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Common enemy, colliding policies: neoclassical realism's perspective on Turkey and Iraq during the Mosul operation against ISIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the divergent foreign policy responses of Turkey and Iraq to the common threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) during the 2016–2017 Mosul Operation, utilizing Neoclassical Realism (NcR) as the analytical framework. Contrary to Neorealist expectations that common threats lead to alignment and cooperation, Turkey and Iraq pursued markedly different strategies. Turkey espoused a revisionist foreign policy aimed at redesigning the regional geopolitical landscape in its favour, leveraging ideological and historical ties to Mosul. This strategy comprised keeping a military presence in northern Iraq and backing local 'kin' groups and actors, in spite of facing defiance from Iraq's federal government, pro-Iran Shia militias and concerns from the international community. In contrast, Iraq's responses were characterized by under-balancing, with internal fragmentation and elite disagreements undermining a coherent and effective foreign policy. The systemic pressures of regional instability and the ascent of IS were filtered via different intervening variables, namely leader images, state-society relations, and institutional strength, eventually determining both countries' diverse foreign policy outputs.

KEYWORDS

Neoclassical Realism; Turkey; Iraq; conflict; ISIS; Mosul

Introduction

There is a broad consensus in International Relations (IR) literature, and particularly Realism, that a common threat is often what brings two or more states together in alignment or close cooperation (Waltz, 2010, p. 166, 174; Walt, 1987). The article's question is: How does NcR reveal that common threats do not necessarily lead to alignment and cooperation (neorealist expectations) when states face common threats? To address this here, we examine the case of Iraq's and Turkey's colliding policies and lack of cooperation when they are faced with a common threat of IS. This paper examines one occasion where not only did such conditions not lead to closer inter-state security cooperation or alignment but also facilitated diverging – and hostile – state policies

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despite the common threat. The case in question refers to the colliding policies by Turkey and Iraq, respectively, during their response to the threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and specifically the 2016–2017 Mosul Operation. Neoclassical Realism (NcR), as a theory often used to analyse empirical exceptions to grand theories, provides a framework that can explain Ankara's and Baghdad's responses, not so much towards ISIS itself, but towards each other in the context of the fight against IS. We argue that in the face of the threat posed by IS, Baghdad resorted to a suboptimal foreign policy of under-balancing. On the other hand and as elaborated below, Turkey implemented a revisionist policy, akin to the broader foreign policy paradigm it adopted in the twenty-first century, that hindered Turkish-Iraqi collaboration against IS as well as stirred tensions between the two countries, particularly over Turkey's military presence near Mosul in Nineveh's governorate and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I). Both states adopted foreign policy behaviours that, according to neorealist premises of alliance formation, were counterintuitive.

The article draws on primary resources, including interviews with key figures.¹ The authors carried out 5 interviews between June 2016 and September 2017, which were semi-structured interviews with key figures and members of the Iraqi Council of Representatives (parliament), who provided insights into Iraqi foreign policymaking and the Mosul Operation.² Additionally, the study incorporates desk research that comprises data collected from both local and international outlets, as well as online documents and official statements, which enrich the analysis. There are several publications on Turkey's foreign policy (Alaranta, 2022; Aydin, 2019; Bozdagloglu, 2003; Erdoğan & Hisarlıoğlu, 2022; Hintz, 2018; Oktav, 2016; Özkeçeci-Taner & Açıkmeşe, 2023; Park, 2014; Tziarras, 2022; Vali, 2019). These studies are in the making and processes of Turkish foreign policy, its foreign relations, and orientations historically and theoretically, as well as how power and identity shape Ankara's foreign policy, and its foreign policy towards various regions. Furthermore, there are studies on Turkey's policy towards Iraq and the KR-I (Kumral, 2016; Park, 2005; Romano, 2015). There are fewer studies on Iraq's foreign relations and foreign policy (Gulmohamad, 2021; Stansfield, 2010). While no existing literature applies NcR to explain the contradictory policies and tensions between Ankara and Mosul over the Mosul liberation operation and the continued presence of Turkish troops in Iraq, this manuscript tackles this. Moreover, the connections between these three actors have not been adequately explored, and certainly not from an NcR perspective. A key theoretical contribution of NcR's analysis is that incorporating systemic stimuli with domestic-level analysis (intervening variables) significantly enhances our understanding of Ankara and Baghdad's diverging/colliding behaviour during the Mosul Operations.

NcR's analysis includes international system and domestic factors, which do not exist in Neorealism's framework due to its lack of emphasis on domestic variables and over-reliance on the international system for its analysis. NcR and its theory of under-balancing provide a detailed framework that shows factors that mould Turkey's and Iraq's contrasting policies towards each other in the context of the Mosul Operations. The broader implication of our argument is that while this case contradicts Neorealism's assumption of alignment and cooperation under common threats, NcR's framework and assumptions explain why Iraq and Turkey did not align. These theoretical explanations are informed by systemic stimuli such as regional instability and intervening variables like leader images, state-society relations, and under-balancing.

The paper first provides a brief historical background from Mosul being a territorial and geopolitical issue between Turkey and Iraq to the expansion of IS into Iraq, and the Mosul Operation. It then lays out the NcR theoretical framework employed, elaborating on the independent, intervening, and dependent variables of the analysis. Before moving on to the analysis of Turkish and Iraqi foreign policies, we provide the international systemic context in which ISIS threat emerged and Turkish-Iraqi responses were shaped. The empirical analysis of the two foreign policies incorporates aspects of domestic factors from both actors to explain the strategies they implemented.

Background on the Mosul question and the Mosul Operation

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Mosul Question has been central to Turkish foreign policy. The Ottoman Empire lost the ‘Vilayet of Mosul’ after the war, and the new Turkish state sought to reclaim it (Çoşar & Demirci, 2004, p. 48). However, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which established the new national borders, did not resolve the Mosul issue. Turkey and Britain left it for later negotiations (Çoşar & Demirci, 2004, p. 49). These negotiations, mediated by the League of Nations, lasted from 1924 to 1926, with Britain ultimately retaining Mosul, and Turkey relinquishing its claim. The negotiations concluded with the 1926 Frontier Treaty between Turkey, Iraq, and the UK (Çoşar & Demirci, 2004, pp. 50–52; Mufti, 2009, p. 20; Zurcher, 2004, p. 201).

However, Turkey’s new borders and its national identity, established after WWI, ‘have been contested by various political and social groups since 1923’ (Özkan, 2012, p. 101). One key challenger has been the Islamic movement, particularly the *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook), led by Necmettin Erbakan from the 1960s. This movement, nostalgic for Ottoman imperial days, often clashed with the dominant Kemalist-nationalist paradigm (Mufti, 2009; Özkan, 2015), although one could argue that the Kemalist framework itself underwent transformations over the years. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, emerged from this movement and has challenged both the Kemalist paradigm (Cagaptay, 2017; Tziarras, 2018) and the geopolitical *status quo* established by the Treaty of Lausanne (Hintz, 2018, p. 115; TCCB, 2016; Tziarras, 2022). More specifically, Erdoğan argued that the Lausanne Treaty, far from being a victory as Kemal had portrayed, was a painful compromise compared to what was agreed in the National Pact of 1920 (Danforth, 2016; Mufti, 2009, pp. 19–20). He emphasized the connection between Turkey and regions like Iraq and Syria, claiming ‘Our physical boundaries are different from the boundaries of our heart’ (TCCB, 2016). This may also be seen as an irredentist statement. And as a movement that aims to reclaim territories on historical, cultural, ethnic, or geographic grounds, irredentism is itself revisionist in nature.

Beyond this ideological perspective and regarding Iraq in particular, Erdoğan views Turkey’s involvement through the lens of traditional security concerns stemming from the Kurdish issue, which has driven Turkish incursions into Iraq since the 1990s (Kasapoğlu, 2012, pp. 75–80). Turkish troops have long been stationed in the region, including at the Zilkam training camp, about 10 miles from Bashiqa in Nineveh Plain, northern Mosul. The 367-kilometer-long Iraqi-Turkish border, Iraq’s fourth-longest, has been one of the most porous and contentious aspects of Iraq-Turkey relations.

Turkey's incursions into Iraq, particularly in the KR-I, date back to the 1980s, following a 1978 security agreement with Saddam Hussein to pursue the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkish operations began in 1983 and intensified after 1991, as Iraqi Kurdish forces could not prevent the PKK from establishing bases in the KR-I (Knights, 2022). After the Iraqi troops withdrew from the KR-I in 1991, the Iraqi Kurdish armed parties could not prevent the PKK from establishing bases deep in the KR-I and Turkey's operations restarted in 1992 (Kasapoğlu & Cagaptay, 2015; Knights, 2022). In 1995, another similar agreement was signed between Baghdad and Ankara. Turkey's ambitious cross-border military operations against the PKK peaked in the 1990s with the involvement of thousands of soldiers and heavy military hardware.³ These Turkish military campaigns went up to three miles inside Iraq, and they created a border zone known to the Turks as the Temporary Danger Zone, which later expanded to cover ten miles (Knights, 2022). The Iraqi Kurdish civil war (Brakuji) between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) further enabled Turkey's long-term presence in the KR-I (Gunter, 1996), and by then, the PKK had retreated to the Qandil Mountains.

Following Saddam's overthrow, Turkey's influence in Iraq waned, as Ankara did not support the 2003 US-led invasion (Hale, 2007, p. 89). While Turkey had unofficial ties with the KDP and PUK during the 1990s, formal relations with Iraqi Kurds began after 2003, especially by 2007 (Gulmohamad, 2021, p. 135). After 2003, Turkey rethought its foreign policy towards Iraq and intended to be part of the US-led coalition of multinational forces in Iraq, as approved by the Turkish Parliament on 6 October 2003. The Iraqi interim Governing Council fiercely rejected Turkey's resolution, arguing that Baghdad did not 'want soldiers from neighbouring countries meddling in their affairs', and so in November 2007, Turkey revoked its offer.⁴ Against this brief historical background, the next section offers an overview of the contemporary importance of Mosul for both Turkey and Iraq in the context of the fight against IS. More information about events of that period is included later under the analysis of the two foreign policies.

Islamic State and the Mosul Operation

In 2014 and 2015, Turkey deployed forces in Iraq, including to the Bashiqa military base in the outskirts of Mosul, comprised of around 25 tanks, a small artillery force, and more than one hundred soldiers (Cagaptay, 2017; Idiz, 2015). Bashiqa is considered Turkey's largest military base in Iraq, along with around 20 military points in the KR-I, mainly in Erbil, Duhok, Zakho and Soran (Dri, 2020). In 2015, Turkey maintained around 3,000 troops in several areas in the KR-I, such as the Bamerni Airport and Kani Masi near the Turkish-Iraqi border. In December 2015, Turkey also sent reinforcements to Zilkan, where Turkish forces were already stationed to train Peshmerga and Arab Sunni tribal forces under the banner of 'National Mobilization' (*Hashd al-Watani*) (Filkins, 2015). Turkish troops in Zilkan have also contributed to the training of Peshmerga forces loyal to Erbil, prompting resentment in Baghdad (HRW, 2011). Ultimately, Iraq perceived Turkey's activities to be violating the country's sovereignty.

Ankara actively sought a military intervention and the use of its deployed troops in Iraqi Kurdistan to participate in the operations for the liberation of Mosul, whereas

Iraq rejected their involvement and called for their withdrawal. When in the same month, a third of Iraqi territories, including Mosul, fell to IS, Turkey seemed to expect the total collapse of the Iraqi state (Park, 2017, p. 206). Unlike Iran, which provided weapons to Kurdish forces to fight IS, Turkey did not provide immediate military support or weapons to its allies, the Iraqi Kurds, when the Kurdish capital, Erbil, was threatened by IS. Despite Turkey's willingness to participate, its limited presence and leverage in the military operations were confined to some training and logistical support. However, during the operations, Turkish troops in the Bashiqa-Zilkhan camp shelled some IS targets, including in the town of Bashiqa, in support and at the request of the Peshmerga who liberated the town. Turkey's military presence in Bashiqa, as further explained below, has five main objectives: (1) Bashiqa is near the city of Mosul and can thus allow Ankara to have leverage over Mosul's future; (2) the fortification of Erdoğan's ties with certain allies in Iraq be they the KDP, Arab Sunni allies and leaders from Mosul such as Usama and Atheel al-Nujaifi and some Turkmen political factions; (3) the provision of aid and support to military operations against the PKK in the Sinjar area; (4) the countering of pro-Iran Shia militias in and around Mosul given that Turkey is reportedly there to protect Mosul's Sunni citizens and prevent violence (Gulmohamad, 2016) and (5) Turkey's consolidation of its troops in Bashiqa which is also due to the concern of another wave of refugees as Turkey was hosting 3.8 million Syrian refugees (UNICEF Türkiye, 2017)

The Peshmerga offensive was the initial stage of the liberation operations to clear some areas around the city and pave the way for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) attack. This was despite Baghdad's assertion that Turkish military support, particularly from Bashiqa, was not needed (Karadeniz & Tksabay, 2016).

After these preparatory stages, the battle for the liberation of Mosul officially started in October 2016. On 4 October 2016, the Iraqi parliament voted for Turkey to withdraw its army from Iraqi territories, calling it 'a form of occupation' (*Ihtilal*), and even advocated severing their relationship (IPC, 2016). Furthermore, the Iraqi government called for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to talk about 'the Turkish side's transgression and interference' and to 'end the Turkish troops' breach of Iraqi sovereignty' as well as 'the Turkish side's non-respect for principles of good neighbours,' according to Iraqi Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmad Jamal (RFE, 2016). In the same month as diplomatic relations worsened, Ankara and Baghdad summoned each other's ambassadors. On 11 October, Erdoğan declared, 'We do not need to take permission', and rebuked Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi: 'you are not my quality ... who is this? Iraq's prime minister? Know your place' (Harris, 2018, p. 154).

Turkey's confrontational language in defence of its presence against Baghdad's will pushed some of its old allies, including former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and some Turkmen representatives, to side with Baghdad (Khalilzad, 2016). No tangible outcomes emerged from the political and diplomatic row, and the *status quo* remained unchanged; Baghdad was unable to expel the Turkish troops, and Turkey – besides its limited bombardment of IS in support of some Peshmerga offensives – failed to have a say in the Mosul liberation operations and their future. The next section lays out the NcR theoretical framework through which the Turkish-Iraqi rivalry during the Mosul Operation is analysed.

Theoretical framework: neoclassical realism

Neoclassical Realism emerged in the 1990s as a theory of foreign policy (and later international politics) that adopted some fundamental premises of Neorealism but went further than that by incorporating domestic-level factors and developing the system-level analysis (Rose, 1998). Thus, NcR opened the ‘black box’ of the neorealist ‘unitary state’ and introduced intervening variables – in addition to the independent-systemic ones of Neorealism – and enabled the analyst to also account for factors such as leader perceptions, political culture, public opinion, ideology, institutions, interests groups, etc. Moreover, NcR improved the structural analysis of neorealism. Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell developed the realist understanding of how the international system affects foreign policy or international politics outcomes by introducing more independent variables such as *systemic clarity* and the *permissiveness/restrictiveness of the strategic environment* (Lobell et al., 2009; Ripsman et al., 2016).

In NcR, the causality of the systemic level remains primary over the policy outcome. However, contrary to Neorealism, systemic stimuli in NcR do not merely affect the outcome directly, namely the dependent variable (or foreign policy behaviour); it is rather ‘filtered’ through unit-level variables which also have an intervening causal role in the final foreign policy outcome (Ripsman, 2009; Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, we employ some of the variables developed by Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobel (Ripsman et al., 2016). In terms of the system level, we employ the independent variables of *international power distribution* and *systemic clarity* as expounded below. Independent variables are international and regional power distribution among states, including the variable of systemic clarity (or clarity of signals), where we identify threats (and opportunities) presented to the states by the system. The strategic environment (its permissiveness or restrictiveness) is shaped by the nature and imminence of threats and opportunities – specifically, how imminent or severe they are. For example, while we do not view ISIS and PKK as independent variables, partly due to their nature (non-state actors), they are part of the strategic environment, which is considered a component of the independent variables. Non-state actors such as ISIS and PKK present Turkey and Iraq with clear and imminent signals of threat (occasionally, opportunity, too). Intervening variables are unit-level variables such as leader images, domestic institutions and state-society relations. In the case of Iraq, we employ the intervening variables of leader images, domestic institutions (including the quasi-state PMF) and state-society relations, whereas in the case of Turkey, we only employ leader images as the intervening variable. Thus, at the unit level, different intervening variables are employed for each case study. That is because each of the two states in question is different and calls for emphasis on different domestic factors for reasons explained in the intervening variable section. The dependent variables are Turkey’s and Iraq’s foreign policy outcomes and responses.

Independent variables – systemic stimuli

Just like Neorealism, NcR posits that the international system is anarchic and is interested in its structure, namely the distribution of power among its units – the nation-states. The *international power distribution* independent variable serves the purpose of

accounting for the distribution of power in the international system (including the regional level, if necessary) and tracing international power shifts over time. This assessment is done based on elements such as national material power, military capabilities, alliance formation, etc. Changes in the international distribution of power may cause power imbalances that stir security dilemmas, arms races, and the reconfiguration of alliances. In this sense, fear, insecurities and perceptions of threat are intrinsic to international relations, especially amid power changes (Walt, 1987; Waltz, 2010, p. 166). At the same time, power shifts present states with not only constraints but also opportunities (Waltz, 2010, pp. 92–94). To better understand the repercussions of international system dynamics on state behaviour, we look at the distribution of power in conjunction with the independent variables of *systemic clarity* (or clarity of signals) and the nature of a state's *strategic environment*.

The variable on *clarity* concerns the 'signals and information the international system presents to states' and constitutes a feature that distinguishes NcR from Neorealism (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 46). More specifically, according to Ripsman et al. (2016) clarity refers: (a) to threats and opportunities presented to a state and the extent to which they are discernible; (b) to the 'time horizons of threats and opportunities'; and (c) to whether optimal policies are evident (Ripsman et al., 2016). The same authors define clear threats as other state (or quasi-state) actors that have revisionist or hostile tendencies against 'the state's territorial integrity or core interests', the capabilities to 'inflict harm on the state', and are imminent (Ripsman et al., 2016). Relatedly, the *strategic environment* pertains to the kind of threats and opportunities – how imminent or severe they are. In this sense, the more imminent and severe the threat or the opportunity, the more restrictive the environment. The more remote and less intense the threat or opportunity, the more permissive the environment (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 52). Whereas restrictiveness constraints foreign policy objectives, permissiveness makes their implementation more possible. These two variables benefit this paper's subject matter as they allow for the better assessment of the threats and opportunities presented to each actor as well as the analysis of quasi-state actors, with IS being an important one for this study (Tziarras, 2017).

Intervening variables – the unit level

To unpack the unit-level dynamics, we look at the intervening variables of *leader images* in the case of Turkey, and *leader images*, *domestic institutions* and *state-society relations* in the case of Iraq. We use different intervening variables for Iraq and Turkey because the two case studies present different domestic conditions and dynamics. Case study treatment, therefore, cannot be uniform. In the case of Turkey, Erdoğan's gradual centralization of power and decision-making processes renders leader images the most essential and consequential intervening variable in Turkey's foreign policy for the Mosul Operation (Siri et al., 2019; Tziarras, 2022). Secondly, due to Iraq's weak and fractured policy-making process, society and domestic institutions variables would be relevant due to the rise of Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), a majority pro-Iran Shia militia and paramilitary group that has quasi-official status and the KRG, namely the KDP and PUK (Gulmohamad, 2017, p. 48). Thirdly, the theory allows researchers to choose appropriate intervening variables for each country or case to increase the analytical precision of NCR approaches (Götz, 2021; Marston, 2024, pp. 29–32)

Leader images concern the perceptions and beliefs of state leaders, particularly those involved in foreign policy decision-making such as foreign ministers, presidents, prime ministers, generals etc. (i.e. the foreign policy executive, FPE). These are the people who are called to deal with matters ranging from grand strategy to crisis management. Therefore, the way in which they perceive, understand, and interpret systemic stimuli matters in how the foreign policy outcome is formed and executed. This is especially true in semi- or non-democratic states where the input of leaders is more often than not more consequential. In the context of leader or elite images, the importance of elite disagreement or fragmentation is also found particularly in NcR literature on under-balancing. The extent to which there is elite consensus or fragmentation can affect the ways in which states respond, or do not respond, to external threats. In the absence of consensus, the state is more likely to pursue a suboptimal policy (Schweller, 2004, pp. 170–171).

The *state-society relations* variable deals with the interaction between the government or state institutions and economic/societal actors such as political parties, business groups, public opinion, etc. The requirement is to trace whether foreign policy decision-making is influenced by such domestic pressures and/or whether foreign policy decisions enjoy the support or face the opposition of domestic actors. State elites do not only respond to external systemic stimuli. Insofar as the political system is democratic, they are also concerned with what domestic societal/economic groups think, for their political survival depends on them as well (Ripsman, 2009; Ripsman et al., 2016; Schweller, 2008). This is therefore an important aspect of decision-making that can have an impact on foreign policy outcomes.

Domestic institutions include formal governmental institutions, organizational routines and bureaucratic processes created by constitutional provisions and set the parameters within which competition over policymaking occurs. These variables contribute to policy formation and responses, and they can determine who contributes to policy formation. Neoclassical Realism recognizes less formal institutions, such as the Hashd al-Sha'abi or Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, a quasi-state governmental body), unwritten rules and customary practices that can exert causal influence on decision-making processes and policy implementation (Gulmohamad, 2017, pp. 44–45; Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 78). It moreover accepts that weak and fragmented state institutions are more likely to demonstrate an inability in responding to threats in a timely manner (Schweller, 2004).

Dependent variables

The dependent variable refers to the outcome (or the product) of the interaction between the independent and intervening variables. We do not hypothesize the foreign policy behaviour of each state *a priori* but examine their foreign policy drivers, objectives and outcomes to reach a conclusion on the reasons behind the lack of alignment (i.e. a form of external balancing) between Turkey and Iraq in the face of ISIS threat. By analysing, comparing and contrasting the foreign policies of Turkey and Iraq vis-à-vis the issues in question (i.e. Mosul and Turkey's military presence in Iraq), we aim to assess their foreign policy behaviour (i.e. the dependent variable) along the lines of revisionism or *status quo*/alignment tendencies in the case of Turkey and balancing/alignment or under-balancing in the case of Iraq.

A *status quo*-oriented foreign policy is one that is averse to upsetting or destabilizing the existing balance of power. Rather than seeking to enhance the state's power, it tends to focus on preserving it (Waltz, 2010, p. 126). On the other hand, revisionist strategies aim at altering the geopolitical *status quo* or balance of power to a state's benefit and at the expense of other states (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 2; Morgenthau, 1993, p. 27). The objective of balancing is to prevent other states (or actors) from altering the existing *status quo* to the detriment of the defending party. This involves internal measures, such as decisions to enhance the state's military capabilities and allocate resources to deter or defend against aggression. On the other hand, external balancing pertains to defending and deterring aggressors through the creation of alliances (Trubowitz, 2011, p. 12). These alliances may be established to either maintain equilibrium in unfavourable regional or global power dynamics, as argued by Waltz, or to counter specific threats, as Walt later added (Walt, 1987, p. 5; Waltz, 2010, p. 118, 66).

In this paper, we focus more on the external balancing strategies or lack thereof, namely on why Ankara and Baghdad have not aligned with each other against the threat of IS, as Neorealism would predict. As such, we are interested in the outcome of under-balancing, which, far from being a revisionist strategy, is neither a *status quo* strategy; rather, it is detrimental to it as it fails to effectively counter subversive threats. From a conventional neorealist perspective, Turkey, as opposed to *revisionism*, would pursue a pro-*status quo* policy, favouring alignment with Iraq and external balancing against the threat of IS. Balancing, and particularly external balancing, is after all a *status quo*-oriented strategy (Trubowitz, 2011, p. 12). Therefore, the dependent variable variation for Turkish foreign policy is between revisionism and *status quo*. On the other hand, alignment would also be best served if Iraq followed a more effective balancing strategy as well, as opposed to under-balancing. As such, the dependent variable variation for Baghdad's foreign policy is between balancing (*status quo*-orientated) and under-balancing. More specifically, under-balancing as a suboptimal response to a threat or danger or unappeasable aggressor (Schweller, 2004, p. 169), seems to occur when there is elite disagreement and fragmentation, government vulnerability and social fragmentation.

The next section will look at the systemic context through the analysis of the independent variables. The systemic stimuli will then be incorporated into the analysis of Turkish and Iraqi foreign policies, respectively, in conjunction with the intervening variables towards determining the dependent variable for each state foreign policy. The results will be summarized in the final and concluding section.

Systemic context – from the international to the regional

The systemic context for Turkey and Iraq is largely similar, though each country has different strategic priorities, security concerns, and filters systemic stimuli based on a different domestic context. This section provides system-level analysis relevant to both countries, focusing on the independent variables of *international power distribution* (internationally and regionally), *clarity* and *strategic environment*. Some elements of the latter may differ between Turkey and Iraq and will therefore be incorporated into the analysis of the intervening variables.

The new millennium brought significant shifts in international power dynamics. By the mid-2000s, the unipolar structure that emerged after the Soviet Union's collapse

faced challenges. New perspectives, emerging as early as the late 1990s, discussed a uni-multipolar (Huntington, 1999) and later, in the mid-2000s, a non-polar world order (Haas, 2008). More recently, the notion of a multipolar world – or one transitioning towards multipolarity – gained traction (Litsas & Tziampiris, 2015; Murray & Brown, 2012; Schweller, 2014; Zakaria, 2021). Whether the international system will fully transition to multipolarity is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, the US's global primacy has somewhat declined (Walt, 2018) as other powers seek better international standing (Hinnebusch, 2013a; Tziarras, 2016). American foreign policy adventurism in the 2000s (particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq) and the 2007/2008 financial crisis led Washington to adopt a more cautious, less unilateralist foreign policy (Hinnebusch, 2013a; Tziarras, 2016).

The 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq marked a significant shift in regional geopolitics. The power vacuum created by the 2003 invasion, and later by the withdrawal, was filled by regional actors, particularly Iran, which gained considerable influence over Baghdad (Fawcett, 2013). Another feature of the post-Iraq war order was the enhanced status of Iraqi Kurdistan, recognized as an autonomous region under the 2005 Iraqi constitution (Onbaşı, 2016). Turkey opposed this due to fears of a transnational Kurdish state, which includes Turkish territories. Meanwhile, relations between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) remained strained, particularly over Erbil's independent energy policies (Barkey, 2010).

The 2010s brought about new dynamics in the Turkey-Iraq relationship. Turkey's isolation after the Arab uprisings (Öniş, 2014) and increased Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria led Ankara to improve ties with the KRG. The divergence between Turkish and Iranian/Iraqi interests over Syria and the rise of the Syrian Kurdish movement were key factors in Turkey's policy shift, having previously collaborated with Baghdad against PKK fighters in northern Iraq (Park, 2014).

By the 2010s, the Middle East geopolitical landscape increasingly mirrored international systemic realities. After the Arab Uprisings and the rise of IS in Syria and Iraq, particularly after 2014, both countries became the frontline of regional conflicts and power struggles. The significance of Bashiqa and the Mosul liberation operation was part of a broader strategic environment that posed threats and opportunities for multiple regional actors. The following section explores the *clarity of signals* presented by the regional and international system to Turkey and Iraq, focusing on threats and opportunities during the 2010s, especially between 2014 and 2017, when the Turkey-Iraq crisis over Bashiqa and the Mosul Operation occurred.

Clarity of signals

After 2011, Turkey and Iraq faced shared and unique challenges in the Middle East, with Syria being a primary source of regional instability, worsening domestic security in both countries. For Turkey, a major shift occurred when relations with Syria transitioned from amity to enmity in late 2011. The collapse of Turkish-Syrian ties, which had been strong since the 1998 crisis, also impacted Turkey-Iran relations (Hinnebusch, 2013b). Turkey soon found itself in conflict with Syria, which had historically used the PKK as a proxy. Committed to regime change, Ankara supported Syrian rebel groups, waging a proxy war against Assad, backed by Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia (Arsu & Arango, 2012).

Turkey was also deeply concerned by the rise of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People’s Defense Units (YPG), offshoots of the PKK. By 2012, Syrian Kurds controlled territory in northeastern Syria, declaring the de facto Republic of Rojava (Sary, 2016). Ankara feared this new Kurdish entity bordering its south, as the PKK could now find safe haven in northern Syria, further enabling its operations in Turkey. There was also concern that Turkish Kurds might be inspired by Rojava to seek more rights or even autonomy (Akyeşilmen & Lulaci, 2017). As a result, since 2016, Turkey has conducted four major military interventions in Syria, presented as counterterrorism operations against both Kurdish forces and IS (Ioannou & Tziarras, 2020).

The international system presented Turkey with a threefold threat from Syria: the Assad regime, the PYD/YPG, and IS. These last two threats also concerned Iraq. For Iraq, ISIS threat was even clearer and more severe, as IS controlled large areas of Iraqi territory, including Mosul. IS’s 2014 advance exposed the Iraqi army’s weaknesses, prompting Baghdad to seek US assistance while the KRG’s Peshmerga also fought IS (Blanchard, et al., 2016).

During the fight against IS, the Peshmerga expanded the KR-I’s territory (Coles & Kalin, 2016). Though initially retreating from Sinjar in June 2014, the PKK stepped in, opening a safe corridor. By November 2015, a coalition of forces, including the Peshmerga, PKK, and Iraqi army, liberated Sinjar. As IS thrived, Baghdad struggled to prevent the KR-I’s expansion and its independent policies. International support for the Peshmerga led KRG President Masoud Barzani to announce a referendum for Kurdish independence in 2017 (Al Jazeera, 2017b), exacerbating Baghdad’s fears of territorial dismemberment amid political, sectarian, and economic crises.

By the time of the 2017 Kurdish referendum, tensions between Ankara and Baghdad were already high over Turkey’s military presence in Bashliqa and its role in the Mosul liberation operation. Although Turkey claimed in 2016 to have moved troops, Iraqi authorities were unaware of such actions (Sputnik, 2016). Baghdad fiercely opposed Turkey’s involvement, fearing long-term interference in Iraq’s affairs (Sputnik, 2016). Thus, alongside IS and Kurdish independence, Baghdad saw Turkey as a threat to its sovereignty. All three challenges were seen as severe and imminent. The following sections explore Turkish and Iraqi policies on the Mosul issue, considering how systemic pressures were filtered through domestic variables (Table 1).

Interpreting Turkish foreign policy – domestic and dependent variables

As noted earlier, the intervening variable employed in the case study of Turkish foreign policy is *leader images*. That is because the transformation of the Turkish political system, particularly after 2016, from parliamentary to presidential, led to a great concentration of power in the president, the institutions and people surrounding him (Neset et al., 2019).

Table 1. Threat signals provided by the strategic environment.

	Turkey	Iraq
Common Threats	PYD/YPG & PKK Kurdish Independence Islamic State	
Individual Threats	US support to Kurds Bashar al Assad regime	Turkish mingling in domestic affairs

Therefore, a case can be made that the authoritarian and centralized turn of the Turkish political system renders *leader images* the most consequential variable. While acknowledging that other domestic factors may also be at play, we here emphasize the central role of ideational factors in shaping foreign policy behaviour, especially when democratic processes are hindered, and leaders play a more significant role in decision-making.

The influence of Turkish perceptions vis-à-vis the country's strategic environment and especially regarding the Kurdish threat since the 1990s has been undoubtedly the main driving force behind the Turkish military interventions in Iraq. Likewise, the emergence of IS and the capture of Mosul in 2014 presented, as we have seen, Turkey with both signals of security threats but also opportunities. At that time, Ankara's objective became to train Kurdish and Sunni Arab forces against ISIS threat. This time too, a significant defensive aspect underscored Turkey's actions (Gulmohamad, 2016). As mentioned, Ankara held concerns regarding the bolstering of both IS and the PKK, the emergence of new waves of refugees, and the expanding influence of Iran and its Shia proxies, particularly in Mosul and the Turkmen regions. The then Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, articulated, 'Turkey is in Bashqa not arbitrarily but out of necessity. We see that important steps have been taken in clearing the area from Daesh [i.e. IS]. We will accordingly reach a solution in a friendly manner about this [PKK] issue as well' (Hadi, 2017). Back in 2015, Kasapoglu and Cagaptay concluded that, irrespective of the existence of the Bashqa base, Turkey had effectively established a complex deterrent in northern Iraq (Kasapoglu & Cagaptay, 2015). Turkey's engagement indeed exhibited complexity, surpassing its previous involvements. However, this time, the scope extended beyond solely system- or security-related (defence or deterrence) considerations, encompassing a pronounced element of proactive action and revisionism. Analogous to its other interventions during the 2010s in Libya and Syria, Turkey seized upon the prevailing power vacuum and security imperatives to reinforce its strategic presence based on a geopolitical vision salient among its leaders and key decision-makers.

Ankara's disregard for Baghdad's appeals for the withdrawal of the Turkish military from Iraq flagrantly violated the latter's sovereignty and served as evidence of Turkey's endeavour to enhance its influence within the country (GulfNews, 2016). Turkish leader images about Mosul were easy to discern, while their impact on decision-making was also salient. During the crisis, Erdoğan insisted, 'No one should talk about our Bashqa base. It will stay there. Because Bashqa is also an insurance against terror attacks targeting Turkey (Erdoğan, 2016b). The Turkish Defence Minister also expressed support for preserving the 'demographic structure' of Mosul and the Turkmen city of Tal Afar in response to the expanding Shia presence. He emphasized, 'The modification of this demographic structure would greatly discomfort Turkey [...] Everyone needs to know that Turkey will not remain silent to a demographic restructuring' (Al Jazeera, 2017a). Turkey's intention was to safeguard and deepen its sway in Mosul. This aspiration was exemplified by Turkey's backing of the aforementioned Hashd al-Watani group (later renamed Haras Nineveh), a local Sunni Arab group from different tribes, which was eventually denied participation in the liberation operations due to its affiliation with Turkey (Author interview with al-Sabawi, 2016). The group's leader, Atheel al-Nujaifi, whose group was allied with the KDP, subsequently faced imprisonment by Baghdad owing to his connections with Turkey (Gulmohamad, 2016). One of Turkey's

pretexts is the defense of Sunni Turkmen in Tal Afar, which has both Sunni and Shia Turkmen (Interview with a Kurdish official, 2017).

Despite its persistent desire to actively partake in the Mosul Operation, Ankara eventually had to content itself with a role focused on training and engaging its partners, primarily the KDP Peshmerga forces of the KRG. Erdoğan posed the question, ‘Can we leave Mosul on its own?’ And added, ‘We are present in the history of Mosul. And what is it they are doing now? They are plotting to grab Mosul from the people of Mosul and offer it to others’ (Erdoğan, 2016a). It has been supported that Turkey endeavoured to utilize the KRG and Haras Nineveh to establish a more accommodating region within Iraq, one that would align with Turkish interests (Al-Bayan, 2016). This strategy aimed to secure an ongoing oil supply for Turkey and create a buffer zone between Turkey’s borders and Baghdad, thus enabling Turkey to operate within this space.

But at the same time, it was apparent that Turkey held grander ambitions for Mosul. Driven by a new vision under the AKP and Erdoğan, Ankara’s determination to partake in operations against IS was heightened. This aspiration aimed to not only deal with the PKK and IS security threats but also establish a more substantial presence, exert influence, and assert control in and around Mosul through ‘kin’ groups (non-state actors), such as Iraqi Kurds, Turkmen, and Sunnis. To these ends, the Turkish parliament extended the authorization of Turkish troops’ deployment in Iraq in 2014, 2016 and later in 2017. Despite pressure from the US and the international community, Erdoğan stated that Turkey’s troops would participate in the liberation of Mosul, which he characterised as a Sunni city (Renahan, 2017, p.109). Erdoğan went further to criticize the Treaty of Lausanne’s main negotiator İsmet İnönü and the founder of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, as ‘two drunkards’ (*iki ayyaş*) whose incompetence resulted in Turkey’s narrowly drawn borders. He also underlined his narrative by referring to the National Pact while pro-AKP media supported his messages; they recognized that the borders could not change in the near future, but they nevertheless presented maps of a ‘Greater Turkey’ – inspired by their Ottoman and Islamic tradition – that would create a ‘new and improved Turkey’ (Hintz, 2017, p.175). This campaign alarmed Baghdad and Iraq’s Shia factions as it confirmed that Erdoğan’s Turkey covets northern Iraq as well.

Considering the historical association of Mosul with the National Pact and the concept of a Greater Turkey, especially within the Islamic movement, along with Ankara’s exploitation of power vacuums and proxies in Iraq, it becomes apparent that, beyond conventional security apprehensions, there exists a pronounced ideological dimension underpinning the Turkish engagement in Mosul (Hintz, 2017, p.175). The fact that nearly 15 years prior, former Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and academic Ahmet Davutoğlu had articulated that the ‘non-political borders’ between Turkey and Iraq, specifically referencing ‘north and south Mesopotamia’, are perpetually influenced by genuine geopolitical factors is not coincidental. This statement alluded to the concept that northern Iraq is inherently intertwined with Turkey’s natural geopolitical sphere (Davutoğlu, 2010, p.225).

Dependent variable – favouring revisionism

Ankara aspired to assume a central role and shape the post-Mosul landscape through its own presence, participation in the Mosul Operation, and its affiliation with local ‘kin’

groups (Al Jazeera, 2017a). However, resistance from both the Iraqi government and, by extension, the US government, particularly concerning the Mosul Operation, imposed limitations that impeded the realization of Turkey's objectives (Times of Israel, 2016). Turkey had essentially adopted a foreign policy strategy that intertwined defensive and offensive elements to address security threats and seek to reshape the prevailing *status quo* by extending its influence (Tziarras, 2022). In this sense, Turkey did demonstrate some balancing behaviour, but only internal balancing and to some degree external, if non-state actors such as the Kurds and Sunni proxies are considered. Traditional external balancing, that is, alignment with Iraq against their common threat, was sidelined by Turkey's revisionist objectives. The influence of *leader images* informed by the country's Ottoman-Islamic past was palpable in this context, albeit these efforts at revisionism yielded limited or mostly unsuccessful outcomes.

Turkey's aspirations to participate in the Mosul Operation as intended, safeguard Turkmen areas from Shia influence, and enhance its own position encountered various constraints (Kasapoglu & Cagaptay, 2015). It has been unable to establish either a resilient deterrent or to ensure the preservation and expansion of its influence in Iraq, as it has achieved, for instance, in Syria; hence necessitating recurrent cross-border operations in Iraq against the PKK. Consequently, Ankara's aims, whether defensive or revisionist, were notably curtailed. Nevertheless, Turkey has maintained a military presence in northern Iraq, reflecting both its determination and the restrictions faced by Baghdad. This ongoing presence could potentially provide leverage in future interactions with Baghdad, the KRG, or other influential actors like Iran and the US.

Interpreting Iraqi foreign policy – domestic and dependent variables

We employ the intervening variables of leader images, domestic institutions and state-society relations to analyse the Iraq case study. These variables were chosen because they better facilitate the determination of Iraq's incoherent response, under-balancing during the Mosul Operation, both vis-à-vis Turkey and IS. By extension, they will shed light on why the common threat of IS did not enable Iraq to follow an alignment approach towards Turkey.

Leader images

The bilateral relations between Ankara and Baghdad deteriorated during Nuri al-Maliki's second term (2010-2014). The hope for improving bilateral relations during Haider al-Abadi's tenure (2014-2018) was weak and temporarily evaporated due to the Turkish presence in the KR-I, and the rising threat posed to Turkey by Iraqi Shia militias (Gulmohamad 2021, p.134). In October 2016, US Defence Secretary Ash Carter visited Turkey, indicating conditional support for a potential Turkish participation in the liberation of Mosul (Stewart & Gumrukcu, 2016). In the same month, Carter visited Baghdad and PM Abadi declined Turkey's offer for such an involvement and renewed his demand for the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Iraq (Stewart & Gumrukcu, 2016). The Turkish government remained unfazed.

On the one hand, Iraq's PM and the majority of the Iraqi Council of Ministers saw Turkey's military presence and potential involvement as a threat, and they agreed that

Turkish troops in Iraq should leave. On the other hand, the KDP's top elites, a major ruling party in the KR-I, Haras al-Watani led by Atheel al-Nujaifi, the ex-governor of Mosul and the Iraqi Vice President (largely a ceremonial post) Osama al-Nujaifi welcomed the presence of Turkish troops. In 2016, Iraqi Vice President al-Nujaifi expressed gratitude for Turkey's role in fighting IS and for its help to liberate Iraqi towns, including Bashiqa, while expressing the hope that Turkey would aid in the coming period (Anadolu, 2016). This contradicted the Iraqi PM's policy in relation to Turkey's military presence in Iraq, presenting elite disagreements and policy splits within the country on this issue. Baghdad's response to Turkey's actions was suboptimal, even underbalanced regarding the perceived threat presented by Turkey, not least because of the fragmentation and disagreements within the Iraqi elite. Despite this fragmentation, Iraqi Prime Ministers and the Chiefs of Iraq's Armed Forces al-Maliki and al-Abadi portrayed Turkey's involvement in the Mosul Operation and their presence in Iraq as a destabilizing factor rather than contributing to defeating IS. Consequently, the Iraqi PMs managed to prevent Turkey from direct involvement in Mosul Operations.

Domestic institutions

Schweller's assumption about the inability of weak state institutions to respond in a timely manner is compatible with Baghdad's weak responses to Turkey. From an institutional point of view, Iraq's PM is the Commander in Chief of Iraq's Armed Forces and directs the Council of Ministers, and the PM is responsible for and was overseeing the Mosul liberation operations (Gulmohamad, 2017, p.38). In October 2016, the Iraqi Council of Representatives rejected the Turkish presence and viewed it as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Simultaneously, the PMF threatened Turkish troops. Its spokesperson, Yousef al-Kiabi called Turkish troops occupiers and threatened to fight IS (Rudaw, 2016). As the PMF had a hawkish position towards Ankara, this further consolidated the PM's stance to rebuff Turkish troops' possible partaking in the Mosul liberation. The PM's policy implementation was constrained by the KRG's Peshmerga mainly from the KDP (Wali, 2016).

Therefore, the government's vulnerability was exposed by Erbil's government and less formal bodies such as Haras al-Watani that constrained Baghdad's policy implementation. While Iraq's federal government could not evict the Turkish troops, partly due to the lack of mobilizing all key actors, elites and resources Turkey was unable to join the liberation of Mosul. Iraq's weak federal government institutions and Erbil's collaboration with Ankara resulted in Iraq's inability to evict Turkish troops from Iraq. Iraq's federal government viewed this as a violation of Iraq's sovereignty, leading Iraq to further distance itself from Turkey during the Mosul Operation. Baghdad's distrust of Ankara and Turkey's assertion of the PMF's human rights violations against Sunnis (Palani et al., 2018) have increased the discord between the two countries in countering IS threats.

State-society relations

Disputes and differences between society and the state can impact foreign policy formulation and implementation. The deeper the division within communities prior to the

threat, the more likely that part of a community will either collaborate with an external enemy or remain passive rather than resist the aggressor; and second, the deeper the social divisions within the state, the greater the resistance to mobilising resources to repel the threats or enemy. Social fragmentation or distributional competition among societal coalitions renders it more difficult for authorities to balance against external threats (Schweller, 2004, pp.153-180).

From this perspective, we can better assess the fact that various community-associated armed groups had alliances with various actors during the Mosul Operation. For instance, some Arab Sunni tribal figures and members were part of Hashd al-Watani and supported by Turkey. There are micro-minorities groups in Iraq, which include Christians, Yazidis, Shabaks, Kakais, and Turkmen in Nineveh Plains (Gulmohamad, 2016). Some members of these communities have been supported by Iraq's federal government, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (Christian), Yazidis Yazidi Protection Force, the PMF, the KRG and its Kurdish parties (the KDP and PUK). Turkey, on the other hand, supports some Arab Sunni (Hashd al-Watani) and Turkmen groups – which have close ties to the Iraqi Turkmen Front, a pro-Turkey Iraqi political group – to create armed factions that would be allied with the sponsors (Author interview with al-Issawi, 2016). The connections between some small Iraqi armed groups and Ankara led to tension between Ankara and Baghdad. This caused Iraq's federal government to see it as interference, contributing to a lack of alignment and coordination during the Mosul Operation (Gulmohamad, 2021, pp.133-136). The following table outlines the micro-minorities armed groups and their backers (Table 2).

All the micro minority groups intended to participate in the operation, particularly in the Nineveh plains. The PKK and YPG focused on arming and setting up Yazidi militias affiliated with them in Sinjar (Gulmohamad, 2016). While there was an understanding between Baghdad and Erbil that both would play complementary roles in the liberation of Mosul, there was no agreement on how to deal with the presence of the Turkish military. This lack of understanding between Baghdad and Erbil exacerbated the lack of alignment between Turkey and Baghdad regarding ISIS threat. The factor of the fragmentation of state-society relations means that the federal government was unable to balance against Turkey's military presence in Iraq. Therefore, Turkey's unwelcome presence and divisions among various armed groups with different loyalties prevented Iraq's federal government from aligning with Ankara, despite the rise of the common threat of IS.

Dependent variable

As far as Iraq's foreign policy outcome is concerned, Baghdad's responses to Turkey's military presence were weak and unbalanced. Despite Baghdad's objection, Turkey's military presence remains part of its counterterrorism policy towards ISIS and the PKK. However, Baghdad's key policy outcomes include: First, Baghdad successfully prevented Turkey's involvement in the Mosul Operation – despite Ankara's artillery shells that killed scores of IS members – partly because the US tacitly approved Iraq's position. While Turkey is part of the US-led coalition against IS, the US formally stated that any foreign troops' involvement in the Mosul Operation should be approved by Iraq's federal government (Karadeniz & Gurses, 2016). Second, Baghdad's responses did not align with

Table 2. Armed groups made up of micro-minorities in Nineveh Governorate and their supporters during the Mosul Operations from 2016 to 2017.

Christian	Yazidi	Turkmen	Shabak	Kakai	Supporters
Syriac Christians affiliated with the Assyrian Democratic Movement, supported by Baghdad and the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), were founded in 2014.	The Yazidi Protection Force is somewhat autonomous and funded by the Iraqi government, with connections to the PUK.				Iraq's federal government
The Nineveh Plain Force (NPF), an Assyrian Christian militia affiliated with the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party, and the Dwekh Nawasha, founded in 2014 by the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP)	Qasim Shesho's Peshmerga (Yazidi Battalion)		Small armed units	The Kakai's armed regiments of a few hundred	The KRG and KDP
The Brigade of the Spirit of God, Jesus Son of Mary, is part of the Imam Ali Battalion, a pro-Iranian Iraqi Shi'a militia. The Babylon Battalion is part of the PMF	Yazidi units within the PMF, such as Hashd al-Sha'abi al-Yazidi and Kataib the Fury of Malek Taus		Small armed groups		PMF: Hashd al-Sha'abi
	The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBD) and several other armed units				PKK and YPG
		Turkmen groups that have ties to the Iraqi Turkmen Front			Turkey

Ankara's willingness to participate in the liberation of Mosul, and thus the federal government did not pursue cooperation with Ankara against ISIS threat, despite the usual neorealist assumption that a common threat leads to alignment. Third, in December 2015, Iraq formally complained to the United Nations Security Council regarding Turkey's military presence in Iraq, yet the *status quo* persisted, and the bilateral relations further deteriorated during this period.

Conclusions

This study examined the divergent foreign policy responses of Turkey and Iraq to the common threat posed by IS during the 2016–2017 Mosul Operation through the lens of NcR. Contrary to Neorealist expectations that a common enemy would lead to alignment and cooperation, Turkey and Iraq's policies diverged significantly, highlighting the limitations of Neorealist assumptions in this context.

The divergent responses of Turkey and Iraq during the 2016–2017 Mosul Operation underline the analytical strength of NcR in explaining foreign policy choices that challenge systemic expectations. While Neorealism would predict alignment in the face of a common existential threat such as IS, the case shows that domestic-level factors profoundly mediate how threats are interpreted and acted upon. For Turkey, the Mosul

Operation became an opportunity to assert a revisionist agenda rooted in both security concerns and ideational ambitions shaped by historical and cultural ties to the region. Turkey's consistent effort to influence outcomes through its military presence and support for local actors and proxies reveals how strategic objectives are often infused with deeper ideological currents and perceptions of regional legacy and identity. These dynamics align with NcR's emphasis on the role of leader images and domestic ideological orientation as critical intervening variables. In contrast, Iraq's fragmented response reflects the challenges faced by states with weak institutional coherence and internal divisions. Baghdad's inability to mount a unified policy, both towards IS and in response to Ankara's involvement, shows how elite disagreements and sub-state actors can paralyse effective external balancing. NcR's under-balancing is particularly salient here, capturing how internal political fragmentation can result in suboptimal policy responses – even in the presence of clear systemic threats. Beyond the explanatory value for this case, the findings offer broader theoretical and empirical implications. They highlight the need to reframe how scholars approach alignment and balancing behaviour in regions where state capacity, legitimacy, and unity cannot be assumed.

While NcR already offers tools to integrate domestic and systemic factors, the Middle East's dense web of non-state actors, transnational affiliations, and contested sovereignties presents opportunities to extend the theory further – particularly in accounting for hybrid threats and multi-layered allegiances. This article thus contributes to ongoing efforts to refine NcR as a flexible yet rigorous analytical framework. It invites future research to explore how ideology, memory, and identity shape foreign policymaking and outcomes not only as intervening variables but also as long-term structuring forces. In regions like the Middle East, where historical narratives and domestic fragmentation frequently override systemic imperatives, understanding state behaviour requires this dual-level approach.

Ultimately, the Mosul Operation serves as a revealing case of how common threats do not automatically translate into cooperation or alliance, and how the internal logics of states – shaped by history, leadership, and institutional dynamics, among others – often pull them in divergent directions. In this sense, foreign policy analysis must remain attentive not only to power and threat but also to the layered domestic contexts that give meaning to them.

Notes

1. Ethics approval from our institutions is not required waived as the interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017 before we joined the current institutions.
2. The semi-elite interviews with the relevant figures provided insights into how the Mosul military operation was conducted and how this translated into foreign policymaking. At the time of conducting the interviews, there was limited information about the Mosul operation. Thus, the interviews offered firsthand information on the operation, liberation, and regional context, such as Turkey's limited involvement and Iraq's responses.
3. Turkey conducted dozens of cross-border military operations against PKK. The largest was Operation Steel-1 in 1997 which involved 35,000 troops and extended 60 kilometres into Iraqi territory. See, (Gürsoy, 2018, p.168; Müftüler-Bac, 2005).
4. It is worth noting that to this contributed the fact that frequent Turkish airstrikes in the KRI targeting the PKK have resulted in damages to civilians and properties that exacerbated grievances in Baghdad and the KRI. See, (Sharp & Blanchard, 2005).

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