental question of Iraqi identity; was it a state for all its citizens, or was it puppet for the pan-Arab nationalism?

This period of crisis led to the rise of the Ba'ath party, which eventually acquire absolute power in 1968. Under the leadership of Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and his kinsman, Saddam Hussein, the Ba'athists regime established one of the most totalitarian states in the world (Dawisha, 2009). While claiming to be a secular with pan-Arab nationalist as its ideology, the party ruled through a narrow, Tikrit-based Sunni group and systematically repressed the Shi'a majority and the Kurds. This repression reached its peak under Saddam

Hussein, who assumed the presidency in 1979, during his regime any expression of independent Shi'a political or religious identity was brutally crushed. The regime executed the revered Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr along with his sister in 1980, viewing his intellectual and political project as a threat.

Throughout the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), thousands of Iraqi Shi'a were executed or deported on suspicion of sympathizing with Iran (Haddad, 2011). Following the Gulf War in 1991, Saddam's regime savagely suppressed a massive popular uprising (*intifada*) in the major Shi'a regions, killing tens of thousands, using helicopter gunships against fleeing civilians, and deliberately destroying the southern marshlands, the heart of a unique local culture (Dawisha, 2009; Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett, 2001). Saddam's acts of brutal violence left a deep and lasting trauma within the Shi'a community, creating an irreparable schism between the majority of the population and the Ba'athists state. This legacy of brutal oppression ensured that when the regime was finally deposed by the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the Iraqi state would not just reform, but entirely collapse, unleashing decades worth of wrath of the people due to sectarian grievance.

4.3 The Rise of Dominant Armed Factions

The historical paths of state failure and sectarian conflict in Lebanon and Iraq birthed the distinct conditions for the emergence of Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces and their rise to power. While both are powerful, sect-based militias that challenge their respective states' monopoly on violence, their origins, structure, and ideologies are products of their unique national histories. Hezbollah was born from the crucible of civil war and foreign invasion as a cohesive, ideologically disciplined "resistance" movement. On the other hand, the PMF, emerged due to the total collapse of the state, an anarchic environment that fostered a coalition of diverse militias later brought under a fragile state-sanctioned umbrella.

4.3.1 Hezbollah: From Resistance to a state within a State

Hezbollah or "The Party of God," was founded due to the trauma of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Israel's invasion, was aimed to destroy the PLO's infrastructure, shattered the existing political landscape, especially the Shi'a community in southern part of Lebanon. It discredited the existing secular nationalist narratives and the more moderate Shi'a militia, Amal or the movement of the deprived, which was perceived failed in facing the Israeli threats. The result of this situation is a political and security vacuum, and a powerful grievance that a new, more radical form of Shi'a activism could exploit (Rubin, 2009).

Since its inception, Hezbollah was a product of the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran. In the summer of 1982, roughly 1,500 personnel from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were dispatched to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. There, they started to recruit, train, fund, and ideologically indoctrinate a cadre of Lebanese Shi'a militants, whom used to be ex-Amal personnel or followers of the late Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (Azani, 2013; Daher, 2019). Hezbollah formally adopted Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), pledging its alliance to Iran's Supreme Leader as its highest spiritual and political authority. This provided the then budding organization an ideological coherence, a dedicated corps of cadres, and a powerful state sponsor that its rival lacked.

The power consolidation of the Hezbollah was intricately linked to its cultivation of a potent narrative of "resistance" (*muqawama*) against Israel and Western Forces (Daher, 2019). The organization's actions of bombings in 1983, in both the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Marine along with the French Paratrooper barracks in Beirut announced its arrival as a force to be reckon. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it faced a two-front struggle: a fierce competition for dominance within the Shi'a community against the Amal movement, known as the war of the brothers, and a relentless campaign of guerilla warfare against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (Salloukh et al., 2015). The culmination of this "resistance" was Israel's unilateral withdrawal from its self-declared "security-zone" in May 2000. This was an important moment, Hezbollah was widely hailed, not just among the Shi'a but across the Arab world, known as the sole Arab force to have successfully liberated its land from Israel's grip. This victory provided Hezbollah with an unparalleled level of martial legitimacy that no Lebanese state institution or political faction could match (Najem, 2012).

The key to Hezbollah's lasting power, lies in its application of the so called "dual-function model," a strategy through which it systematically supplanted the notoriously weak and ineffective Lebanese state (Azani, 2013). As the state failed to give basic security and social services, Hezbollah stepped in to fill that vacancy, thus forming a parallel state structure. This includes:

1. A Formidable Military Branch: Hezbollah possesses a military strength that is widely considered to be more powerful and better disciplined compared to the official Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). With Iran and Syria serve as constant supplier of its arsenal, Hezbollah's power grows significantly, its arsenal includes tens of thousands of rockets, advanced anti-tank guided missiles, anti-ship missiles, and a corps of tens of thousands of battle-hardened fighters (Azani, 2013).

2. An Extensive Social Welfare Network: This is not a simple charity, but a sophisticated system of social engineering. Institutions such as *Jihad al-Bina* (Construction Jihad) rebuild infrastructure damaged by war, the *Mu'assasat al-Shahid* (Martyr's Foundation) provides for the families of fallen fighters, not to mention a network of schools and hospitals, like *al-Rasoul al-Azam* Hospital in Beirut which offers high quality services. These welfare systems make Hezbollah a core provider and viewed as a replacement of the state, thus garnering immense loyalty and creating a dependent population (Salloukh et al., 2015).
3. A sophisticated Political Apparatus: Hezbollah is not just a militia, by time they turned to a major political party with significant representation in the Lebanese parliament and cabinet (Daher, 2019). It uses its political power in a sophisticated manner: forming alliances (most notably with the Free Patriotic Movement, a Christian party, back in 2006), blocking legislation, and ensuring the state does not challenge its "arms, people, resistance" trinity.

The war with Israel back in 2006, caused by a cross-border raid by Hezbollah, further solidified the party's status. Despite the heavy casualties and destruction brought by the war, Hezbollah's ability to survive 34 days of intense bombardment by the Israeli force was perceived as a "divine victory." It shows to the world that Hezbollah was not merely a militia, but a sophisticated military actor capable of deterring against a modern state army, further cementing its status as a dominant "state within the state."

4.3.2 The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF): From Anarchy to State Sanction

The origins of the PMF (*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*) could be traced to the catastrophic collapse of the Iraqi state following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. The invasion and the following occupation policies, particularly the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) order number 2, which formally disbanded the Iraqi army, security, and intelligence services, created a fatal security vacuum and unleashed decades of suppressed sectarian tension (Dawisha, 2009). Furthermore, Jon Lee Anderson's account of the fall of Baghdad captures the utter chaos as the state plunge into darkness in an overnight, leaving citizens to fend for themselves (Anderson, 2004).

In the chaotic years between 2003 and 2014, various Shi'a militias emerged. These groups were not new creations but often revivals or transformations of older groups. The most significant are:

1. The Badr Organization: Founded in Iran in the early period of 1980s as the military branch of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the

organization was trained by the IRGC and fought alongside Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. After 2003, thousands of its fighters returned to Iraq and, through SCIRI's political lobbying, heavily infiltrated the new ministry of interior, and later use state resources to run sectarian death squads during the 2006-2008 civil war (Jabar & Mansour, 2017).

2. The Sadrist Movement: They are the followers of the populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr formed the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (Mahdi Army), a massive grassroots militia that engaged in two major uprisings against U.S. forces in 2004 and became a primary driver of sectarian cleansing attempt in Baghdad.
3. Iranian "Special Groups": As the occupation continued, Iran cultivated smaller, more loyal proxy groups, often rogue members from the Sadrist movement, such as *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (League of the Righteous) and *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (Hezbollah Brigades). These groups focused their attacks on U.S. forces and directly trained, armed, and funded by Iran's Quds Force (Dury-Agri et al., 2017).

Different from its Hezbollah counterpart in Lebanon, the Iraqi Shi'a militant landscape was characterized by fragmentation, fierce competition, and shifting alliance, whereas Hezbollah gradually established hegemony and unity.

The critical factor for the formation of the PMF was the alarmingly rapid advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the summer of 2014. As ISIS seized Mosul and vast swathes of northern and western Iraq, the reconstituted Iraqi army, plagued by corruption and "ghost soldiers," disintegrated once again. With Baghdad itself under threat, Iraq's highest Shi'a religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a historic fatwa on June 13, 2014. He called upon all able-bodied Iraqi men to take up arms in *wajib al-kifai* (a collective religious duty) to defend the country against the ISIS onslaught (Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021; Nader, 2015).

Sistani's fatwa was a moment of awakening for the Shi'a community, Tens of thousands of Shi'a volunteers responded. While his call explicitly directed volunteers to join the state security forces; however, the reality on the ground was that the existing militias, with their established command structures and Iranian backing, were the most effective fighting forces. They quickly absorbed the flood of new recruits (Jabar & Mansour, 2017). In response to this reality, the government of then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki established the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC), creating a formal, state-funded umbrella organization to coordinate these disparate groups.

This ad-hoc arrangement was given formal legal status in November 2016, when the Iraqi Parliament passed the Popular Mobilization Law. This controversial legislation

recognized the PMF as an “independent military formation” and a component of the Iraqi armed forces, reporting directly to the Prime Minister as Commander-in-Chief (Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021). This act was a quintessential example of a weak state’s strategy of co-optation. Unable to disarm or defeat the powerful militias, the Iraqi state opted to formally integrate them, providing them with salaries, weapons, and legal legitimacy in the hope of exerting some measure of control.

Unlike Hezbollah’s monolithic structure, the PMF remains a heterogeneous coalition of dozens of factions (estimated at over 60 brigades) with varying ideologies and allegiances. The detailed “Orders of Battle” provided by the Institute for the Study of War (Dury-Agri et al., 2017) and the analysis by Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar (2017) allow for a typology:

1. The *Wilayat* Factions (Iran-Loyalist): These are the most powerful and well-equipped groups, such as the Badr Organization (PMF Brigades 3, 4, 5, etc.), *Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq* (Brigades 41, 42, 43), and *Kata’ib Hezbollah* (Brigades 45, 46, 47). They are loyal to Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and effectively function as Iranian proxies. Their leaders, like Hadi al-Ameri (Badr) and the late Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Kata’ib Hezbollah), formed the core leadership of the PMF.
2. The Sistani Factions (State-Loyalist): These groups, often called the “shrine militias,” were formed in direct response to Sistani’s fatwa and pledge allegiance to him and the Iraqi state. They include the Ali al-Akbar Brigade (Brigade 11) and the Abbas Combat Division (Brigade 26). They are generally more nationalist and focused on defending Iraq.
3. The Sadrist Faction (Populist-Nationalist): Muqtada al-Sadr’s rebranded militia, the Peace Companies (*Saraya al-Salam*, Brigades 313, 314), also operates under the PMF umbrella but maintains a high degree of autonomy and is often in political opposition to the Iran-aligned factions, championing an anti-corruption and Iraqi nationalist platform.

This internal fragmentation means the PMF lacks the ideological and organizational coherence compared to that of Hezbollah. It is less of a “state within a state” and more a collection of competing armed factions that have been embedded onto the formal structure of a weak and contested Iraqi state.

4.4 The Crucible of Regional Conflict: The Syrian Civil War

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 served as a critical test for both Hezbollah and the proto-PMF factions, highlighting their divergent capabilities and strategic imperatives. For Hezbollah, the war was an opportunity to project power and secure its interests abroad. For the Iraqi Shi'a militias, it was a proximate threat whose consequences would have a direct and devastating impact at home (Royle & Mabon, 2022; Salloukh et al., 2015).

Hezbollah's decision to intervene in Syria was a risky strategic decision. Framing its intervention as a pre-emptive war against *takfiri* extremists who threatened Lebanon's Shi'a, Hezbollah deployed thousands of its elite fighters to bolster the beleaguered regime of Bashar al-Assad. The primary strategic rationale was to preserve its "Axis of Resistance" partner and, crucially, to secure its logistical supply lines from Iran, which run through Syria (Rubin, 2009). The intervention was not without controversy inside Lebanon, but Hezbollah's military and political power allowed it to override any domestic opposition. Its role in key battles, such as the 2013 battle for the strategic town of Qusayr near the Lebanese border and its later campaigns in the Qalamoun Mountains and Aleppo, was decisive in turning the tide of the war in Assad's favour (Phillips, 2022; Salloukh, 2017). The intervention, thus, strengthened the already powerful Hezbollah and solidify its position as a formidable para-military force, gaining invaluable offensive combat experience but also embroiling it deeply in a bloody regional sectarian conflict.

The Syrian war had the opposite effect on Iraq. The chaos in eastern Syria provided a safe haven for the precursor to ISIS, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), allowing it to regroup, rearm, and rebrand. The conflict in Syria was not a foreign war that Iraqi Shi'a militias chose to enter; it was a wildfire that inevitably jumped the vulnerable border. Indeed, some of the most hardline Iraqi Shi'a militias, like *Kata'ib Hezbollah* and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, were already active in Syria prior to 2014, fighting on behalf of the Assad regime under the pretext of defending the Sayyida Zainab shrine in Damascus (Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021; Hussain, 2013). This created a transnational jihadi movement, where Sunni and Shi'a extremists from across the region clashed. The fall of Mosul to ISIS in 2014 was a direct consequence of this transnational dynamic and the security collapse in Syria. Therefore, the mobilization of what would become the PMF was not an act of power projection but one of desperate self-defence against an existential threat that the Syrian conflict had unleashed upon Iraq (Haddad, 2011).

This comparison reveals the fundamental difference in the development of the two entities. By 2011, Hezbollah was a mature and coherent actor capable of making independent foreign policy decisions and intervening militarily abroad to protect its

strategic interests. The Iraqi Shi'a militias, in contrast, were still a fragmented and competing collection of groups, forced into a reactive coalition by a crisis that originated beyond their borders but threatened their very existence at home.

To sum up, the histories of Lebanon and Iraq demonstrate how the legacy of colonial state-formation can create divergent paths toward remarkably similar political realities. Both nations were constructed with sectarianism at their core, leading to structurally weak states incapable of commanding the unified loyalty of their citizens. This inherent weakness, worsened by decades of internal conflict and external interference, created the fertile ground for the emergence of powerful sect-based armed groups.

In Lebanon, a political system designed to manage sectarianism through power-sharing ultimately failed, leading to a devastating civil war that *hollowed out the state*. From these ashes rose Hezbollah, a disciplined, ideologically coherent movement and proficient in exploiting the narrative of resistance and the vacuum of state authority to become the nation's dominant military and political force, a powerful "state within the state". Its deep roots, institutional sophistication, and clear ideological project, backed by decades of consistent Iranian support, set it apart.

In Iraq, a state built on the principle of sectarian and ethnic domination descended into a brutal totalitarianism that delegitimized the state in the eyes of the majority. Its eventual, violent collapse in 2003 produced a state of near-total anarchy, from which a chaotic and fragmented collection of Shi'a militias emerged. Forced into a loose coalition by the existential threat of ISIS, these groups were eventually formalized as the PMF, a state-sanctioned but uncontrollable body that embodies the weakness and contestation of the post-2003 Iraqi state. Its heterogeneity and the competing loyalties of its constituent parts make it a fundamentally different entity from Hezbollah, a reflection of the utter disintegration of the Iraqi state from which it came.

Having established the historical 'what' and 'how' of the rise of these formidable factions, the subsequent chapter will turn to an analytical discussion of their contemporary impact. It will apply the theoretical frameworks of state capacity and foreign policy behaviour to explore *why* the existence of Hezbollah and the PMF fundamentally alters the nature of state sovereignty and regional security in the Middle East today.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

Why do states, when confronted with dangerous external threats, sometimes fail to take the necessary actions to secure themselves? More specifically, why do states like Iraq and Lebanon, situated in one of the world's most volatile regions, consistently exhibit foreign policy behaviours that appear suboptimal, incoherent, or paralyzed? Traditional theories of international relations, particularly structural realism, would expect such states, existing in a condition of regional anarchy, to engage in balancing behaviour against powerful or threatening neighbours (Waltz, 1979; Hinnbusch, 2018).

However, as the historical narrative in Chapter 4 established, the foreign policies of Baghdad and Beirut often defy this logic. From Lebanon's official policy of "dissociation" from a Syrian war in which its most powerful actor, Hezbollah, was a primary combatant (Salloukh, 2017; Bahout, 2014), to Iraq's reliance on American airpower against ISIS and its inability to prevent Iranian-backed militias from attacking US forces (Nader, 2015), the foreign policy conduct of these states is puzzling. This chapter addresses this central puzzle by moving from historical explanation to direct theoretical analysis, seeking to explain the structural conditions that result in these foreign policy anomalies. It argues that the answers are not in external pressures alone, but deep within the internal system and the states' own malfunction.

This chapter argues that the institutionalization of sectarianism in both Iraq and Lebanon has critically corrode state capacity, particularly the state's monopoly on coercion and its ability to formulate and implement a unitary foreign policy. This degradation does not simply render the state "weak" in a generic sense; it fundamentally alters its foreign policy behaviour, transforming it from the coherent, rational process theorized by many IR theories into what can be described as a contested, dual-track, and often contradictory process (Wilkins, 2013; Korany & Dessouki, 2008). This dysfunctional behaviour is the direct result of constant internal bargaining between official state institutions and powerful, sect-based non-state actors, namely Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq.

Eventually, this contested process compels the state into a structurally determined policy of underbalancing. As defined by Randall L. Schweller (2006) in his seminal work *Unanswered Threats*, underbalancing is the obvious failure of states to recognize and/or respond to dangerous threats in a timely and effective manner, driven by domestic political

constraints that overwhelm rational strategic imperatives. This chapter will demonstrate that in the cases of Iraq and Lebanon, underbalancing is not an occasional policy mistake or a sign of simple incompetence, but a persistent and logical outcome of a failing political system where sovereignty is fragmented and the “national interest” is often a contested concept (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Lynch et al., 2022).

To build this argument, the chapter will proceed in several distinct stages. First, it will dissect the theoretical mechanism through which ingrained sectarianism corrodes the core components of state capacity, creating the necessary preconditions for a dysfunctional foreign policy apparatus. This section will explore how the presence of powerful non-state actors, legitimized by sectarian politics, erodes the state’s coercive capacity and captures its administrative functions, making a unified foreign policy nearly impossible. Second, the analysis will once again turn to the regional crucible that was the Syrian Civil War, focusing on the critical juncture between 2012 and 2014. This period will be established as a powerful catalyst that dramatically escalated the threats faced by both Lebanon and Iraq, from the spillover of jihadist groups to intense geopolitical pressure, and to laid bare the dysfunctional foreign policy behaviours of each state (Lawson, 2014; Phillips, 2022), this section is a reiteration and refinement from the previous explanation in chapter 4.

The third and main empirical part of the chapter will then apply the method of process tracing to a series of comparative case studies. These cases will analyse in detail the specific bargaining dynamics between the state and non-state factions in both Lebanon and Iraq as they responded to major foreign policy challenges, such as Hezbollah’s intervention in Qusayr (Nerguizian, 2013) and Iraq’s request for US and Iranian assistance against ISIS (Choucair, 2013; Chulov, 2014). Finally, the chapter will explicitly link these observed behaviours to the outcome of underbalancing. It will synthesize the findings to show how different forms of internal fragmentation, what can be termed “*capture*” by a hegemonic faction in Lebanon versus “*paralysis*” by multiple, competing factions in Iraq, lead to similarly dysfunctional results. This analysis, I hope, will provide the crucial link between the historical context of Chapter 4 and the broader theoretical conclusions of the thesis, challenging state-centric models and offering a more nuanced understanding of foreign policy in the contemporary Middle East.

5.2 The Mechanism: How Sectarianism Corrodes State Capacity

The foreign policy of a state is fundamentally a reflection of its internal capacity to define and pursue a national interest outside of its borders (Hinnebusch, 2014; Korany & Dessouki, 2008). In both Lebanon and Iraq, the political systems designed to manage

sectarian diversity have paradoxically resulted in the systemic erosion of this very ability. The institutionalization of sectarian identities as the primary foundation for political power has not led to a stable, functioning pluralism but rather to a “*hollowed-out*” state, one where the core attributes of sovereignty are fragmented and contested by many factions from within (Salloukh et al., 2015). The hollowing out process is not merely an abstract concept; it represents a clear deterioration of the state's fundamental responsibilities. This section will build the first causal link of the chapter's central argument (Sectarianism -> Weakened State Capacity), demonstrating how the entrenchment of sectarian politics directly degrades the two most vital components of state power: the monopoly on the legitimate use of force and the ability to formulate and implement unified state policy through control of its own institutions.

5.2.1 The Coercive Deficit: Losing the Monopoly on Violence

The Weberian ideal of the state is defined by its “*monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory*” (Weber, 1946, p. 78). In both Lebanon and Iraq, this monopoly has been shattered. The state's official armed forces coexist with, and are often overshadowed by, powerful, sect-based armed groups that operate with significant autonomy. This creates a dual-track security environment where the state's coercive capacity is not only diminished but is often contradicted by the actions of factions that are, in Iraq's case, formally part of the state itself. This coercive deficit is the most glaring manifestation of diminished state capacity and the primary enabler of a fragmented foreign policy.

In Lebanon, the post-civil war Taif Agreement (1989) envisioned the disarmament of all militias and the consolidation of security under the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). While other militias disarmed or were integrated, Hezbollah, citing the ongoing Israeli occupation of the South, was granted an exception, allowing it to retain its arsenal under the legitimizing banner of “The Resistance.” This exception, emerge from political necessity and Syrian patronage, has evolved into a permanent and dominant feature of the Lebanese landscape. Over the past three decades, Hezbollah has developed a military wing that is, by all accounts, more powerful, better equipped, and more battle-hardened than the LAF itself (Daher, 2019; Azani, 2013). Its vast and ever-expanding arsenal of rockets, precision missiles, advanced anti-tank weaponry, and drones, combined with its tens of thousands of disciplined, ideologically committed, and experienced fighters, gives it a capacity for both deterrence and power projection that the official state cannot hope to match (Norton, 2007).

This reality has created a *de facto* division of coercive labor, famously encapsulated in the political slogan of the “Army-People-Resistance” trinity. This formula, often inserted into government policy statements, formally acknowledges the role of the Resistance alongside the state's army. In practice, the LAF is responsible for internal security, counter-terrorism against non-Hezbollah threats (like Sunni jihadist groups), and policing in areas where a sectarian agreement allows it to operate. However, in matters of national defense and strategic deterrence, particularly in facing Israel, the state has effectively given up its sovereign prerogative to Hezbollah (Salloukh et al., 2015; Wilkins, 2013). There are clear “red lines” and geographic areas, such as Beirut's southern suburbs (*al-Dahieh*), parts of the Bekaa Valley, and much of the south, where the LAF's authority is nominal and its operational freedom is severely restricted by Hezbollah's own security apparatus (Daher, 2019).

The relationship is not always directly antagonistic, it is often one of implicit coordination, intelligence sharing, and conflict avoidance, with the LAF commanders understanding the practical limits of their power. This arrangement, however, fundamentally undermines state capacity. The Lebanese state cannot make sovereign decisions on war and peace, as evidenced by the 2006 war with Israel, which was initiated and prosecuted by Hezbollah with the state acting as a horrified, powerless bystander (Wilkins, 2013). This hollowing out of coercive capacity means that Lebanon's official foreign policy is often a reactive effort to manage the diplomatic fallout from the actions of a non-state actor it cannot control, an armed entity that has become, as Hussain Abdul-Hussain (2008) puts it, a “state within a state.”

The situation in Iraq presents a different, yet functionally similar, dynamic of coercive deficit. The 2003 US invasion did not just weaken the state; it destroyed its coercive apparatus through the summary disbandment of the Ba'athist army (Dawisha, 2009). The subsequent security vacuum was filled by a chaotic array of militias, many of which had been nurtured in exile by Iran, such as the Badr Organization. The rebuilt Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) remained weak, corrupt, and plagued by sectarianism. This fragility was catastrophically exposed in the summer of 2014, with the collapse of multiple army divisions in the face of the ISIS onslaught. This moment of existential crisis necessitated the mobilization of the very militias the state had sought to replace, now operating under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (Abbas, 2017). The state's weakness was so profound that it had to turn to non-state actors for its very survival, a move sparked by the famous fatwa from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani calling on citizens to defend the nation.

The subsequent passage of the Popular Mobilization Law in 2016 was a formal, legal admission of the state's failure to reclaim its monopoly on violence. By incorporating the PMF into the state's security structure, granting its fighters salaries and pensions, and placing it formally under the command of the Prime Minister, the Iraqi state attempted a desperate strategy of co-optation. It sought to regain a semblance of control by providing legitimacy to forces it could not disarm (Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021). However, as multiple analyses show, this integration is largely nominal (Anderson & Zawity, 2024; El-Dessouki, 2017). The PMF is not a monolithic entity but a “wildly heterogenous” coalition of factions with different command structures and, crucially, different loyalties (Knights, 2019).

Powerful Iran-aligned factions within the PMF, such as *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (KH), *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH), and *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba* (HHN), have consistently demonstrated their operational autonomy. They launch rocket and drone attacks on US forces and diplomatic facilities, pursuing their own strategic and economic interests in direct contradiction to the official policy of the Iraqi government in Baghdad (Nader, 2015). This creates an odd situation where one part of the state's formal security apparatus (the PMF) actively undermines the foreign policy partnerships of another party (the Prime Minister's office and the ISF). While other PMF factions, like the shrine militias loyal to Grand Ayatollah Sistani or the Sadrist brigades, exhibit greater Iraqi nationalism, their competing agendas further fragment the state's coercive power.

The Prime Minister cannot deploy forces or enforce policy with a unified will, as he must constantly negotiate and bargain with powerful, armed commanders within his own formal chain of command who receive orders and resources from Tehran. This internal contestation over the use of force renders the Iraqi state incapable of acting as a unitary actor on the international stage and creates a permanent security dilemma within its own borders.

5.2.2 The Administrative Deficit: Capturing State Institutions

Beyond the military sphere, state capacity is critically dependent on a coherent administrative apparatus capable of extracting resources and implementing policy in the service of a national interest (Mann, 1984; Schweller, 2006). In both Lebanon and Iraq, sectarian power-sharing systems have prevented this function, transforming state ministries and institutions into spoils to be divided among political factions. This system of institutional capture ensures that the resources of the state are diverted to serve partisan and sectarian clientelist networks rather than a collective public good, thus halting the state's

administrative capacity from the inside and rendering it incapable of pursuing long-term national projects, including a stable foreign policy.

In Lebanon, the post-Taif consociational system allocates senior administrative positions (the so-called “Grade One” posts) and ministerial portfolios based on strict sectarian quotas. While intended to ensure representation, this has in practice led to a system where ministries are treated as the exclusive fiefdoms of the sectarian parties that control them (Salloukh et al., 2015). Hezbollah and its allies have become rulers of this system. For example, their long-standing control over the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Telecommunications is not simply about providing public services; it is a strategic asset used to expand patronage networks, gather intelligence, and generate resources that support the broader “resistance society” (Daher, 2019). The ministries become tools for job creation for party loyalists and for directing contracts to affiliated businesses.

One of the greatest consequences such as, the dual Shi’a control of the powerful Ministry of Finance, historically shared between Hezbollah and its ally Amal, has given them a dominance over the state’s entire fiscal policy. This power allows them to block budgets, paralyze governments that might challenge their interests, and resist international financial reforms that could threaten their autonomy or access to resources (Salloukh et al., 2015). This capture of key administrative nodes prevents the emergence of a unified national economic or social policy, as each faction prioritizes the consolidation of its own sectarian power base over the functioning of the state as a whole.

In Iraq, the post-2003 system of *muhasasa ta’ifia* (sectarian apportionment) has produced a similar, if more extreme, form of administrative decay. The system of distributing ministries among the winning parties of the dominant ethno-sectarian blocs has led to unchecked, world-leading corruption and the hollowing-out of state functions (Osman, 2015). Political parties linked to powerful PMF factions have secured control over key ministries, such as the Ministries of Interior and Transport, and have used them to milk cash to fund their operations and provide salaried jobs for their fighters and constituents (Anderson & Zawity, 2024). This has had a devastating effect on state capacity. It starves other essential services of funds, creates a bloated and inefficient bureaucracy based on loyalty rather than merit, and delegitimizes the state in the eyes of the public, who see it as an instrument of plunder for the political elite.

When a ministry’s primary function becomes serving the party that controls it, it becomes an ineffective instrument of national policy. The problem stretches beyond ministries to control over economic assets, border crossings, and reconstruction contracts,

all of which are sources of revenue for militias that operate outside the state's formal budget (Jabar & Mansour, 2017). This administrative decay means that the Iraqi state lacks the institutional cohesion and financial resources to sustain a robust and independent foreign policy, making it perpetually vulnerable to the influence of external patrons who can offer the resources the state itself cannot provide.

5.2.3 Competing Agendas: The Fragmentation of National Interest

The corrosion of coercive and administrative capacity leads directly to the fragmentation of the national interest itself. A state that cannot control the instruments of violence or its own bureaucracy cannot pursue a singular, coherent foreign policy agenda. Instead, foreign policy becomes another arena for competition between the nominal state and the powerful non-state actors embedded within it (Hinnebusch, 2014; Mann, 1984; Schweller, 2006). The national interest is no longer a given, but a prize to be fought over by actors with fundamentally different, and often conflicting, ideology and goals.

In Lebanon, there is a clear and persistent dichotomy between the official foreign policy of the state and the strategic agenda of Hezbollah. The Lebanese state's nominal agenda, as articulated in forums like the 2012 Baabda Declaration, is one of “dissociation” (*al-na'i binnafs*) from regional conflicts (UN General Assembly, A/66/849, 2012). Its interests, at least on paper, lie in maintaining stability, attracting international aid and investment, and preserving delicate relationships with both Western and Arab Gulf powers. This official position was a consensus reached by Lebanon's political elites, including Hezbollah, in an attempt to protect the country from the spillover of Syrian war (Bahout, 2014). Hezbollah's agenda, however, is fundamentally geopolitical and transnational. As an integral part of the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” its priorities are the deterrence of Israel, the preservation of its strategic patron in Syria, and the broader projection of Iranian influence (Daher, 2019; Adraoui, 2018).

These two agendas are not merely different; they are opposing one another. The state's need for neutrality conflicts directly with Hezbollah's need for interventionism. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has frequently articulated a foreign policy vision that dismisses Lebanese sovereignty in favour of the wider regional struggle, framing battles in Syria as essential for the defence of Lebanon (Salloukh, 2017). As we will see in the case studies, this clash forces the Lebanese state into a foreign policy of reaction and accommodation, attempting to manage the consequences of Hezbollah's actions rather than charting its own course. The Baabda Declaration became a dead letter almost as soon as it was signed, a testament to the state's inability to enforce its own declared foreign policy.

In Iraq, the fragmentation is even more complex due to the heterogeneous nature of the PMF. The official Iraqi state, particularly since 2014, has sought to pursue a delicate balancing act, maintaining its strategic partnership with the United States for security assistance against ISIS, while also managing a necessary and complex relationship with its important neighbour, Iran (Almarashi, 2009; Keynoush, 2016). This official policy of attempting to be a friend to two adversaries is constantly and violently undermined by the competing agendas of the PMF factions.

- The *Wilayat* Factions: Groups like KH, AAH, and the Badr Organization are ideologically committed to Iran's *Wilayat al-Faqih* doctrine. Their foreign policy agenda is largely synonymous with Tehran's: the full and unconditional expulsion of US forces from Iraq, the consolidation of the "land bridge" to Syria, and the projection of Shi'a Islamist power regionally. Their actions, from rocket attacks on US installations to independent military operations in Syria, directly subvert Baghdad's official foreign policy (Nader, 2015; El-Dessouki, 2017).
- The Nationalist/Sadrist Faction: The powerful Sadrist movement, led by the unpredictable cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, defines its agenda in more Iraqi nationalist terms. While also fiercely opposed to the US presence, it is equally hostile to what it views as excessive Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs (Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021). This creates a powerful internal veto player, capable of paralyzing the government and preventing any decisive foreign policy move, whether towards the US or Iran. The Sadrists' ability to mobilize massive street protests adds another layer of constraint on the state's actions.
- The State-Aligned Factions: The "shrine militias" (*Hashd al-Atabat*) that responded most directly to Sistani's fatwa generally exhibit greater loyalty to the Iraqi state and its official command structure. However, their focus is primarily domestic security and the protection of holy sites. They lack the power and influence to impose a coherent agenda on the more powerful Iran-loyalist or Sadrist blocs, and their presence further complicates the command and control of the security sector (Jabar & Mansour, 2017).

This deep fragmentation means there is no singular "Iraqi national interest" that the state can pursue. Every foreign policy decision, from security agreements with the US to economic deals with Saudi Arabia or diplomatic postures toward Syria, is subject to a complex internal negotiation where powerful armed factions can veto, contradict, or simply ignore the official position of the government (Royle & Mabon, 2022). This internal paralysis is a direct consequence of an institutionalized sectarianism that has empowered

these factions and hollowed out the state's capacity to act as a unitary, sovereign entity. This eroded capacity, in both its coercive and administrative dimensions, sets the stage for the dysfunctional foreign policy behaviours and the ultimate logic of underbalancing that the rest of this chapter will explore (Hinnebusch, 2014; Mann, 1984; Schweller, 2006).

5.3 The Syrian War: The Defining Factor (2012-2014)

If the entrenchment of sectarianism created the internal preconditions for the erosion of state capacity in Lebanon and Iraq, the Syrian Civil War provided the powerful external shock that brought these pathologies into sharp, undeniable relief. The period between 2012 and 2014 was a critical juncture where the conflict in Syria ceased to be a neighbour's problem and transformed into a direct and existential threat to both Beirut and Baghdad. The war acted as a regional crucible, melting down pre-existing security arrangements, inflaming domestic sectarian tensions, and forcing the hollowed-out states of Lebanon and Iraq into a series of desperate and contradictory foreign policy manoeuvres.

This section serves as an analytical bridge from the theoretical discussion of weakened state capacity to the practical case studies that follow. It will demonstrate how the escalating chaos in Syria between 2012 and 2014 did not merely influence but actively catalysed the contested foreign policy behaviours that define these two states. For Lebanon, the war shattered the notion of neutrality and forced a confrontation between the state's official policy and Hezbollah's interventionist agenda. For Iraq, the conflict created a jihadi super-state on its border, triggering a state collapse that forced a desperate, contradictory appeal for help from geopolitical rivals.

Lebanon: The Shattering of Dissociation and the Triumph of the Faction

In the initial phase of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Lebanese state, under the government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, adopted a formal policy of "dissociation" (*al-na'i binnafs*). This posture was less a proactive strategic choice and more a reflection of the state's profound weakness and the desperate desire of its fragmented political elite to avoid being torn apart by the crisis next door (Bahout, 2014). The policy was enshrined in the Baabda Declaration of June 11, 2012, a consensus document produced by the National Dialogue committee, which included all major political leaders, including Hezbollah's. The declaration was a clear attempt to insulate Lebanon from the conflict, calling on all parties to "keep Lebanon away from the policy of regional and international axes and struggles" and, critically, to "prevent Lebanon from being used as a base, a corridor or a launching pad for smuggling weapons and militants" (United Nations, A/66/849-S/2012/477). The

document was hailed by then-President Michel Suleiman and his allies in the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition as a foundational text for state neutrality and sovereignty (Naharnet Newsdesk, 2013). However, its core tenets were almost immediately rendered meaningless by the very actors who had signed it, revealing it not as a robust policy but as a fragile prayer against the encroaching storm.

The first and most overwhelming spillover effect was the humanitarian crisis. As the violence in Syria intensified through 2012 and 2013, a torrent of refugees began crossing into Lebanon. By mid-2012, the numbers were already straining the resources of local communities in the north and the Bekaa Valley (McEvers, 2012). By the end of 2014, the number of registered refugees would exceed one million, with hundreds of thousands more unregistered, reaching a quarter of Lebanon's native population (Salloukh, 2017). This unprecedented flood of refugees placed an unbearable strain on the state's already feeble administrative capacity, overwhelming public services like schools, hospitals, and sanitation, and creating severe economic distress and social friction in host communities. The state, lacking the resources and institutional coherence to manage the crisis, effectively outsourced the response to international organizations and local municipalities, further highlighting its incapacity and absence (Daher, 2014).

Beyond the humanitarian dimension, the Syrian conflict was imported directly into Lebanon's political and security landscape. The sectarian nature of the war in Syria mapped almost perfectly onto Lebanon's own Sunni-Shi'a fault lines. Northern Lebanon, particularly the city of Tripoli and the Akkar region, became a critical rear base for the Syrian opposition, serving as a sanctuary for fighters, a hub for fundraising, and a storehouse for weapons and supplies flowing to rebel groups (Lawson, 2014). This support for the Syrian rebels, often facilitated by Sunni politicians aligned with the March 14 coalition, represented a flagrant violation of the Baabda Declaration. On the other side, Hezbollah and its allies viewed the Syrian uprising not as a struggle for democracy, but as a Western and Gulf-backed conspiracy to break the "Axis of Resistance" by toppling its central pillar, the Assad regime (Hussain, 2013). This perception transformed the Syrian war into an existential issue for Hezbollah, one that would force it to reveal the true standing of foreign policy decision-making in Lebanon.

Initially, Hezbollah's involvement was unseen and deniable, consisting of sending experienced cadres and military advisors to assist the Syrian army and protect strategic assets. Publicly, its leaders denied any direct combat role, framing their presence in Syria as limited to the protection of Lebanese Shi'a living in a string of villages on the Syrian side of the border, or the defence of the Sayyida Zainab shrine near Damascus, a site of

immense religious significance for Shi'a Muslims (Daher, 2019). However, as the Syrian army faltered throughout 2012 and early 2013, losing significant ground to a determined rebel opposition, Hezbollah's strategic calculus shifted dramatically. The potential fall of the Assad regime represented an intolerable threat, one that would sever Hezbollah's primary logistical and weapons supply line from Iran and leave it strategically isolated between a hostile new regime in Damascus and its primary adversary, Israel. This led to what Aram Nerguizian (2013) termed a "necessary war of choice," a decisive intervention to save its indispensable ally.

The turning point that made Hezbollah's intervention undeniable was the Battle of Qusayr in the spring of 2013. The strategic Syrian town, located near the Lebanese border in the Homs governorate, had become a vital logistical hub and command centre for the rebels. Its capture was essential for the Assad regime to secure its control over central Syria and re-establish the critical land route between Damascus and the Alawite coastal region. Unable to retake the town on its own, the Syrian army relied on thousands of Hezbollah's elite fighters to lead the assault. In a major speech on May 25, 2013, Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, publicly announced and justified the intervention. He reframed the battle not as an interference in a foreign war, but as a pre-emptive defence of Lebanon itself, arguing that if the *takfiri* extremists (a term for hardline Sunni jihadists) were to win in Syria, they would inevitably bring their war into Lebanon and target the Shi'a community (Daher, 2019; Adraoui, 2018).

After weeks of brutal urban combat, Hezbollah and the Syrian army captured Qusayr in early June 2013. While a major military victory for the Axis of Resistance, it was a moment of grave crisis for the Lebanese state. The battle marked the definitive and public collapse of the official policy of dissociation. A non-state actor, Hezbollah, had one-sidedly committed to a major military intervention in a foreign war, dragging the country with it and effectively making foreign policy for all of Lebanon (Salloukh, 2017). The Lebanese state was powerless to stop it. President Suleiman and the March 14 coalition could only condemn the intervention and lament the death of the Baabda Declaration, a public admission of their own impotence.

Hezbollah's actions triggered a wave of retaliatory car bombings in its strongholds in Beirut, carried out by Sunni jihadist groups operating from Syria, further plunging the country into a cycle of violence directly imported from the conflict next door. The state's security apparatus, the LAF, was left to manage the internal fallout, sectarian clashes in Tripoli, bombings in Beirut, a new terror threat on its eastern border, of a war it had no part in starting and no power to stop. The period of 2012-2014 starkly illustrates the dynamic

of the hollowed-out state, while the official government clung to a fiction of neutrality for international audiences, the country's real foreign policy was being brutally forged on the battlefields of Syria by a non-state faction in pursuit of its own non-negotiable geopolitical agenda. The state did not make foreign policy; it merely endured it.

Iraq: The Unravelling of a Fragile State and the Contradictions of Survival

While Lebanon experienced the Syrian war as a weakening spillover that shattered its political consensus, for Iraq the conflict was an accelerant that triggered a full-blown crisis of state survival. The period from 2012 to 2014 saw the remnants of the fragile post-2003 Iraqi statehood project unravels completely, culminating in a state of near-collapse that forced Baghdad into a series of desperate and contradictory foreign policy decisions. This unravelling was predicated on two interconnected dynamics, one internal and one external: the sectarian and exclusionary policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, which created a deep well of Sunni resentment, and the rise of a powerful jihadist proto-state in the vacuum of eastern Syria, which exploited that resentment with devastating effect.

Following the final withdrawal of US combat troops at the end of 2011, Prime Minister al-Maliki moved swiftly to consolidate his power in a manner that systematically alienated Iraq's Sunni Arab minority. Viewing politics as a zero-sum game, he marginalized his Sunni political partners, most notably by issuing an arrest warrant for his own Sunni Vice President, Tariq al-Hashimi, forcing him into exile. He used the state's security forces, which he had steadily staffed with loyalists from his own Dawa party and other Shi'a groups, to suppress dissent (Dawisha, 2009). This culminated in a violent crackdown on a massive and largely peaceful Sunni protest movement that swept across Anbar, Nineveh, and other provinces throughout 2013. The storming of the main protest camp in *Hawija* in April 2013, where security forces killed dozens of demonstrators, was seen by many Sunnis as a point of no return. It destroyed what little trust remained in the post-2003 political order and created a fertile environment for a renewed and far more virulent insurgency (Osman, 2015).

Simultaneously, the escalating chaos in neighbouring Syria provided the perfect hideout for the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). After being decimated during the "Anbar Awakening," a movement where Sunni tribes had allied with the US to fight al-Qaeda, AQI had retreated into the shadows. The power vacuum in eastern Syria, particularly in provinces like Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, allowed it to regroup, recruit fighters, raise funds, and rebrand itself under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Using this new safe haven, ISIS launched a sophisticated

campaign of spectacular bombings and assassinations back into Iraq throughout 2013, skilfully exploiting the growing Sunni discrimination to build support networks and intimidate opponents (Lawson, 2014; Phillips, 2022). In January 2014, ISIS achieved a stunning success, capitalizing on the government's crackdown to capture the city of Fallujah and large parts of Ramadi in Anbar province. This victory was a clear signal of the Iraqi state's weakness and established a dangerous cross-border jihadist proto-state.

The Iraqi state, hollowed out by years of sectarian *muhasasa*, endemic corruption, and Maliki's personalized control of the security forces, was incapable of mounting an effective response. The ISF was plagued by “ghost soldiers,” names on the payroll who did not exist but whose salaries were pocketed by corrupt officers, and its leadership was often chosen for sectarian loyalty rather than military competence. The final, catastrophic collapse came in June 2014. In a lightning offensive, a few thousand ISIS fighters routed tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers, capturing Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, in a matter of days. The collapse was total and humiliating; entire divisions of the ISF disintegrated, with soldiers abandoning billions of dollars' worth of advanced US-supplied military hardware, shedding their uniforms, and fleeing south towards the relative safety of the Kurdistan region or Baghdad (Anderson, 2004). ISIS seized the abandoned weaponry and swept south, capturing Tikrit and other major cities, and advancing to within a few dozen kilometres of the capital itself.

The fall of Mosul was the ultimate demonstration of the post-2003 Iraqi state's failure. It triggered a crisis of existential proportions and a fractured, desperate, and deeply contradictory foreign policy response. Facing imminent destruction, the Maliki government made two simultaneous appeals for help to two geopolitical rivals who were themselves locked in a struggle for influence over Iraq.

First, Baghdad turned to Tehran. Within days of Mosul's fall, Iran's elite Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, was on the ground in Baghdad, personally organizing the defence of the capital and mobilizing the powerful network of Shi'a militias that Iran had sponsored for years, such as the *Badr Organization*, *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (Chulov, 2014; Nader, 2015). Iran immediately began an airlift of weapons, ammunition, and military advisors to Iraq. These Iranian-backed militias, many of which had spent the previous years fighting US forces, quickly became the most effective and motivated fighting force defending the approaches to Baghdad and other Shi'a majority areas (Chulov, 2014). The reliance on Iran was immediate and absolute.

At the very same time, the Iraqi government made a formal, desperate appeal to the United States and the international community. In a letter to the UN Security Council

dated June 25, 2014, the Iraqi Foreign Minister stated that ISIS had “established a safe haven outside of Iraq’s borders,” which posed a direct threat to the country, and requested that the US lead international efforts, including military assistance, to combat the threat (United Nations, S/2014/440). This was followed by urgent public and private requests for US airstrikes to halt the ISIS advance and blunt their offensive capabilities (Spetalnick & Hassan, 2014). The supreme irony of the situation was lost on no one: Baghdad was simultaneously requesting life-saving air support from Washington while its defence on the ground was being organized by, and increasingly entrusted to, the proxies of Washington’s primary regional adversary, Iran. This dual appeal perfectly encapsulates the contested and incoherent foreign policy behaviour of a collapsed state. Baghdad needed help from anyone and everyone, regardless of the profound geopolitical contradictions this entailed.

The state’s coercive incapacity was so complete that it had to be supplemented by a popular mobilization, which was given immense religious legitimacy by Grand Ayatollah Sistani’s fatwa for collective defence (*wajib al-kifai*). This led directly to the formal creation of the PMF, an act which institutionalized the very militias, many of them Iranian proxies who had long challenged the state’s authority, as an official organ of the state (Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021; Robertson, 2015). The state was forced to formally sanction, fund, and arm its own internal rivals in order to survive. This decision, born of desperation in the crucible of the 2014 crisis, would permanently formalize the fragmentation of coercive power in Iraq. It ensured that the state’s security apparatus would be a site of permanent contestation and that its foreign policy would remain an arena of complex internal struggle between factions loyal to Baghdad, Najaf, and Tehran.

In conclusion, the Syrian Civil War between 2012 and 2014 was not merely a background event but a dynamic and powerful catalyst that accelerated the processes of state decay in both Lebanon and Iraq. It exposed the fiction of Lebanese neutrality, forcing Hezbollah’s interventionist foreign policy into the open and demonstrating the state’s inability to enforce its sovereign will. For Iraq, it spawned a monstrous threat that shattered the fragile post-occupation state, leading to a desperate and contradictory foreign policy that sought salvation from rival powers and institutionalized the fragmentation of its own security apparatus. This critical period, defined by the crucible of the Syrian war, set the stage for the specific foreign policy case studies that follow, providing a clear and dramatic illustration of how states with hollowed-out capacity respond when faced with existential threats.

5.4 The Bargaining Arena: Foreign Policy Behaviour in Action (Case Studies)

The theoretical mechanisms outlined in the previous section, the corrosion of state capacity through the loss of the monopoly on violence and the capture of administrative institutions, do not operate in a vacuum. They are most clearly observed when the state is forced to act under the extreme pressure of a foreign policy crisis. This section delves into the empirical core of the chapter's argument by examining the "bargaining arena" where the foreign policies of Lebanon and Iraq are actually forged. Through a series of comparative case studies, this analysis will apply the method of process tracing to dissect how the national interest is contested and foreign policy behaviour is produced through the constant, push-and-pull dynamic between official state institutions and powerful non-state factions.

We will analyse two distinct models of this contested behaviour, both of which are rooted in the hollowing out of the state by institutionalized sectarianism. First, in Lebanon, we see a dynamic of *state capture*, where a single, hegemonic non-state actor, Hezbollah, possesses the power to unilaterally set the country's strategic course. This forces the official state apparatus into a perpetually reactive posture, its foreign policy reduced to managing the diplomatic fallout of decisions it cannot influence. Second, in Iraq, we observe a dynamic of *state paralysis*, where the fragmentation of power among multiple, competing non-state actors, primarily within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), creates a political and security dead-end. This paralysis prevents the state from pursuing any coherent policy, leaving it vulnerable to multiple, often contradictory, threats simultaneously.

These case studies will demonstrate how the coercive and administrative deficits discussed previously manifest in real-world crises, producing the dysfunctional foreign policy behaviours that ultimately lead to a structural logic of underbalancing.

5.4.1 Lebanon: Foreign Policy as Factional Hegemony

In Lebanon, the state does not make foreign policy on matters of high politics; it attempts to manage the foreign policy made by Hezbollah. The party's military and political dominance, as detailed in Chapter 4, is so complete that it can unilaterally commit to strategic actions that have profound consequences for the entire nation, leaving the official institutions of the state, the Presidency, the cabinet, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to grapple with the repercussions. The following cases illustrate this dynamic, showing a consistent pattern of dual-track behaviour where the state's official policy of neutrality is rendered useless by the faction's non-negotiable interventionism.

Case Study 1: The Syrian Intervention and the Farce of “Dissociation”

The clearest and most consequential example of Hezbollah’s hegemonic control over Lebanese foreign policy is its intervention in the Syrian Civil War. This case study perfectly illustrates the concept of dual-track foreign policy, where the state and a non-state actor pursue contractionary policies simultaneously. The state’s official position, enshrined in the 2012 Baabda Declaration, was one of “dissociation” (*al-na’i binnafs*). This policy was a rational attempt by the Lebanese state, led by then-President Michel Suleiman, to insulate the fragile country from the escalating conflict next door (United Nations, A/66/849-S/2012/477). It represented the consensus of a state elite who understood, correctly, that taking sides in the Syrian conflict would have devastating consequences for Lebanon’s own precarious sectarian balance (Bahout, 2014). However, this official policy was predicated on the assumption that all Lebanese actors would abide by it. Hezbollah’s strategic interests rendered this assumption, and thus the entire policy, void from the outset.

The process tracing of Hezbollah’s intervention reveals a deliberate and incremental escalation, conducted in defiance of the state’s declared policy:

- **Phase 1 (2011-2012): Stealth Support and Official Denial.** In the initial stages of the uprising, Hezbollah’s involvement was covert. It provided military advisors, intelligence support, and logistical assistance to the Assad regime, recognizing early on the threat that the fall of its key ally would pose to its own strategic depth and supply lines (Daher, 2019). During this period, Hezbollah’s leaders publicly denied any combat role, framing their limited presence in Syria as necessary for the protection of Lebanese citizens in Shi’a border villages or the defence of the Sayyida Zainab shrine in Damascus, a site of immense religious significance for Shi’a Muslims (Adraoui, 2018).

Simultaneously, the Lebanese state, under Prime Minister Mikati, attempted to maintain the policy of dissociation. This translated into a foreign policy behaviour of ignorance and deliberate inaction. The state lacked the coercive capacity to enforce its own policy on either side of the domestic divide, as Sunni groups and politicians aligned with the March 14 coalition were also violating the dissociation policy by funnelling support to the Syrian opposition from northern Lebanon (Lawson, 2014; McEvers, 2012). The state was a passive observer of its own territory being used as a rear base for both sides of the Syrian conflict.

- **Phase 2 (Early 2013): The "Necessary War" and Public Rupture.** As the Assad regime’s position became increasingly precarious in late 2012 and early 2013, losing significant ground to a determined rebel opposition, Hezbollah’s strategic

calculus shifted from secretive support to overt intervention. The potential fall of its most critical ally was deemed an existential threat that overrode any commitment to Lebanese state policy. The battle for the strategic town of Qusayr, located near the Lebanese border in the Homs governorate, became the focal point. In a pivotal speech on May 25, 2013, Hassan Nasrallah formally announced Hezbollah's combat role, framing it not as a choice but as a necessity to defend Lebanon from the threat of *takfiri* extremism (Nerguizian, 2013). He argued that if these jihadist groups were to win in Syria, they would inevitably bring their war into Lebanon and target the Shi'a community. This speech was, in effect, a unilateral declaration of foreign policy by a non-state actor. Nasrallah did not seek the Lebanese government's permission; he simply informed the Lebanese people and the world of the new reality.

The state's reaction was one of public resentment and condemnation, which highlighted its own impotence. President Suleiman immediately and publicly rebuked Hezbollah, stating that its intervention was a grave violation of the Baabda Declaration and that the "Army-People-Resistance" trinity, a formula used to legitimize Hezbollah's arms, did not apply outside Lebanon's borders (Naharnet Newsdesk, 2013). This moment starkly revealed the dual-track nature of Lebanese foreign policy: the President, the constitutional head of state responsible for upholding national sovereignty, was publicly contradicted and defied by the leader of a political party and militia. The state declared neutrality, while its most powerful military component declared war.

- **Phase 3 (Post-Qusayr): Institutionalizing the Contradiction.** Following the capture of Qusayr in June 2013, a victory largely attributed to Hezbollah's prowess, the party's intervention in Syria became a permanent and expanding feature of its strategy (Daher, 2019). The official state policy of dissociation, while still formally in place, was now an open farce. The Lebanese government's foreign policy became an exercise in damage control. Its diplomats at the United Nations and the Arab League were forced into contorted positions, attempting to maintain a stance of neutrality while the nation's most powerful military force was a key belligerent in a regional war.

This contradiction paralyzed Lebanon's ability to engage with the international community on the Syria file. It severely strained relations with the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, which were heavily backing the Syrian opposition and viewed Hezbollah's actions as a direct act of Iranian aggression (Mabon &

Wastnidge, 2022). It also created deep internal divisions, leading to the collapse of Mikati's government and a prolonged period of political gridlock that included a two-and-a-half-year presidential vacuum.

This case study demonstrates a clear process of factional capture of foreign policy. The Lebanese state was unable to define or implement a national interest because that interest (stability through neutrality) conflicted with the non-negotiable strategic imperatives of Hezbollah. The state's foreign policy behaviour was reduced to issuing rhetorical statements that were immediately and publicly nullified by the actions of the faction. This is a classic precondition for underbalancing: the state could not balance against the clear threat of spillover from Syria because its most powerful internal actor had an interest in amplifying, not containing, that very threat.

Case Study 2: The 2006 War and the State's Reactive Diplomacy

The 2006 July War between Hezbollah and Israel provides another powerful illustration of the state capture dynamic, where the official government is forced to manage the diplomatic and political consequences of a war it did not choose. While this event occurred before the Syrian crisis, it clearly establishes the pattern of behaviour that would become even more obvious after 2011. The war began on July 12, 2006, when a Hezbollah unit crossed the border into Israel, killing three soldiers and capturing two others. This unilateral act of aggression, undertaken without the knowledge or consent of the Lebanese government, triggered a massive and devastating Israeli military response (Norton, 2007). The process that followed saw the Lebanese state, led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's March 14 government, scramble to assert a semblance of sovereignty in a crisis entirely dictated by Hezbollah.

The process tracing of the state's response reveals a reactive, rather than proactive, foreign policy:

- **Initial Disavowal:** In the immediate aftermath of the Hezbollah operation, the Siniora government's first reaction was to distance itself completely. A government statement declared that it "was not aware of, and is not responsible for, and does not adopt what happened" (Wilkins, 2013, p. 88). This was a clear attempt to signal to the international community that the actions of the militia should not be equated with the policy of the state. However, as Israel's devastating air campaign began to pound Lebanon's infrastructure, this position became untenable. The government quickly realized that it could not simply disavow responsibility for a war being waged from its sovereign territory.

- **Forced Diplomatic Ownership:** As the conflict escalated, the Lebanese government was compelled to take diplomatic ownership of the crisis. Prime Minister Siniora embarked on a frantic diplomatic campaign, appealing to the Arab League, the United Nations, and European capitals for a ceasefire. His government formulated a “Seven-Point Plan” which, among other things, called for an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of Israeli troops, the deployment of the LAF to the south, and the strengthening of the UNIFIL mission. This diplomatic activity was the state’s attempt to reclaim a role and steer the crisis towards a resolution. However, its negotiating position was fundamentally weak. It had no control over the military actors on its side of the conflict. Hezbollah continued to fire rockets into Israel throughout this period, giving Israel little incentive to heed the Lebanese government’s calls for a ceasefire (Wilkins, 2013). The state was negotiating for peace while the faction was prosecuting a war.
- **The Aftermath and Contested Sovereignty:** The war ended with the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (United Nations, S/RES/1701, 2006), which was largely based on the Lebanese government’s seven-point plan. On paper, this appeared to be a victory for Lebanese state diplomacy. The resolution called for the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of Israeli forces, and, crucially, the deployment of 15,000 LAF soldiers to the south, asserting state sovereignty over the area for the first time in decades. However, the resolution also called for the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, a clear reference to Hezbollah. This created a new internal battleground. The state successfully deployed the LAF to the south, but it was politically and militarily incapable of implementing the disarmament clause of the resolution it had championed. Hezbollah hailed the outcome as a “Divine Victory” and refused to surrender its weapons, arguing they were still necessary for deterrence (Daher, 2019). The result was the institutionalization of the dual-security structure in the south. The LAF and UNIFIL patrolled the area, but Hezbollah’s military infrastructure remained intact, operating clandestinely.

This case study reinforces the model of state capture. The state did not initiate the 2006 war, but it was forced to manage its consequences. Its foreign policy was entirely reactive, a desperate attempt to clean up a mess it did not create. While it achieved a partial reassertion of sovereignty through the deployment of the army, it failed to resolve the core issue of Hezbollah’s arms, thus ensuring that the conditions for future crises remained in

place. The state's foreign policy behaviour was that of a constrained actor, forced to bargain for its own sovereignty with a non-state faction operating on its territory.

5.4.2 Iraq: Foreign Policy as Factional Paralysis

In Iraq, the corrosion of state capacity has produced a different, more chaotic form of contested foreign policy. The sheer number of powerful armed actors, primarily within the PMF, with competing loyalties and agendas, means that no single faction can achieve the hegemonic control that Hezbollah enjoys in Lebanon. The result is not state capture by one group, but state paralysis caused by the competing demands of many. The Iraqi state is constantly pulled in multiple directions at once, leaving it unable to formulate or implement a coherent foreign policy and forcing it to underbalance against a host of threats simultaneously.

Case Study 3: The Contradictory Response to the Rise of ISIS (2014)

The collapse of the Iraqi army and the rise of ISIS in the summer of 2014 provide the most dramatic illustration of foreign policy paralysis born of state failure. As mentioned in the previous section, the crisis was the culmination of Maliki's exclusionary policies and the spillover from the Syrian war. The state's response to the fall of Mosul was not a single, coherent policy, but a series of contradictory and desperate gambles that revealed the profound fragmentation of power within Iraq.

The process tracing of Baghdad's response shows two sides and conflicting foreign policy tracks being pursued at the same time:

- **Track 1: The Appeal to the West.** Facing the imminent threat of Baghdad itself falling to ISIS, the Maliki government made a formal and urgent appeal to the United States and the international community. In a letter to the UN Security Council on June 25, 2014, Iraq requested international support to combat the ISIS threat, which it correctly identified as having been nourished in the "safe haven" of eastern Syria (United Nations, S/2014/440). This was followed by direct requests to the Obama administration for immediate US airstrikes against ISIS convoys and positions (Spetalnick & Hassan, 2014). This track represented the official state's foreign policy, seeking assistance from its primary international security partner, the United States, with whom it had a Strategic Framework Agreement. It was a rational move by a state facing an existential threat from a powerful terrorist organization.
- **Track 2: The Embrace of Iran and its Proxies.** Simultaneously, and in direct geopolitical contradiction to the first track, Baghdad threw open its doors to

massive Iranian intervention. Within days of Mosul's fall, Iran's elite Quds Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, was on the ground in Iraq, personally organizing the defence of the capital and mobilizing the network of powerful Shi'a militias that Iran had sponsored for years, such as the Badr Organization, *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (Chulov, 2014; Nader, 2015). Iran immediately began an airlift of weapons, ammunition, and military advisors, and its affiliated militias quickly became the most effective and motivated fighting force on the ground, halting the ISIS advance towards Baghdad (Chulov, 2014). This reliance on Iranian support was not a coherent policy choice made in concert with the appeal to the West; it was a desperate act of survival that empowered the very actors who were ideologically committed to expelling the United States from Iraq.

This dual-track response created a foreign policy environment of profound contradiction. Iraq was asking the US Air Force to provide air cover for ground forces that were often commanded by Iranian officers and composed of militias designated as terrorist organizations by the United States. This paralysis prevented a coherent anti-ISIS strategy from emerging in the early stages. The US was initially hesitant to intervene, deeply wary of becoming the air force for Iranian proxies (Spetalnick & Hassan, 2014). The Maliki government, for its part, was unable to choose between its potential saviours. It could not reject Iranian help, as it was essential for the immediate defence of Baghdad. Nor could it forgo US help, as it was essential for the long-term campaign to reclaim territory from ISIS.

The state was paralyzed, caught between two rival patrons, unable to formulate a singular national strategy. This paralysis was a direct result of the hollowing out of its own coercive capacity, forcing it to outsource its defence to a contradictory mix of internal and external actors. The creation of the PMF, which formalized this contradiction, ensured that this state of paralysis would become a permanent feature of Iraqi foreign and security policy.

Case Study 4: The Soleimani Assassination and the Crisis of Sovereignty

The American drone strike that killed Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and PMF deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis at Baghdad's airport on January 3, 2020, was a seismic event that threw Iraq's foreign policy paralysis into stark relief. The assassination of a top official from a neighbouring country and Iraq's own most powerful paramilitary commander, carried out by Iraq's primary international security partner on Iraqi soil, created an impossible diplomatic and political crisis. The aftermath revealed a state utterly incapable of acting with a unified voice or purpose, as different power centres pursued radically different and mutually exclusive policies.

The process of the Iraqi response can be traced through three conflicting tracks:

- **The Parliamentary Track: A Call for Expulsion.** The most immediate and forceful reaction came from the Shi'a-dominated Parliament. Fuelled by outrage from the Iran-aligned factions (Nader, 2015; Anderson & Zawity, 2024), the Council of Representatives convened an emergency session on January 5, 2020, and passed a non-binding resolution calling on the government to end the presence of all foreign troops in Iraq. This vote was a clear articulation of the foreign policy preference of the Iran-aligned bloc, a direct rebuke to the United States, and a demand for a fundamental reorientation of Iraq's strategic posture.

However, the resolution was passed in a highly contested session, boycotted by most Sunni and Kurdish MPs who viewed the US presence as a vital check on both Iranian influence and a potential resurgence of ISIS (Anderson & Zawity, 2024), highlighting the deep sectarian and ethnic divisions over the US presence (Osman, 2015; Haddad, 2011). Furthermore, the resolution's non-binding nature meant it was a powerful statement of intent but lacked the force of law, a clear sign of the limits of parliamentary power in the face of executive branch and external pressures.

- **The Governmental Track: Prevarication and De-escalation.** The caretaker government of then-Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi was caught in an impossible position. Abdul-Mahdi, a compromise candidate who owed his position to a tenuous consensus between the Sadrists and the Iran-aligned Fatah bloc (Abbas, 2017; Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021), was under immense pressure from the pro-Iran factions to implement the parliamentary resolution. Publicly, he condemned the US strike as a flagrant violation of Iraqi sovereignty and the terms of the strategic partnership, and his office-initiated steps to begin the process of troop withdrawal. Privately, however, his government understood the catastrophic implications of a complete and hostile break with the United States. Iraq's security forces were still heavily reliant on US training, intelligence, and air support in the ongoing fight against ISIS remnants (Nader, 2015).

More critically, its economy was deeply intertwined with the US financial system, with its oil revenues held in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, a point of leverage Washington had threatened to use (Hinnebusch, 2014; Korany & Dessouki, 2008). A full expulsion of US forces would risk a security collapse, economic ruin, and international isolation. Consequently, Abdul-Mahdi's government engaged in a policy of prevarication, paying lip service to the

parliamentary resolution while simultaneously engaging in back-channel communications with Washington to de-escalate the crisis and prevent a complete rupture. This was a foreign policy of paralysis, attempting to appease internal hardliners while avoiding the disastrous consequences of their demands.

- **The Militia Track: Kinetic Action and Escalation.** While the official institutions of the state were locked in debate and indecision, the Iran-aligned PMF factions pursued their own foreign policy through direct military action. The death of Soleimani, whom they saw as a revered leader, and al-Muhandis, the PMF's operational "glue," was a profound blow (Anderson & Zawity, 2024). In the wake of the assassinations, these groups vowed "revenge" and unleashed a new wave of rocket attacks against US bases and the US embassy in Baghdad (Nader, 2015; El-Dessouki, 2017). These attacks were a direct contradiction of the government's attempts to de-escalate. They were a clear signal that these factions did not consider themselves bound by the official policy of the Iraqi state and would continue to prosecute their own war against US forces, regardless of the consequences for Iraq's stability or sovereignty (Anderson & Zawity, 2024).

This kinetic track demonstrated that the state had lost control over the most fundamental aspect of foreign policy: the decision to use force against another country. Following the death of al-Muhandis, the Iran-aligned factions formed the Iraqi Resistance Coordination Committee (*al-Tansiqiya*) in an attempt to consolidate their efforts, often in defiance of Iran's own calls for restraint, which were aimed at avoiding a full-scale war with the US (Anderson & Zawity, 2024). For instance, in December 2020, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* launched a major rocket attack on the US Embassy in deliberate defiance of a ceasefire ordered by Soleimani's successor, Esmail Qaani, demonstrating that the fragmentation of command had worsened after the assassinations (Anderson & Zawity, 2024).

The Soleimani assassination laid bare the complete fragmentation of foreign policy making in Iraq. There was no single "Iraqi response." Instead, there were at least three different responses, pursued simultaneously by different actors within the state system, each cancelling the others out. The parliament voted for expulsion, the government sought to delay and manage, and the militias chose to escalate. This paralysis left Iraq in the worst of all possible worlds: it angered the US, emboldened Iran and its proxies, and showcased its own profound weakness on the world stage, a textbook example of a state unable to act in its own national interest because it cannot agree on what that interest is (Schweller, 2006).

5.5 The Outcome: A Structural Logic of Underbalancing

The preceding sections have established the causal chain that links institutionalized sectarianism to the degradation of state capacity and the production of contested, dysfunctional foreign policy behaviours. This final analytical section connects this chain to its ultimate outcome: the chronic and dangerous tendency of both Lebanon and Iraq to underbalance against major external threats. Underbalancing, as theorized by Randall L. Schweller (2006), is not merely a policy error or a sign of weakness; it is a specific and predictable pathology where states, paralyzed by domestic political constraints and elite fragmentation, fail to recognize or react to clear and present dangers in a manner consistent with their national interests. The case studies of Lebanon and Iraq provide powerful, real-world illustrations of Schweller's thesis. They reveal that in these hollowed-out states, the "national interest" is not a unitary concept driving foreign policy. Instead, it is a contested space where the particularistic interests of powerful sectarian factions consistently override the state's collective security needs.

This section will demonstrate that the foreign policy behaviours identified earlier, the dual-track strategy of capture in Lebanon and the fragmented paralysis in Iraq, are the direct mechanisms that produce underbalancing. By examining the specific threats each state faces and their manifestly inadequate responses, we can see how the internal logic of sectarian politics leads to a foreign policy that is, from a traditional realist perspective, deeply irrational. The analysis will distinguish between the two states, arguing that Lebanon's underbalancing is a product of its capture by a single, hegemonic faction (Hezbollah), while Iraq's underbalancing stems from its paralysis at the hands of multiple, competing factions (the PMF). Yet, despite these different paths, the outcome is the same: a structural inability to balance against threats that directly undermine their sovereignty, stability, and long-term security.

5.5.1 Explaining Underbalancing in Lebanon: The Logic of Factional Capture

The Lebanese state consistently underbalances against a host of severe external threats, most notably the threat of another devastating war with Israel and the threat of diplomatic and economic isolation from key Western and Arab powers. This failure is not due to a lack of awareness among the Lebanese elite; on the contrary, they are acutely conscious of the dangers. Rather, it is a structural outcome of the state's capture by its most powerful non-state actor, Hezbollah. The party's non-negotiable strategic agenda, dictated by its role in the Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance," systematically prevents the Lebanese state from pursuing policies that would mitigate these threats.

The domestic political cost of confronting Hezbollah is perceived by the rest of the fragmented political elite as being far higher than the potential cost of another war or deepening isolation, thus locking the state into a perpetual pattern of underbalancing (Schweller, 2006). This dynamic, where the faction's interests consistently and predictably override the national interest, manifests most clearly in the state's inability to balance against its most pressing security and economic threats.

Underbalancing Against the Israeli Military Threat

The most significant and persistent threat to Lebanon's national security is the prospect of another large-scale war with Israel. The 2006 July War provided a catastrophic preview of such a conflict, resulting in over 1,200 Lebanese deaths, the vast majority of whom were civilians, and causing billions of dollars in damage to the country's infrastructure, effectively erasing years of post-civil war reconstruction (Daher, 2019; Norton, 2007). From the perspective of a weak state, a rational foreign policy would prioritize de-escalation, conflict avoidance, and crisis management with its vastly more powerful southern neighbour. This would demand, at the least, ensuring that its territory is not used as a platform for attacks that could provoke a massive Israeli response. The Lebanese state's official commitment to UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 war and calls for a zone south of the Litani River free of any armed personnel other than the LAF and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), is a clear reflection of this rational interest in de-escalation (Wilkins, 2013). Resolution 1701 represents the international community's and the Lebanese state's foundation for stability.

However, the Lebanese state is structurally incapable of enforcing this policy because Hezbollah's entire identity, legitimacy, and strategic posture are predicated on maintaining and expanding its military capacity for "resistance" against Israel. Hezbollah's continued military presence in the south, its vast and ever-improving arsenal of rockets and precision missiles, and its periodic cross-border operations represent a constant source of friction and a direct challenge to the stability established by Resolution 1701 (United Nations, S/RES/1701, 2006). The state's inability to implement this key UN resolution is the ultimate proof of its coercive deficit. It underbalances against the threat of war because it has ceded its monopoly on violence and its sovereign right to make decisions on war and peace to a non-state faction. This is not a hidden arrangement; it is an openly acknowledged reality within the Lebanese political system, often celebrated under the slogan of the "Army-People-Resistance" trinity, a formula that explicitly legitimizes the existence of a parallel military force alongside the state's own (Salloukh et al., 2015).

This dynamic was perfectly illustrated by the events leading to the 2006 war itself. Hezbollah's unilateral decision to launch a cross-border raid and kidnap two Israeli soldiers was a foreign policy action taken not by the Lebanese state, but by a faction, in pursuit of its own goals (namely, a prisoner exchange) (Norton, 2007). The Lebanese government, under Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, was completely sidelined and its immediate reaction was to publicly disavow the action, a clear admission that it had no control over the events unfolding on its own sovereign territory (Wilkins, 2013). The state was dragged into a devastating war against its will. In the aftermath, despite championing Resolution 1701 at the UN and claiming its passage as a diplomatic victory, the state has been unable to compel Hezbollah to abide by its disarmament clauses.

The result is a permanent state of precariousness, where the entire country remains hostage to the strategic calculations of a single faction. This is underbalancing by capture: the state's rational interest in avoiding conflict is held captive by the faction's ideological and strategic commitment to perpetual confrontation. The Lebanese elite, fragmented and beholden to the sectarian power-sharing system, are unwilling to risk the domestic upheaval that a genuine confrontation with Hezbollah over its arms would entail. As Schweller (2006) argues, when elites are fragmented and prioritize their own parochial interests and political survival over the collective good, they will consistently choose to appease powerful internal actors rather than balance against external threats.

Underbalancing Against Diplomatic and Economic Isolation: The Syrian Intervention

Lebanon's economy is uniquely fragile and extroverted, heavily dependent on its relationships with the outside world, particularly the wealthy Gulf Arab states and Western powers. Remittances from the Lebanese diaspora, foreign direct investment, tourism, and international financial aid have historically been the lifeblood of the Lebanese system, propping up a largely unproductive economy (Korany & Dessouki, 2008). A rational foreign policy for a state in such a position would therefore prioritize the cultivation and maintenance of positive relationships with these key external partners. However, Hezbollah's geopolitical alignment consistently and systematically undermines this interest, forcing the state to underbalance against the clear and present threat of economic collapse and diplomatic isolation.

The case of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria is the most powerful illustration of this form of underbalancing. The official policy of the Lebanese state, articulated in the Baabda Declaration of 2012, was one of "dissociation" from the Syrian conflict (United Nations, A/66/849-S/2012/477). This was a rational, if weak, attempt to balance against the immense threat of being pulled into the neighbouring sectarian conflagration. It was a

policy designed to protect Lebanon's national interest in stability and to maintain its crucial relationships with the Gulf states who strongly opposed the Assad regime.

Hezbollah, however, viewed the potential fall of its primary state sponsor in Damascus as an existential threat to its own power and its role in the "Axis of Resistance." As such, its strategic imperatives were in direct and total opposition to the state's declared policy. As detailed in Section 5.4, Hezbollah unilaterally chose to intervene on a massive scale, most decisively in the Battle of Qusayr in 2013 (Nerguizian, 2013). This act represented the complete capture of Lebanon's strategic foreign policy. The state could not balance against the Syrian threat; instead, its most powerful component actively chose to plunge into the heart of it.

The consequences were a textbook example of underbalancing against the predictable fallout.

- **Diplomatic Isolation:** By siding with Assad and Iran, Hezbollah placed Lebanon in direct opposition to the consensus of the Arab League and the interests of its key financial benefactors in the Gulf (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2022). The Lebanese state was unable to prevent this, and its foreign policy was reduced to managing the diplomatic repercussions, such as the freezing of a multi-billion-dollar Saudi aid package to the LAF. The state underbalanced against the threat of losing its most important regional partners.
- **Economic Consequences:** The deterioration of relations with the Gulf led to travel bans, a collapse in tourism, and a decline in investment, all of which accelerated Lebanon's economic demise. The state could not enact a foreign policy to protect its economy because its geopolitical posture had been captured by the faction.
- **Security Blowback:** Hezbollah's intervention directly led to retaliatory attacks by Sunni jihadist groups inside Lebanon, bringing the Syrian war onto Lebanese soil and undermining the state's primary function of providing domestic security (Salloukh, 2017).

In each instance, the logic of underbalancing is clear. The Lebanese state was unable to pursue a rational policy of balancing against the clear threats of war, spillover, and economic isolation because its foreign policy was captured. The domestic political constraint, the inability of the state and its fragmented elite to challenge Hezbollah's military and political dominance, was so absolute that it systematically overrode any rational consideration of the national interest (Schweller, 2006).

5.5.2 Explaining Underbalancing in Iraq: The Logic of Factional Paralysis

The Iraqi state underbalances not because it has been captured by a single faction, but because it is paralyzed by the competing agendas of many. The fragmentation of coercive power among the numerous factions of the PMF, each with its own loyalties and strategic priorities, makes it impossible for the state to formulate and implement a coherent national foreign policy. Baghdad is thus forced to underbalance simultaneously against multiple, often contradictory, threats. It cannot effectively balance against Iranian influence because powerful elements of its own state are agents of that influence. It cannot balance against Turkish incursions because those same elements are strategically indifferent. And it cannot fully balance against the root causes of Sunni jihadism because doing so would threaten the sectarian political order upon which the ruling elite depends.

Underbalancing Between Hegemony and Partnership: The Soleimani Assassination

The central foreign policy dilemma for the post-2003 Iraqi state has been navigating the intense geopolitical rivalry between its two most significant external partners: the United States and Iran. A rational foreign policy for Baghdad would be to maintain a position of careful neutrality and balance, maximizing the benefits from both relationships while avoiding being drawn into their conflict (Keynoush, 2016). The assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis in January 2020 made this balancing act impossible and triggered a crisis that exposed the state's paralysis. The state was forced to underbalance against both the threat of Iranian encroachment on its sovereignty and the threat of a catastrophic rupture with its American security partner.

The process, as detailed in Section 5.4, reveals this paralysis in action:

- **The Reaction to the US:** In response to the US strike, the state's official institutions were forced by the powerful Iran-aligned factions to signal a balancing move against the United States. The parliamentary resolution calling for the expulsion of US troops was a clear example of this (Anderson & Zawity, 2024). However, the state immediately had to underbalance this move. The government of Adel Abdul-Mahdi could not actually implement the resolution because it was fully aware that doing so would trigger a security collapse (given the continued reliance on US support against ISIS) and economic ruin (given Iraq's dependence on the US financial system) (Nader, 2015). The state's response was therefore a performative gesture of balancing that was deliberately not carried through, a form of underbalancing driven by the fear of its consequences.
- **The Reaction to Iran:** At the same time, the state was forced to underbalance against the clear violation of its sovereignty by Iran, which uses the PMF factions to

conduct a proxy war on Iraqi soil. The government could not condemn the militia attacks on US forces that followed the assassination, nor could it hold the perpetrators accountable, because those militias were part of its own formal security structure and possessed more effective coercive power than the official army (Al Jbour & Khalaf, 2021; El-Dessouki, 2017). The state could not balance against Iranian influence because its capacity to do so was paralyzed by the very agents of that influence.

This case perfectly illustrates the logic of paralysis leading to underbalancing. The Iraqi state is pulled in opposite directions by powerful internal factions with irreconcilable foreign policy agendas (pro-Iran vs. pro-US vs. Sadrist nationalist). Unable to commit to any single course of action, it is forced into a state of strategic incoherence. It underbalances against the threat of Iranian hegemony to appease one set of internal actors, and it underbalances against the threat of a US withdrawal to appease another. The result is a failure to address either threat effectively, leaving Iraq a perpetually penetrated and contested state, a classic example of Schweller's (2006) model where domestic elite fragmentation makes a coherent strategic response to external dangers impossible.

Underbalancing Against Existential Threats: The Rise of ISIS

The 2014 collapse of the Iraqi state in the face of the ISIS advance provides a profound example of how years of accumulated internal decay can lead to a catastrophic failure to balance against a direct, existential threat. The foreign policy behaviour of the Maliki government in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the fall of Mosul was not one of balancing, but of a panicked and contradictory scramble for survival that ultimately deepened the very pathologies that caused the crisis.

The state underbalanced against the rising threat of ISIS in several key ways:

- **Internal Underbalancing:** In the year leading up to June 2014, the Maliki government consistently underbalanced against the growing Sunni insurgency that was the precursor to ISIS's success. Instead of pursuing a political strategy of accommodation and national reconciliation among factions, Maliki's government doubled down on the sectarian policies that alienated the Sunni population (Osman, 2015). This was a choice to prioritize the short-term political interests of his Shi'a-dominated bloc over the long-term national interest of state stability. He failed to balance against the rising internal threat because doing so would have required political compromises that were anathema to the sectarian logic of the *muhasasa* system.

- **External Underbalancing (Pre-Collapse):** As ISIS grew in strength in its Syrian safe haven, the Iraqi state failed to balance against this clear cross-border threat. It did not significantly reinforce its border, nor did it shift its best troops to face the emerging danger in Nineveh and Anbar. The security apparatus remained focused on internal political control in Baghdad rather than on defending the nation's territorial integrity, a classic sign of a weak, personalized state.
- **Contradictory Balancing (Post-Collapse):** As detailed in Section 5.4, when the collapse came, the state's response was not a coherent balancing strategy but a paralyzed, contradictory appeal to geopolitical rivals. The simultaneous requests for help from the United States and Iran represented a failure to choose a strategic direction (United Nations, S/2014/440; Nader, 2015). By empowering the Iranian-backed PMF factions as the primary ground force, the state underbalanced against the long-term threat of factional dominance and Iranian influence in order to counter the short-term threat of ISIS. It chose to save the state in the immediate term by mortgaging its future sovereignty to powerful, armed non-state actors (Jabar & Mansour, 2017).

The response to ISIS was thus a masterclass in underbalancing, driven at every stage by the domestic political constraints of Iraq's sectarian system. The state was unable to formulate a rational, unified national security strategy because its constituent parts were engaged in a zero-sum competition for power, a dynamic that ISIS skilfully exploited.

5.5.3 Comparative Synthesis: Capture vs. Paralysis as Pathways to Underbalancing

The cases of Lebanon and Iraq, when placed side-by-side, offer a powerful comparative lesson in the mechanics of state failure. Both states underbalance, but they do so through different, though related, logics of internal fragmentation. Understanding this distinction is crucial for developing a more nuanced theory of foreign policy in hollowed-out states.

Lebanon's foreign policy is dysfunctional due to *capture*. The presence of a single, hegemonic non-state actor with a coherent, ideologically-driven agenda allows for a decisive, although factional, foreign policy to be made. Hezbollah can and does act unilaterally, forcing the rest of the state to follow. This leads to a specific type of underbalancing: Lebanon consistently underbalances against threats that are in opposition to Hezbollah's interests (Israel, the Gulf states, the West) because the faction has captured the state's strategic decision-making capacity. The state's behaviour is predictable in its subservience to the faction's agenda.

Iraq's foreign policy, in contrast, is dysfunctional due to paralysis. The fragmentation of power among multiple, competing armed factions with irreconcilable agendas means that no single actor can impose its will. The Iran-aligned factions, the Sadrists, and the official state institutions are locked in a perpetual stalemate (Anderson & Zawity, 2024). This leads to a more chaotic and unpredictable form of underbalancing. Iraq underbalances against all major threats simultaneously because it is incapable of forming the internal consensus necessary to prioritize and confront any single one. It underbalances against Iran due to the power of pro-Iranian factions. It underbalances against the US due to the same factions' hostility. It underbalances against Turkey due to their indifference. This is underbalancing by gridlock, where the state is frozen into inaction by the contradictory pulls of its internal components.

These different pathways are a direct result of the historical processes detailed in Chapter 4. Lebanon's long civil war and the subsequent Syrian occupation allowed a single dominant resistance movement to consolidate power over decades. Iraq's sudden state annihilation created a free-for-all, empowering a multitude of actors at once. Despite these different mechanisms, the outcome, as predicted by Schweller's (2006) framework, is the same. In both cases, the domestic political constraints imposed by an institutionalized sectarian system overwhelm any rational, strategic assessment of the national interest. The survival of sectarian elites and factions becomes the *de facto* national interest, and the state is structurally compelled to pursue foreign policies that undermine its own long-term security and sovereignty.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a central puzzle in international relations: why do states, when confronted with dangerous external threats, often fail to take the necessary actions to secure themselves? More specifically, why do the fragile states of Lebanon and Iraq consistently exhibit foreign policy behaviors that appear incoherent, self-defeating, and ultimately inadequate in the face of profound external threats? This study has answered that question by moving beyond traditional, state-centric theories of international relations and, instead, embracing the core tenets of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). It has answered Valerie Hudson's (2013) foundational call to "open the black box" of the state, examining the human decision-makers and the domestic political structures that constrain them.

This thesis has argued and demonstrated that the institutionalization of sectarianism in Lebanon and Iraq has systematically hollowed out the state, degrading its capacity and transforming its foreign policy from a rational, unitary process into a contested domestic bargaining game. The direct result of this internal fragmentation, be it the *factional capture* seen in Lebanon or the *factional paralysis* witnessed in Iraq, is a structural and chronic logic of underbalancing.

The argument has been built in a series of deliberate stages, following the multi-level analytical framework advocated by scholars like Derek Beach (2012). Chapter 4 addressed the question of "what states want" by tracing the historical genealogies of both states, showing how colonial legacies and post-independence crises instrumentalized sectarian identity as the primary organizing principle of politics (Salloukh et al., 2015; Haddad, 2011). This historical foundation established *why* powerful non-state actors like Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) could emerge and claim a legitimate, sect-based stake in the nation's political life.

Chapter 5 then analysed "how states make decisions" within this fraught context. It detailed the theoretical mechanisms through which sectarianism corrodes the state's coercive and administrative capacities, before applying this framework to a series of comparative case studies. These cases demonstrated, through process tracing, how the constant bargaining between state and factional elites produces a contested, dual-track foreign policy behaviour that ultimately explains "what states do," or, more accurately, what they fail to do. This concluding chapter will now synthesize these findings, discuss their broader theoretical implications, and suggest avenues for future research.

Synthesizing the Findings: Factional Capture vs. Factional Paralysis

The comparative analysis at the heart of this thesis reveals two distinct pathways to the same outcome of underbalancing. The divergent historical trajectories of Lebanon and Iraq created fundamentally different domestic political arenas, which in turn produce different modes of dysfunctional foreign policy behaviour.

In Lebanon, the long, grinding civil war followed by the post-Taif order allowed a single, coherent non-state actor, Hezbollah, to gradually establish hegemony over the Shi'a community and, by extension, over the strategic functions of the Lebanese state. As the case studies on the 2006 war and the Syrian intervention demonstrated, Lebanon's foreign policy is a clear example of *factional capture*. Hezbollah is powerful and disciplined enough to unilaterally decide on matters of war and peace, dragging the official state along in its wake. The Lebanese state's foreign policy behaviour is thus reduced to a reactive, dual-track performance. On one track, its official institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, attempt to maintain a facade of neutrality and sovereignty for international audiences, as seen in the Baabda Declaration (United Nations, A/66/849-S/2012/477). On the other, more powerful track, Hezbollah prosecutes its own foreign policy based on the strategic imperatives of the "Axis of Resistance" (Daher, 2019). The state, therefore, underbalances against the threat of war with Israel and against economic isolation from the Gulf because its ability to enact a rational, national interest-based policy of de-escalation and positive engagement has been captured by the non-negotiable, ideologically-driven agenda of its most powerful faction.

In Iraq, the opposite dynamic is at play. The sudden and total annihilation of the Ba'athist state in 2003, followed by the existential crisis of the ISIS advance in 2014, did not allow a single hegemonic actor to emerge. Instead, it created a security vacuum filled by a fragmented coalition of competing militias, later formalized as the PMF. As the case studies on the response to ISIS and the Soleimani assassination showed, Iraq's foreign policy is defined by *factional paralysis*. The state is not captured by a single actor's will; it is ripped apart by the competing wills of many. The Iran-aligned factions of the PMF, the Sadrist movement, the state-loyalist units, and the official government all pull in different directions (Anderson & Zawity, 2024; Jabar & Mansour, 2017). The result is a multi-track policy that is inherently contradictory and self-negating. The Iraqi government requests US air support while its own security forces attack US bases. It condemns Turkish violations of its sovereignty in the north but lacks the internal consensus to mount a response. It seeks to balance between Washington and Tehran but is paralyzed by factions that demand an absolute alignment with Iran. The Iraqi state underbalances against the threats of Iranian

hegemony, Turkish revisionism, and renewed jihadist insurgency because it is structurally incapable of forging the internal political consensus necessary to pursue any single, coherent foreign policy strategy.

Broader Theoretical Implications

The findings of this thesis have significant implications for several key debates within political science and international relations. By applying an FPA lens to the foreign policies of Lebanon and Iraq, this study offers a direct challenge to state-centric IR theories, while contributing to the literature on sectarianism and validating the core methodological approaches of FPA itself.

First, this thesis serves as a powerful critique of the unitary actor assumption that underpins structural realist theories of international politics. Neorealism, in its quest for parsimony, treats the state as a “black box,” assuming that its foreign policy is primarily a rational response to the distribution of power in the international system (Waltz, 1979). The cases of Lebanon and Iraq demonstrate the profound limitations of this approach. It is impossible to understand why these states consistently underbalance without opening the black box and analysing the domestic political competition within. Their foreign policies are not rational responses to external threats; they are the often-irrational outcomes of internal power struggles. This finding directly supports Randall Schweller’s (2006) neoclassical realist argument that domestic political constraints, in these cases, elite fragmentation driven by sectarianism, are often the most powerful variable in explaining why states fail to balance. For hollowed-out states, the primary game is not the international one; it is the domestic one, and its pathologies are projected outward as dysfunctional foreign policy.

Second, this research contributes to the constructivist turn in the study of Middle East politics, particularly regarding the phenomenon of sectarianism. This thesis empirically supports the “sectarianization” thesis advanced by scholars like Nader Hashemi, Danny Postel, and Bassel Salloukh, which argues that contemporary sectarian conflict is not the product of ancient, primordial hatreds, but is rather a modern political phenomenon, actively constructed and mobilized by political elites in their competition for power and resources (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Salloukh et al., 2015). This study has shown precisely *how* sectarian identity is instrumentalized in the foreign policy arena. Hezbollah’s “resistance” narrative and its intervention in Syria are framed in sectarian terms to mobilize its constituency and legitimize its regional agenda. As F. Gregory Gause (2023) notes, in the Middle East, “ideology is grounded in identity,” and transnational ideologies become power resources in the hands of ambitious regional leaders and their local clients. This

thesis has detailed the mechanisms through which these identity-based ideologies are deployed, leading to what Gause (2017) identifies as a key feature of the “New Middle East Cold War”: the tendency of states to underbalance due to ideological and regime security concerns that prevent otherwise logical alliances.

Third, and most importantly, this thesis validates the core theoretical and methodological commitments of Foreign Policy Analysis. It answers Valerie Hudson’s (2013) call for research that takes human agency seriously and looks below the nation-state level to understand international politics. The foreign policies of Lebanon and Iraq cannot be understood without analysing the beliefs, motivations, and strategic interactions of specific actors: the leaders of Hezbollah, the commanders of the PMF factions, and the beleaguered officials of the state. Furthermore, this study confirms the utility of the multi-level analytical framework described by Derek Beach (2012). It was only by synthesizing insights from the *system-level* (the regional context of the Syrian war and the Iran-Saudi rivalry), the *state-level* (the nature of sectarian institutions and weak state capacity), and the *sub-state group level* (the bargaining dynamics between factions) that a comprehensive explanation for underbalancing became possible. This multi-causal, agent-centric approach is the hallmark of FPA and has proven indispensable in solving the puzzle presented by these two critical cases.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study, like all academic research, has its limitations, which in turn open up promising avenues for future inquiry. The focus on Lebanon and Iraq provides a powerful comparison of two Shi’a-majority Arab states where Iran wields significant influence. The findings, however, may not be directly generalizable to other contexts. Future research could test the “capture vs. paralysis” framework in other fragmented states. For instance, how does underbalancing manifest in a Sunni-majority state with multiple, competing Islamist factions and external patrons, such as Libya? Or in Yemen, where a single faction, the Houthis, has captured the capital but faces a fragmented coalition of opponents backed by rival external powers? A structured, focused comparison of these cases, as advocated by Beach (2012), could help to build a more generalizable mid-range theory of foreign policy in failed or failing states.

Furthermore, while this thesis has focused on the group and state levels of analysis, it has largely black-boxed the individual leaders themselves. Following the research program laid out by Hudson (2013), future studies could add another layer of explanation by conducting a detailed political-psychological analysis of key decision-makers. What is the operational code or leadership style of figures like Hassan Nasrallah or key PMF

commanders? How do their individual beliefs and personalities shape their strategic choices and bargaining tactics? Integrating this individual level of analysis could provide an even more nuanced understanding of the foreign policy behaviour identified in this thesis.

Finally, while this study has focused on high politics and security, the framework could be extended to other realm of discipline such as political economy. How does the illegal economic activity of factions, their control of smuggling routes, border crossings, and corrupt business enterprises, influence their foreign policy stances? Does economic competition between factions exacerbate the dynamic of political paralysis? These are crucial questions that should be considered further investigation.

Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, this thesis affirms the central insight of Foreign Policy Analysis: that to understand why nations act as they do, we must first understand who acts on their behalf. In Lebanon and Iraq, the state does not act alone. Its foreign policy is the chaotic, contested, and often self-defeating result of a perpetual internal struggle for power, legitimized and fuelled by the very sectarian systems designed to manage diversity. The cases of Lebanon and Iraq are not merely regional curiosities; they are stark warnings about the profound fragility of the nation-state model in the twenty-first century Middle East.

In a region increasingly defined by transnational identities, penetrable borders, and powerful non-state actors, the hollowing out of state capacity has devastating consequences. Until the internal pathologies of these sectarian political systems are addressed, Lebanon and Iraq will remain trapped in a cycle of underbalancing, unable to secure themselves in a region that offers no mercy to the weak. Their foreign policies will continue to be a mirror, reflecting not a coherent national interest, but the fragmented and conflicting ambitions of the factions that hold the state captive from within.

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