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ETHNICITY AND THE IRAQI KURDISH QUESTION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHALLENGES OF KURDISH AUTONOMY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAQI NATIONAL SECURITY

SECURITY STUDIES: FROM TERRORISM TO

PEACEKEEPING

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PREFACE

This study, which explores the impact of the Kurdish issue in northern Iraq on Iraq's national security, was conducted during a period of ongoing developments. The ever-evolving nature of the region, its persistent instability, the influence of neighboring countries, and the involvement of non-state actors have all contributed to the complexities of this research.

I am deeply grateful to my esteemed professor, Fabrizio Cotticchia, whose invaluable knowledge and experience guided me throughout the thesis process. His continuous support, insightful suggestions, and constructive feedback have been instrumental in overcoming the challenges of this study.

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the national security phenomenon and its machinery, as well as to identify the forms and mechanisms of separatist movements, specifically the ethnic and Kurdish question in Iraq. As a result, the process leading up to the foundation of the Kurdish Regional Government, as well as the quasi-state's initiatives toward external sovereignty after gaining internal sovereignty, are investigated, as are the effects of these initiatives on the security of the Iraqi Federal State. The research question is: "How does the evolution of the Kurdish Regional Government affect Iraqi national security perception?" The impact of the United States' Iraq intervention, international and regional institutions, Iraq's neighbouring countries, and non-state players on the process is examined.

Keywords: Iraqi National Security, Ethnicity, Quasi-state**,** Autonomy, Kurdish Regional Government, Separatism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of time, mankind has sought ways to assure their safety and struggled largely for its own existence. Later, with the emergence of the institution of the family, in which individuals feel a deep sense of belonging to each other, the family was added to the values that human beings must fight for along with their own existence. Over time, the values whose existence must be fought for have multiplied. So much so that it has become difficult to defend them solely. After a certain point, groups that saw a mutual benefit in defending and securing the same ideals began to defend them together. Because these common beliefs ensured the survival of those who upheld them. These common ideals, in which everyone engaged equally at first, later began to be expressed as common and absolute values that needed to be protected. These common values, which everyone participated in equally at first, gradually began to be expressed as common and absolute values that needed to be defended, values that some benefited from more and therefore attached more importance to securing them than others.

The development of security concerns is directly parallel to the development of human value perception. We epistemologically see that the concept of security is a combination of two Latin words: "*se" (non: privative expression)* and "*cura" (problem, issue or matter eth.)*[1]. Conceptually, it is observed that security is a "problem-free" form. Throughout history, the security concerns of the individual or society have changed subjectively to preserve their values.

According to Thomas Hobbes, the security concerns of human beings are relevant to his nature. Men naturally seek their own preservation but being naturally apprehensive of danger from all sources and distrustful of each other, they are driven on to seek power and control over others. All passions may be reduced to the Desire of Power. There are three basic passions that determine an individual's behaviour. Firstly, being selfish regardless of morality. This feature leads man to be directed by his passion. Secondly, man strives to preserve their goods and property. The last passion determining an individual's behaviour is that men pursue the reputation. Man's desire is unending and ever-renewing. The thing that man fears most is death. Therefore, human happiness depends on providing a death-free environment in which the above-mentioned desires can be satisfied.[2]

An anarchic environment prevails when there is no superior power to restrain the activities caused by human nature and to regulate the struggle of human beings against each other. In this environment of constant conflict, people struggle for power and try to dominate each other. In this chaotic environment that leads to security concerns, people have sought to create specific tools and organizations such as authority, state and military that can guarantee

[1], Was ist unter Frieden und Freiheit zu verstehen? Wolfgang Heisenbert/Dieter S. Lutz (Ed.) "Sicherheitspolitik kontrovers", Schriftenreihe Band 291/I, Bundeszentral für politische Bildung, Daniel Frei, Bonn, 1990, p. 45.

[2] Klasik Toplum Sözleşmesi Kuramlarında Birey-Devlet İlişkisi (Indıvıdual-State Relations in the Theories of Classic Society Contracts), Fatih Demirci, Gazi University, 2005, p. 182-184.

their security, by sacrificing some of their own freedoms. This is called the *social contract,* a contract conducted between the society and the authority.

According to Machiavelli, the existence of a strong authority is essential to prevent an anarchic environment. This authority is necessary to maintain order in society and to control the selfishness and competition inherent in human nature. Machiavelli argues that people are naturally self-interested, so authoritarian rule is essential to prevent chaos and disorder. This means that the state and the leader must have solid power. Furthermore, his understanding of "political power" is based on his ideas about "human nature". Human beings have some characteristics that do not change and do not differ according to time and place. In the seventeenth chapter of The Prince, he stated that man is essentially an evil and selfish being and that this is his nature. "We can say this of most people: that they are ungrateful and unreliable; they lie, they fake, they're greedy for cash and they melt away in the face of danger."[3]

For Machiavelli, when this nature of humans is thought, the statesman must take this fact into account in his political affairs, moreover, he himself must act selfishly by following this rule. Otherwise, in a society of selfish people, the selfless cannot carry out their cause. According to Machiavelli, people care most about possessions. The ruler should know this and respect property in order not to confront the people. It is better to kill a person than to take his property. People forget the deaths of their parents, but they always remember the pain of property and land taken from them, and that is why they resent the ruler. The prince has the supreme power of command in the new monarchy and in this sense, he is the "sovereign". Therefore, in the context of the new monarchy, the prince symbolizes for Machiavelli a state with institutions behind it and he almost identifies the concepts of "prince" and "state" or "sovereignty" in the sense of the highest institutionally organized power of command.

From 1568 to 1648, two long-lasting wars significantly contributed to the weakening of the imperial system and the fragmentation of European states due to the ongoing power struggles among them. The Thirty Years' War, which engulfed Central Europe and involved numerous European powers, and the Eighty Years' War, also known as the Dutch Revolt, in which the seventeen provinces of the Netherlands rebelled against the Habsburg dynasty, had profound and destructive consequences. These wars, characterized by intense physical violence, undermined the imperial structure, leading to a shift in the political order of Europe. Their conclusion in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia is widely recognized as the pivotal moment in the emergence of the modern European state system, marking the decline of imperial dominance and the rise of the nation-state as the primary political entity. This transition was further reinforced by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which solidified the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention.

The emergence of the nation-state system following the Treaty of Westphalia was instrumental in the eventual decline of empires that had already been weakened by intra-European power struggles. The new framework prioritized sovereignty, territorial

[3] The Prince, Translated and Introduced by Tim Parks, Penguin Books, Niccolo Machiavelli, 2015, p. 66.

integrity, and centralized governance, replacing the fluid and overlapping authority structures of imperial rule. As this political transformation unfolded, concepts such as popular sovereignty and nationalism gained prominence, ultimately contributing to the causes of World War I. The emphasis on national identity as the primary organizing principle in international relations redefined security concerns, as the preservation and protection of the nation became paramount. This shift saw the evolution of security from a broad imperial concern to a more focused national security paradigm, wherein the primary objective was to ensure the stability, survival, and interests of the nation-state.

According to Benedict Anderson, there is a strong correlation between the emergence of nationalism and the weakening of empires. It coincided with the decline of traditional structures of authority, such as monarchies and religious institutions, which had previously provided the primary sources of communal identity.[4] "The fatality of human linguistic diversity" created the conditions for national consciousness, as languages became linked to specific territorial communities rather than to transnational religious or dynastic affiliations.[5] This transition redefined sovereignty, shifting political legitimacy from divine or monarchical rule to the collective will of the nation. As a result, the modern nation-state emerged as a secular, horizontal community, distinct from the hierarchical and universalist structures of empires. In addition, the construction of national identity was further reinforced through national historiography, "a sense of deep, horizontal comradeship" by crafting collective memories that connect present-day citizens to a shared past (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). Therefore, national narratives selectively emphasize certain historical events while marginalizing others, creating a cohesive sense of continuity. Symbols, myths, and commemorative practices as common values, serve as instruments for reinforcing national solidarity and legitimacy. These processes, integral to the functioning of the nation-state, illustrate how national identity is not an inherent or static reality but a dynamic construct shaped by political and cultural forces. In accordance with this, nations are not natural or primordial entities but are socially constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and institutions.

The nation-state, as a concept, has been a dominant theme in political theory and historical analysis, evolving from early modern state structures into the prevailing form of political organization in the contemporary world. It is commonly understood as a political entity defined by a clearly demarcated territory, a centralized government, and a population that shares a collective identity, often based on common language, culture, and historical experience. With Anderson's conceptualization, the nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). This notion of "imagined" does not imply artificiality but rather underscores the fact that members of even the smallest nations will never personally know all their fellow citizens, yet they envision themselves as part of a cohesive whole. The mechanisms that facilitate this imagined solidarity include print capitalism, standardized education, and national

[4] Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 1983, pp.11–12.
[5] Anderson, p.48.

historiography, all of which contribute to the formation and reinforcement of national consciousness. The expansion of newspapers, books, and pamphlets in vernacular languages enabled geographically dispersed populations to perceive themselves as part of a unified community. Print capitalism created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars (Anderson, 1983, p. 44). This process standardized language and fostered a sense of simultaneity, allowing people to imagine themselves as members of a shared historical and cultural trajectory. Consequently, national identities became more deeply entrenched, replacing localized dialects with official national languages that further reinforced collective belonging. The very factors that once facilitated the rise of the nation-state—print capitalism, standardized education, and shared historiography—are now undergoing profound transformations that may redefine the nature of national identity in the 21st century.

Despite its widespread adoption, the nation-state has faced persistent challenges, particularly in the context of globalization, migration, and supranational governance. These challenges have proved that the imagined nature of the nation-state does not eliminate internal divisions or external pressures that threaten national unity. Ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity within nation-states often complicates the creation of a singular national identity, resulting in tensions between dominant national narratives and marginalized communities. Moreover, the increasing influence of transnational institutions, global economic interdependence, and digital communication networks has led some arguments on whether the nation-state remains the most effective political structure in an interconnected world. However, Anderson's framework remains highly relevant in contemporary debates on nationalism and statehood, providing a powerful explanation for how national identities are formed, maintained, and contested. His emphasis on the constructed nature of national consciousness underscores the adaptability and fluidity of nation-states, highlighting the role of media, education, and political institutions in shaping collective identities. As the modern world continues to experience shifts in communication, governance, and economic structures, Anderson's insights remain crucial for understanding both the resilience and fragility of the nation-state as a political entity.

Having explored how nationalism and the nation-state provided a shared historical backdrop for the emergence of "national security," it becomes essential to turn our focus to the Cold War era—the very period during which the concept of national security first appeared in the literature. At the onset of the Cold War, the global landscape was characterized by two ideologically opposed blocs, each perceiving the other as an existential threat[6]. On one side stood the Soviet Union, where the ruling socialist class and its Communist Party strove to expand and safeguard its ideological framework.[7] Opposing them were Western capitalist elites, who championed democratic values and market economies. Both sides regarded the preservation of their ideological foundations as essential to maintaining legitimacy and power, thus fueling an era of intense geopolitical competition.[8]

[6] Gaddis, J. L. (2005). *The Cold War: A New History*. Penguin Press.
[7] Kotkin, S. (2001). *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000*. Oxford University Press.
[8] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not eradicate these deep-rooted security anxieties. Instead, the transition to a unipolar world order transformed the dynamics of conflict. Whereas rivalry during the Cold War was structured as a confrontation between nation-states, the post-Cold War period has witnessed a shift toward a more complex geopolitical environment in which the instruments and actors of struggle have changed. Traditional military confrontations have largely been supplanted by economic, cyber, and ideological conflicts, with emerging competition in technology, energy security, and global governance.[9]

Evidence of the persistence of security concerns is found in the continued expansion of military alliances such as NATO, which has evolved in ways that many in Russia still perceive as threatening.[10] This evolution reflects a lingering Cold War mentality in global security strategies. At the same time, although the Cold War was originally framed as a battle between communism and capitalism, today's global tensions are increasingly defined by a contest between liberal democratic values and authoritarian governance models—a rearticulation of ideological conflict seen in emerging poles such as China and Russia.[11] Moreover, the means of competition have transformed from direct military confrontation to forms of hybrid warfare and asymmetric threats. Cyber warfare, economic sanctions, and information manipulation now serve as primary tools of global power struggles. For instance, the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China over technological supremacy in areas such as artificial intelligence and semiconductor production mirrors the arms race of the Cold War, albeit in a different domain (Nye, 2011; Hoffman, 2009).

The emergence of non-state actors—multinational corporations, terrorist organizations, and cyber groups—has further complicated the security landscape. While the Cold War was predominantly defined by state-centric confrontations, the post-Cold War era has seen an increase in conflicts that defy traditional military paradigms, including economic coercion, cyber-attacks, and proxy wars. [12]

Although the ideological and military confrontations of the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the underlying security concerns did not vanish. Instead, they have evolved into new forms shaped by technological advancements, economic interdependence, and shifting geopolitical alliances. The nature of competition has shifted from a direct state-to-state rivalry to a more diffuse, multidimensional struggle, demonstrating that the legacy of the Cold War continues to influence global politics.[13]

With the end of the Cold War, intra-state conflicts rose to prominence and have become a more frequently-referred concept than inter-state conflicts shaping security studies except in some specific cases. According to Kalyvas, civil wars are "armed combat taking place within

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[9] Hoffman, F. G. (2009). *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*. Potomac Books. Nye, J. S. (2011). *The Future of Power*. PublicAffairs.
[10] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). [Article on NATO expansion and Russian perceptions].
[11] Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press.
[12] Buzan, B., & Hansen, L. (2009). *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. Cambridge University Press.
[13] Gaddis, J. L. (2005). *The Cold War: A New History*. Penguin Press. Nye, J. S. (2011). *The Future of Power*. PublicAffairs.

the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties that are subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities.[14] However, there is still controversy in the civil wars about whether rebellion attempts of domestic groups against a certain sovereign authority can be involved in this definition. We can also infer from the expression of "one side of a civil war is the state" [15] that intra-state conflicts are not only between parties under a common authority within the borders of a recognized sovereign country, but also it may be a violent contest between government and domestic groups. Most agreed point, internal conflicts are often characterized by high levels of violence which can lead to genocide, destruction, and human suffering. As both definitions suggest, the other consensus on intra-state conflicts so far is that both subjects of the conflict should not be independent states which have external sovereignty. The external sovereignty is significant to define the parties of civil wars. This will be clearly defined in chapter *2*.

There is deep diversification on all other characteristics of civil conflicts (triggers, exact date of emergence, parties, methods or instruments etc.). It's not plausible to use "disagreement" because this profound and flexible ground derives from the nature of civil wars more than the division of scholars. Furthermore, it's worth saying that intra-state conflicts between groups do not have a separatist essence. To further explain, all civil conflicts based on separatism are the product of an uprising against a state authority. So, the group as a subject of the conflict, demands separate, autonomous or independent political governance, territory or resources from an independent central state authority. This is why such civil conflicts are categorized as "*separatist movements"* in the literature. Additionally, intra-state conflicts, even separatist movements, can vary ideological, religious or sectarian, ethnic, economic and political triggers. The main subject of this study is the conjuncture of a group rebelling against the central state authority in the ethnic separatist ground to have an organization that will fulfil the requirements of full-fledged internal sovereignty on the way to gaining a "*quasi-state*" form. Quasi-state is a conceptually contested issue, and it will be examined within *chapter 3*.

The concepts such as autonomous region, regional government or quasi-state are interwoven. All of them have achieved or are taking steps towards achieving internal sovereignty at some point, seek separation from a certain central power on the basis of a certain stimulation, and seek sovereignty in the international fora. The fact that an independent and externally sovereign state who suffers lack of the power to ensure its internal sovereignty, should not it to be defined as a quasi-state. In other words, a state that is unable or unwilling e to provide basic services for its citizens, has internal vulnerability or cannot guarantee the security of its own population can be defined as a "*fragile* or *failed"*[16] state. A fragile state is one where political and administrative institutions are weak, and the government struggles to provide basic services or enforce law and order, yet it still maintains

[14] Kalyvas Stathis N., ' Civil Wars', in Carles Boix, and Susan C. Stokes (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics (2009; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. 2009, p. 426-434.

[15] Hironaka Ann, Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 3.

[16] Charles, T. Call, Beyond the "failed state": Toward conceptual alternatives, European Journal of International Relations, 2016, p. 4.

a semblance of authority over its territory. In contrast, a failed state has experienced a near-total collapse of central authority, to the point that the government is unable to control its territory or deliver essential services, often resulting in widespread violence and the proliferation of non-state actors.[17] For example, Somalia is frequently cited as a failed state because it has long lacked effective central governance and is characterized by lawlessness and fragmentation (Rotberg, 2003). On the other hand, countries like Afghanistan are often labeled as fragile states—they face significant challenges in governance and service delivery but still retain a functioning government, albeit one that struggles to assert full control.[18] While both fragile and failed states exhibit substantial weaknesses in governance, the key difference lies in the degree of state collapse: fragile states are unstable but still function on some level, whereas failed states have largely disintegrated as coherent political entities.

On the other hand, an autonomous administration that has fully established its internal sovereignty, has strong administrative institutions, and is able to provide basic needs and services to the population that supports it, or to ensure the security of its citizens, will be defined as a quasi-state unless it is able to gain recognition in the international system. Moreover, another obstacle for a quasi-state to achieve external sovereignty and international recognition is the unchanging attitude of a parent state towards them. "Parent state,"[19] a state to which the breakaway territory formerly belonged, persistently doesn't accept loss of the seceded region. It constantly seeks to increase its influence and penetration in the autonomous region and makes military preparations to incorporate it back into its territory. Because the central authority considers peripheral structure as a threat for its national security. In accordance with this attitude, this study will examine the power struggle between the ethnic separatist Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi Federal state and what the Kurdish regional government means for the national security of Iraq. Because Kurdish separatism in Iraq represents a full-fledged and clear point in the study of the processes of mobilization and development of ethnic separatist movements. In addition, the Kurdish autonomous structure has the potential to answer questions about the statehood processes of quasi- or de facto states; how to maintain control over the breakaway territory; how to strengthen its own legislative and executive institutions; and how to consolidate social order, i.e. local support. Throughout history, there are many de facto states that achieved the ideal of independence or even lost their autonomy over time and were absorbed by the parent state. The Kurdish Regional Government has an advantageous position in terms of mobilization, conjuncture, and external support. Considering the regional and intra-Iraqi issues that this study discusses in detail, it is important to provide the reader with a roadmap on whether the KRG can maintain this advantageous position, or whether it will not be able to maintain its continuity in today's conditions, or what its possible future will be.

[17] Rotberg, 2003, *The Failure and Collapse of Nations: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions*).
[18] World Bank, 2006, *Fragile States: Challenges and Opportunities*).
[19] Pal Kolsto, The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States, Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo, 2006, p. 737.

Separatist movements have a strong correlation with the characteristic feature and the historical legacy which arise from the ethnicity. In case of Kurdish separatism, nearly all Kurdish groups rioted against the central power of the time on purpose of acquisition of independence and secession from the parent state. Success and failure of Kurds to gain independence or autonomous form is not associated with their characteristic feature stemming from their ethnicity, it is directly related with their mobilizational capabilities, the penetration of the central state on them and other third factors. Because living as a tribe already stimulates them to gain an independence structure and to set up local governmental institutions. Even if they could achieve independence or autonomous form from the parent state within history, the reason why they could not sustain it is to be divided against themselves. For Kurds, their family links outweigh their national links. Additionally, for them, there is no distinction between living under the power of a central authority belonging to a different ethnicity and living under the power of a Kurdish tribe to which they don't belong. We will observe this deep power conflict, even between the Kurds, by analysing the Barzani and Talabani case in chapter *4*.

Kurdish separatist movements are not limited to the Iraqi case. The Kurds occupy a territory that lies at the point of intersection of the borders of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and the U.S.S.R. The number of Kurds in the last two nations is quite small[20]. The traditional Kurdish territory which has been inhabited by the Kurds an estimated three thousand years was divided into the five nations after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire following World War I.

When examining the Iraqi population, it reflects an intricate structure in terms of ethnic and sectarian differences. The territory is ethnically divided into Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen, but it is also sectarian, with Shiite and Sunni communities. The ethno-sectarian tensions derived from this intricate structure became more apparent after the US intervention leading to the authority gap. Iraqi society is made up of ‘‘three major ethnic groups’’. In what is described as the ‘‘south’’, there are Shiites, who have historically been oppressed and who suffered badly during the failed uprising in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. In the ‘‘centre’’ are the Sunnis, who have always benefited from being the majority sect in Islamic empires and who in modern times have ‘‘ruled ruthlessly’’ in order to suppress everyone else. To the north are the Kurds, who are seen as having been ‘‘fiercely independent’’ since time immemorial and locked in a perpetual nationalist struggle against outside domination. Finally, Iraqi society is construed as the home of a long list of other ‘‘scattered’’ or ‘‘isolated’’ smaller ‘‘minorities’’, such as the Assyrians, Turkmen, Faylis and Shabak.[21]

The Middle East reflects a complex relationship with terms such as obvious authority vacuum and the "quasi" states born from this lack of authority, political instability, radical elements, separatist movements, ethnic and sectarian tensions since the Gulf War. There is a

[20] Nagel Joane, The Conditions of Ethnic Separatism: The Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, Seventy-Third Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1978, p.11.

[21] Reidar Visser, Ethnicity, federalism and the idea of sectarian citizenship in Iraq: a critique, International Review of the Red Cross, 2007, p. 809-810.

deep connection between the period when instability began in the Middle East and the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bipolar world order came to end and the US and its European partners, gathering on specific liberal patterns, emerged as the sole victor of the Cold War.

The idea that the root of instability of the region based on the USA intervention is the most-agreed point, although there is a deep division over the motivation behind the invasion in the literature. Claims such as the proliferation of MDW, freeing the Iraqi people (Kurds in Northern Iraq), and alleged connections between Saddam and Al-Qaeda, failed to justify the operation. There are many arguments supported by a type of, *performative war theory* [22]such as the need to save the US hegemony that started to crack after 9/11, preserve its leadership role in the international system, and remind the world of its conventional military power. This argument overlaps with the core elements of Bush Doctrine formed by the National Security Strategy (NSS). The core elements of the Bush Doctrine include a commitment to preserving the pre-eminent position of the US, aggressive democracy promotion, unilateralism, and a willingness to use force preventively.[23] The strongest two reasons why these arguments are being supported by large mass: first the support of the USA to El-Qaida in Afghanistan against the Soviets before 9/11, and the backing again of the USA to Saddam against Iran Islamic Republic in the Gulf War. Indeed, as the *Blowback Theory* acknowledges, these policies undermined the credibility of the United States in the international community.

The Iraq invasion is central to understanding the region's current crisis and power struggles. Its strategic location at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, its vast oil reserves, and its military strength elevated Iraq to a leadership position among Arab states. After the invasion, the U.S. ostensibly justified its action by claiming to liberate the Kurds in Northern Iraq. The U.S.-supported Kurdish Regional Government then assumed control over key areas—such as Erbil and Kirkuk—that are characterized by high ethnic diversity and abundant oil resources. Moreover, the bilateral agreements between the KRG and major European and U.S. oil companies for independent oil export and processing further reveal the combined methodological and motivational aspects of U.S. policy.

1.1 Research Question: How does the evolution of the Kurdish Regional Government affect Iraq's national security perception?

The attempts and initiatives carried out by the Kurdish Regional Government to create its own governance, military and economic apparatus apparently irritate the Iraqi Federal State. This might be the first time in history that Kurds can catch an acceleration to ensure their governmental institutions, and they can determine their own economic, defence and foreign affairs. Such that, they sometimes cross the line moving as an external sovereign state by leaving autonomous identity. Their own oil export and extract policies without any

[22] Ahsan I. Butt, Why Did the United States Invade Iraq in 2003, Associate Professor, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, 2017, p. 1.
[23] Smith, Steve & Hadfield, Amelia & Dunne, Tim, Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases (2008), p. 216.

permission of the Baghdad regime could be given as an example of that. Infrastructure projects, security organizations, strong internal authorities, relative democratisation process, relations with neighbour countries and with Baghdad are sort of instruments that show the most autonomous and decisive point the Kurds have ever reached throughout history.

The regional administration continues to attempt to become more independent from the central state without losing third support and without drawing the ire of Iraqi public opinion. In doing so, it maintains its balanced policies both with neighbouring countries and with Baghdad. The factions to which it owes its autonomy—which Turkey and Iran view as terrorist organizations—and the expansionist federal state policies are the two main sources of pressure on the Erbil administration, which has close ties to the security issues of its neighbors.

While this pressure was being felt intensely, being an international and transnational terrorist organization with the greatest influence and resources in history, ISIS emerged. Its destructive effect in the weakening of the Kurdish Regional Government, caused the Kurdish mobilizational skill in policy diversification. ISIL made Erbil more obedient against Baghdad and Ankara. In order to remove ISIL presence in Northern Iraq, it was necessary for Erbil to collaborate with neighbouring countries against a common enemy. The way to do this was to make some concessions.

Iraq was ruled by Arab nationalism from the late 1960s until 2003. This was predicated on the Baathist regime's political actions stemming from the Pan-Arabism ideology. The Iraqi Ba'ath was a movement founded on Arab socialism-nationalism and anti-imperialism. The Iraqi nationalist governance system was dismantled in 2003 as a result of US intervention. By separating power into ethnic and sectarian segments, the 2005 Iraqi Constitution established Iraq as a federal state. It is conceivable that Saddam's brutal authoritarian actions against a certain segment of the people that differed in ethnicity or opinion, or against those who resisted him, may have led to the overthrow of the Arab socialist/nationalist Baath administration without American assistance. Nonetheless, it is a matter of debate whether the new political structure to be established after Saddam's defeat would be federative.

In the light of all the inputs, this research examines the impact of the Kurdish Regional Government on Iraqi national security based on specific arguments. As for the question “What future awaits the Kurdish quasi-state?”. According to Pal Kolsto, there are four possible outcomes for the quasi-states. First, inclusion into the external patron state. Second, reabsorption in the parent state. Third, unification with the parent state in federal arrangement. Fourth, obtaining international recognition as an independent state.[24] The last one is not only optimal for the quasi state but also difficult to attain. Here, the main aim is to handle the relations between KRG, Iraq Federal Government and border countries; the military and intelligence operations of Northern Iraq border countries; political divisions;

[24] Pal Kolsto, The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States, Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo, 2006, p. 737.

ethnicity question; the impact of ISIS in Kurdish sovereignty; the governing, economic, infrastructure, and military mechanisms of KRG. Doing so provides a methodology from which the reader can infer hypotheses about the future of the Kurdish Regional Government.

2. NATIONAL SECURITY

National security stands as one of the most fundamental responsibilities of the modern state, encompassing the protection of a nation's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the well-being of its citizens against both internal and external threats. In an increasingly interconnected and volatile global environment, the concept of national security has evolved beyond traditional military concerns to include economic stability, cyber resilience, energy supply, and public health. This chapter aims to explore the multifaceted nature of national security, examining the theoretical frameworks, key actors, and policy instruments that shape state responses to emerging challenges. By analyzing contemporary threats and state strategies, this section provides a comprehensive understanding of how national security is defined, maintained, and contested.

National security studies constitute a pivotal domain in both academic and policymaking spheres, guiding states in identifying and responding to diverse security challenges. However, a recurring critique within the field pertains to the presence of "selective appreciation"—a bias wherein specific threats, actors, or regions receive disproportionate attention. As noted by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), the securitization process often reflects political and cultural priorities rather than objective threat assessments. Accordingly, the multidimensional impacts of selective appreciation hinder the avenues for a more holistic approach to national security.

The tendency to emphasize certain threats, regions, or perspectives while neglecting others is a pervasive issue in national security studies, with far-reaching implications for policymaking, academic inquiry, and global perceptions of security. This selective lens, which privileges specific security concerns at the expense of a more comprehensive understanding, significantly shapes both theoretical discourse and practical strategies. As highlighted by scholars such as Buzan and Wæver (2003), Baldwin (1997), and Tickner (1992), addressing such imbalances is crucial for the development of inclusive and balanced security frameworks.

One of the most critical outcomes of this skewed focus is the distortion of threat perception. Governments and institutions may disproportionately concentrate on challenges like terrorism or rival states, while underplaying equally pressing issues such as climate change, pandemics, or domestic instability. This can lead to misallocated resources and an incomplete response to the diverse threats facing modern societies. Baldwin (1997) argues for a broadened conception of security—one that extends beyond military dimensions to include economic, environmental, and societal concerns.

Such a narrow approach also fosters significant blind spots in strategic planning. By consistently favoring conventional military threats over human-centric or non-traditional

risks, decision-makers often overlook emerging vulnerabilities. The Human Security Report (2005) and works by Paris (2001) have underscored the growing importance of addressing challenges posed by non-state actors and integrating human security principles into national agendas. Issues like cybersecurity, resource scarcity, and gender-based violence remain underrepresented in many national strategies, compromising the robustness of contemporary security architectures.

Moreover, the disproportionate emphasis on certain regions—often major powers or geostrategic hotspots—creates imbalances in global security discourse. The marginalization of smaller states and less prominent regions reinforces a Western-centric or Americentric narrative, weakening the inclusivity and universality of security studies. Within academia, this bias manifests through the dominance of traditional paradigms like realism, which frequently overshadow alternative perspectives such as constructivism, feminism, or post-colonialism. Such intellectual hierarchies limit theoretical innovation and restrict the analytical depth of national security research.

This narrowed focus is not merely an academic concern; it also serves political ends. By framing particular issues as existential threats, states can legitimize contentious domestic or foreign policies. While potentially effective in rallying public support, this securitization process risks undermining democratic values, silencing dissent, and elevating state-centric agendas above broader human security considerations. Ultimately, these dynamics challenge the credibility and effectiveness of national security studies.

To meet the complexities of today's interconnected security landscape, the field must move beyond entrenched biases and embrace a more pluralistic, critically engaged approach. Incorporating diverse voices and expanding the range of recognized threats will not only strengthen theoretical rigor but also enhance the practical relevance of security strategies in the 21st century.

Broadly, the concept of national security encompasses the protection of a state’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability. It requires addressing threats from a range of sources, including military, economic, and environmental challenges, while safeguarding the well-being of its citizens. National security is a comprehensive approach that integrates diplomatic, military, and social strategies to maintain peace and stability within and beyond a nation’s borders. The increasing dominance of the nation-state as the central actor in the international system brought about a security framework that prioritized national interests, thereby influencing the development of global political structures.

To understand the core of national security, it’s necessary to understand its appliers ‘nature. The world comprises geopolitical entities which are human system entities with geopolitical interests. These interests stem from the competitive instinct. A human with a geopolitical interest, within a particular geopolitical entity, has an ambition to be superior to the other and every human belongs politically to one of the geopolitical entities and, in the nationality scenario, may associate with more than one of them. Every human belongs to

multiple human systems which at the highest level is the geopolitical entity which the individual is identified with—the nation.[25]

Nation is a human system within a specific geopolitical entity. It is not a definition, just reflects the fact that a nation is a product of the human system of governance. This helps us depict better the human systems, and to get "nation" a foothold as a primary governance of the human system. A nation can be defined as a group of people or a community within -generally-a specific territory with a particular apparatus of affiliation and commonality - language, history, belief or ethnicity. But also, there can be more than one nation under one governmental form. So, a nation is not the largest human system in terms of the governance, or a nation can suffer from the lack of the territory although its people have common features such as language, history, institution or religion etc. It does not necessarily mean that a society must own land in order to qualify as a nation, it's enough to have commonality and geo-property rights that are governed or governable.

A nation, whether it has its own sovereign/non-sovereign territory or not, exists not only through common belonging but also through governance. This identifies with the essence of power inherent in human nature. This is where the saying "where there are two people, there is power" comes from. That is, the ruler and the ruled. The issue in governance by national security is human well-being by governance. How does one get to it? Simple, the characters should get out of the plot when governing and also critically tune in governing. The crux of the concept of national security lies in this statement. And interestingly every player in the show has a part in governance.[26]

The central tenet of national security is traditionally considered to secure the lives of individuals although it has wider applications involving modern human systems. Although the broadest meaning is the well-being of people of a geopolitical society, the concept is not limited and easily described as we consider it because the definition of national security has evolved according to the course of history and how actors perceive national security. One of the common threads of traditional and modern national security studies is to minimize the insecurity of individuals living in a given geopolitical entity. The ultimate goal of any government is to secure the needs of its people, and the most important need is life security for the people. In fact, prioritizing the security of life is not only a matter for citizens, but also the crucial factor through which governments gain legitimacy. Providing safety of its citizens from internal and external threats is the most important stage through which a government, whether or not it is externally sovereign or not, establishes itself to its citizens and ensures its internal sovereignty. In other words, security of life is a priority for both citizens and administrators.

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[25] Prabhakaran Paleri , Revisiting National Security: Prospecting Governance for Human Well-Being, Rashtriya Raksha University, 2022, Springer, p.18.

[26] Prabhakaran Paleri , Revisiting National Security: Prospecting Governance for Human Well-Being, Rashtriya Raksha University, 2022, Springer, p.52.

However, when we look at the historical cycle, we observe national security as guaranteeing the interests of the central instrument, that is, the community with a geopolitical identity. The national security definition of "national security" entails a set of assumptions regarding how political communities protect their interests and guard against potential threats. While the nation-state remains central to discussions of national security, there is often a tendency to regard it as an outdated or overly narrow field. Critics argue that this perspective can stifle more nuanced debate, as national security is not solely the realm of realpolitik or traditional notions of national interest. Instead, it is vital to understand national security as a critical intersection of contemporary socio-political issues, particularly the role of the state in promoting and safeguarding national values.

Despite a prevalent focus on traditional national security issues, there have been significant scholars examining various national security policies across democratic nations, especially in the transatlantic and Asian contexts. However, there remains a surprising lack of comparative analysis of national security policies. This gap is notable given the changing threat landscape, which increasingly includes transnational, environmental, and domestic challenges. Understanding how different states conceptualize and prioritize these threats is crucial but largely overlooked in mainstream security studies.

It is better to address contemporary national security by considering the evolving roles of multiple actors and the persistent influences of traditional concepts. As national security policies adapt to include a broader range of issues—such as non-traditional security threats and the role of various actors—the fundamental aim of policymaking remains largely aligned with conventional ideas about national interest.

The exploration of national security as both a descriptive and normative pursuit involves examining how public policies are shaped by societal resources and internal preferences. An integrated approach that acknowledges both external pressures and domestic dynamics, as suggested by Melvyn Leffler,[27] provides a holistic view of national security behavior. This study seeks to interrogate the complex theories, actors, and issues that define national security today, addressing a series of core analytical themes and encouraging a critical reassessment of its implications and methodologies.

2.1 Conceptual Evolution of National Security

Considering the evolution of national security, the concept of security has been broadly understood as the creation of a "problem-free" environment. This notion emphasizes that human beings strive to eliminate threats to ensure the continued existence of what they deem valuable in a smooth and unimpeded manner. Over time, the objects of human valuation evolve, and consequently, so do their associated security concerns. According to this perspective, national security represents the collective concern of a nation's citizens to safeguard its existence in a manner free from disruption. This concern emerged during a

[27] Leffler, M. P. (1992). *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*. Stanford University Press.

historical period in which individuals began to attribute significant value to the nation, coinciding with the transition from the medieval era to the early modern period.

Ideological and political developments have played a crucial role in both this historical transformation and the emergence of national security as a concept. Rooted in the development of the nation-state—an evolution traceable to the 16th century—the concern for national security gained global prominence following the Second World War. Buzan elucidates the strong correlation between national security and the modern state system, asserting that "the concept of national security as it took form after the Second World War draws upon a conception of the state that reaches back hundreds of years."[28] Political theorists such as R. B. J. Walker has identified two key historical transformations that fundamentally shaped the modern state. The first was the shift from a medieval system of overlapping authorities to a modern territorial state system, while the second involved the transition from monarchical governance to a national, popular form of government. Unlike the medieval system—where governance was characterized by overlapping religious (churches) and political (empires) authorities—the modern state asserts supreme sovereignty over its territory. In contrast, medieval authorities had to continuously negotiate and, at times, engage in conflict over competing claims regarding territorial governance. From this perspective, the central authorities were relatively weak between the 6-15th centuries, and the security phenomenon was based on the territories which they committed to. It didn't apply just for the national perception, but also political power was shared among the feudal lords.

Europe was governed by empires, and the centre of the empire was often too far away to project its authority effectively, at least compared to the modern state.[29] The process of transformation began from the empires including power-sharing Pope (religious) and emperor (political) towards contemporary independent nations as the political rulers of the empires became more secular. Europe's pre-modern political order was dominated by sprawling empires, but these empires lacked the centralized reach of a modern state**.** The imperial core was often too distant to project authority effectively into borderlands or over powerful local nobles. In medieval Europe, kings and emperors had to "share" political authority with feudal lords who controlled their own territories, fragmenting power and leaving the continent without any single strong sovereign. Even attempts to impose unity, such as the Holy Roman Empire, resulted in a patchwork of semi-autonomous principalities – a condition aggravated by religious divides. (After the 1555 Peace of Augsburg formally split the empire into Catholic and Lutheran realms, the spread of Protestantism beyond agreed boundaries. Compounding these centrifugal forces was the rivalry between sacred and secular powers. For centuries, the Pope and the Emperor stood as twin pillars of legitimate authority in Europe, operating in a tense power-sharing arrangement. The papacy claimed spiritual supremacy over Christendom and often clashed with imperial ambitions; indeed, the 11th-century Investiture Controversy between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV was the greatest conflict between secular and religious powers in medieval Europe. This constant

[28] People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations, Barry Buzan, 1983.
[29] Barry Buzan and Lene Hanse, The Evolution of International Security Studies, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 22-23.

push-and-pull meant that imperial rulers could not wield absolute power, especially in regions far from the imperial center or when challenged by the Church's influence.

Over time, this medieval order gave way to a more secular and centralized state system. Political rulers gradually became more secular in their authority and consolidated control at the expense of the Church's influence. By the 15th and 16th centuries, with the rise of the Renaissance and the Reformation, the papacy's temporal power waned as strong centralized kingdoms – regarded as the "ancestors of the modern state" – emerged on the European stage. In other words, the balance tipped in favor of kings and emperors: the Pope's role became increasingly confined to spiritual matters while secular monarchs built up bureaucracies and standing armies. 1648's Peace of Westphalia is often cited as a turning point, cementing the concept of sovereign states no longer subject to supranational religious authority. In the long run, this secular transformation culminated in the dissolution of the old empires and the rise of independent nations. The Holy Roman Empire itself was eventually dissolved in the 19th century, and by the early 20th century the multi-ethnic empires that once dominated Europe – for example, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires – had collapsed. In their wake, dozens of nation-states emerged each asserting its independence. Thus, the European political order transformed from a patchwork of distant imperial domains and divided authority (between emperor and pope) into a system of contemporary sovereign nation-states defined by secular, centralized governance.

The modern understanding of national security finds its roots in the Westphalian system (1648), -established the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference-signed in 1648, ended the Thirty Years' War, which is the conclusion of the sectarian conflicts in Holy Roman Empire and is often credited with establishing the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. In its earliest form, national security was largely equated with the protection of territorial integrity from external military threats. During this era, military power and diplomatic influence were the primary tools used by states to ensure their survival. This treaty marked a shift in how states interacted with one another, emphasizing the importance of territorial integrity and the autonomy of states by granting the right of self-determination and sovereignty, territorial state concept, has crucial role in the emerge of today's modern nation-state system and in loosen of cosmopolitan empire structure, on the on hand. After this flare, the international system continued steadily to evolve towards nation-state organization. On the other hand, national security basically refers to the measures taken by a state to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the well-being of its citizens from external threats. The concept has evolved over time but fundamentally revolves around the idea that a state must ensure its own safety and stability. The connection between the two lies (the Peace of Westphalia and national security concept) in the emphasis on sovereignty. The Westphalian system laid the groundwork for modern nation-states, where each state is seen as the primary authority within its borders. This framework allows states to prioritize their national security without external interference, as they are recognized as sovereign entities. Inferatively, the Peace of Westphalia established the principles of state sovereignty that underpin the modern concept of national security, and it created a system where states could focus on their security needs while respecting the

sovereignty of others, shaping the way international relations and security policies are approached today.

National security has long stood at the core of state sovereignty and survival. However, the concept has not remained static; it has undergone significant transformation over time, particularly in response to global political shifts, theoretical developments in international relations, and the emergence of new and unconventional threats. What was once a narrowly defined military concern has evolved into a multidimensional concept encompassing political, economic, societal, environmental, cyber, and human dimensions.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, security continued to be framed in military terms. The two World Wars emphasized the existential dangers posed by state actors, reinforcing the realist conception that security was a zero-sum game centred on power and anarchy. In the early Cold War period, this framework intensified as nuclear weapons and ideological rivalry between the United States, and the Soviet Union turned national security into a global contest.

The study of *The Palgrave Handbook of National Security* discusses how major international relations theories—specifically realism, liberalism, and constructivism—can inform national security policy planners, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. Realism is emphasized as particularly relevant due to its focus on state behaviour, interests, and responses to threats. It views international relations as inherently competitive, where states aim for survival primarily through power accumulation. The lack of a systematic enforcement mechanism leads to a condition of anarchy; hence, conflicts, including war, are inevitable. Realists suggest that states operate on a self-help principle and often view ideology in national security policy as mere justification for actions, rather than guiding principles. They also highlight different dynamics under bipolar and multipolar systems, where power distribution affects state interactions. The theory offers insights into how smaller states navigate relationships with great powers, typically balancing, bandwagoning, hiding, or hedging.

In contrast, liberalism seeks to mitigate the consequences of anarchy through institutions, economic interdependence, and democratic governance. The liberalist view, which started to take effect in the second half of the 20th century, suggested that national/international organizations, individuals, NGO's, lobbies and elites have also a crucial effect on the decision-making process. This period caused Realism to lose its importance steadily. The Western block under the leadership of the USA which defeated Nazi Germany, created an order which considerably reflects their values and interests. The strategy was to encourage the other states to adopt fundamental Western values and interests in all successive administrations. In this context, some global organizations were established like NATO, OECD, IMF and World Bank. The highest motivation in shaping international rules was the containment policy against Soviet threat on the one hand, the global domination on the other. According to Hunter, if it weren't the strong US support and the security ensured by NATO which European countries enjoyed -especially Western ones-, it would not be possible to

constitute a security block in the heart of Europe and to begin a comprehensive integration process.

Constructivist theory rose to prominence as a critique of realism to predict that it is possible a different international interaction as a production of socialisation rather than focusing on material and rational national interests. The collapse of the USSR and end of the Cold War were the consequences reinforcing this idea. In accordance with this, having arisen from a state's identity, the national interest is mutually constituted based on the socialisation experience, cultural and historical myths, and strategic culture of a state. It critiques the limitations of realism and liberalism by focusing on identity, norms, and socialization in IR. It argues that state policies, including national security approaches, are shaped by historical, cultural, and social influences rather than just material conditions. The constructivist perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of security phenomena, including non-traditional security issues and changing norms regarding behavior such as nuclear non-use. However, constructivism faces criticism for its subjective nature and the difficulty in measuring the influence of ideas on state behavior.

The Palgrave Handbook categorizes this expansion into several key domains. Economic security, which is globalization and financial interdependence, makes economies vulnerable to external shocks and cyber threats. It explains environmental security, mentioning how climate change, resource scarcity, and natural disasters began to be framed as security issues with cross-border implications and with the rise of information technologies- which gave rise to the cyber security concept- cyberattacks emerged as a central national security concern. Moreover, human security firstly introduced by the UNDP in the 1990s, this concept shifts the referent object of security from the state to the individual, emphasizing protection from poverty, disease, and violence. These developments reflect a paradigm shift from national security to comprehensive security, wherein states are not the only referents, and the sources of insecurity are not limited to other states. [30]

During the two world wars and the first 20 years afterwards, when the doctrine of realism was dominant, it would not be wrong to say that the subject and object of the concept of security was exclusively the state and its nation for which it was responsible. We observe that the main purpose of the state-based security concept and the studies it brings about is to guarantee the survival of states by developing military-strategic policies. The concept of security, which has not yet diversified and has a shallow understanding, has been subjected to use of armed forces. It was not predictable until the collapse of the Soviet Union that it was inevitable that security would be diversified as a discipline and that its subject or subject matter would be on a broader ground, as nations and the organizations responsible for them were constantly developing and exploring. The constant state of conflict and armament brought about by the world wars and the resulting (un)security environment dictated to all states how important the understanding of national interest and national security is and that it must be protected at all costs. With the line of realism, the idea was that the international

[30] The Palgrave Handbook of National Security, Edited by Michael Clarke · Adam Henschke Matthew Sussex · Tim Legrand, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

system is chaotic, and survival is only possible with your own power. This has served as a fuel that encourages states to arm themselves and increase their military power day by day. In addition, the idea was that peace, and security could only be achieved through deterrence and war readiness, and if a state's capacity to achieve this was insufficient, it should cooperate and ally with other states which have common threat perceptions.

A state's threat perception was clear and absolute during the war years. This would be nothing more than territorial. It was impossible to diversify security in those days by incorporating new ideas like cyber, energy, human, social, or cultural. In a world with more predictable intentions, it would be easy to forecast how a state's actions to increase its capacity would be viewed as a possible danger to another state regardless of its good faith. Whether due to the balance of power or the existence of a hegemonic power, security/insecurity in the international environment depended on states increasing their military capacity. Decision-makers were the only actors in the implementation of policies addressed to national security.

Realism has been subject to criticism throughout history, but we observe that during the years of non-war these criticisms have increased and the theories suggesting that security can be achieved in other ways have been taken more seriously. Although the world order, shaped by the victors of World War II, was based on specific liberal patterns such as internationalization, trans-identity globalization, and interdependency, there were criticisms that it was reflecting a ground in which powerful states could find an opportunity to defend their values and guarantee their economic and political supremacy. The materials used to export the liberal idea to the peripheral part of the world were realistic. Given factors such as the Vietnam War and Cuban crisis, which reflect the predisposition of powerful states to the use of force in the aftermath of two major world wars it is inferred that the warless situation was generated from the lack of capabilities rather than liberal idea's supremacy and the strongest period of the liberalism was the years of the no war. Despite being subject to strong criticism, the realist perspective, as the most convincing way to ensure national security, was still attractive against the world order based on liberal foundations. But the victorious states thought that guaranteeing national security, however difficult, was possible through the spread of liberal thought. It was a strategy that was possible to try, but also difficult. Indeed, the Western bloc, which would gradually suffer the negative consequences of it, would be geographically confined to Europe and North America, where a liberal zone of peace was certain, in which liberal regimes strengthened their domestic foundations and gained international experience in the late 18th century. This strongly derived from nearly 200-year absence of war between liberal governments, whether nearby or not. In accordance with this, when governments are compelled to choose which side to fight in an oncoming world war, liberal states tend to end up on the same side (Pacific Union), regardless of the complexities of the roads that get there.

Another strong claim of liberalism is the power of domestic groups in the decision-making process. Pursuant to this, non-state actors such as international companies, interest groups, lobbies, elites and individuals can shape state preferences. While war is the most negative factor undermining trade interdependencies, there is a dilemma here that has

only intensified since the US invasion of Iraq. While a state of war may adversely affect the business activities of powerful transnational corporations, it can also be a tool that serves them. In other words, support/non-support for war may even vary depending on the sector in which international companies, which are non-state actors, are located. As a matter of fact, during the invasion of Iraq, the statement of Alan Greenspan, the then US Federal Reserve Chairman, "Iraq war was largely about oil"[31] stands out as a data that reinforces this dilemma. Whether it serves the essence of liberal thought or not, the post-invasion oil activities of the American oil and energy giants like Hunt Oil, Sharon and Exxon Mobil Corporation in Northern Iraq were a factor that strengthened the theory that domestic interest groups shape state preferences. There is a deep debate about whether this claim of liberal thought has weakened after the invasion of Iraq.

The Cold War entrenched the state-centric, militarized security paradigm. As noted in *The Palgrave Handbook*, "the bipolarity of the Cold War institutionalized a rigid conception of national security, dominated by military logic" (Palgrave, 2024, p. 94). With the Cold War, again, national security was predominantly associated with the defense of a nation-state against external military threats. The role of conventional military power in ensuring national security did not lose its importance. Even if World War II was over, the endeavours of the states in developing military capacity continued by transforming into a different form. The idea of gathering all states which share common national threats, under the umbrella of a defense organization rose to prominence due to the heavy economic burden caused by the war. This idea was godsend for the European states which both paid the heaviest price in the war and had lack of the financial power to create a huge military budget. Whether it was to counter Soviet military development or to ensure regional cohesion and strategic partnership, the creation of NATO in 1949, a joint defense organization led by the United States, was the flare for the US-European diplomatic, military and economic partnership that continues to this day. But this partnership, while regional, was not intended to transcend the national security aims and concerns of the member states. The prevailing idea, still, was that strong military readiness and strategic deterrence were the best means to ensure a nation's sovereignty and security. The strategies addressed to ensure national security, however, were largely focused on countering the Soviet Union's military capabilities, often leading to arms races and extensive military alliances. The race to build up arms and military capacity was no longer driven by war, but by security concerns arising from ideological differences in the bipolar world. Consistent with this, the Cold War world order established by The Soviet Union-led Eastern bloc and the United States-led Western bloc, was not only driven by the persistent armament race but also there was a desire of transformation on the national security perception, led by two catastrophic wars, by associating with some instruments like economics, individual rights or non-state institutions not only with military apparatus. Similarly, the combination of military and nonmilitary statecraft strategies have been interesting and plenty of academic attempts were carried out to analyse the possible exchange of nonmilitary national goals such as economics, science and technology, government, protection of energy, food and natural resources even if the Cold War was overwhelmingly

[31] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/sep/16/iraq.iraqtimeline

about military (conventional and nuclear) capabilities. The second half of the Cold War was a period when the discussions spread about whether to expand national security beyond the military sector and use of force.

With the advent of nuclear weapons, one of the main areas of attention was the strategic conundrums brought up by the development of them. The security dilemma was based on a terrible and devastating war with possible retaliation from nuclear proliferation or turning these weapons into an effective policy tool as a deterrent power. According to an assumption relied upon that all governments behave rationally, a country's nuclear capabilities could be organized in such a way as to dissuade other actors from engaging in a nuclear exchange, and vice versa.[32] Also reflecting the preoccupation of national security scholars of the day with nuclear weapons, Henry Kissinger during the 1950s introduced the possibility of controlling and limiting nuclear war even after it had broken out, a line of thinking which proved both influential and highly contestable over subsequent decades.[33]

Argued that neoliberal institutions created during this period were to promote cooperation and reduce conflict. Liberals suggested that intertwining economies and trade are kind of instruments strengthening peace. As the democratic peace theory emphasizes that democracies are less likely to engage in conflicts with one another due to shared values around law and governance. It was assumed that the interdependency brought with internationalization mitigates the conflict and aggression. Envisioned that it would be easier for states to continuously develop trade relations than to continuously arm themselves and develop their military capacities. International organizations, rule-based systems and liberal policies would soften the chaotic environment and anarchy of the international system, and it would be easier to adopt Kant and Locke than Hobbes. The allure of realism would eventually fade, and liberal ideals would assert their dominance despite strong opposition from communism, Arab nationalism/socialism, and non-aligned movements in the other parts of the world.

By the mid-1960s, however, the golden age of national security studies was coming to an end. Two events contributed to its downfall. The first of these was the intensification of the Vietnam War. The relevance and applicability of theories created during the golden age were questioned due to obstacles faced by the US, particularly during the Vietnam War. According to Joseph Nye and Sean Lynn-Jones, attempts to apply deterrence theory to the Vietnam War highlighted disciplinary flaws. In the relatively radical political atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as the rise of strong anti-war sentiment in the United States, the study of national security issues became unfashionable. National security studies, particularly those focused on nuclear issues, became less relevant as tensions between the US and the Soviet Union eased. Although the decline in interest in national security studies is associated with the increasing influence of the norms of global interdependence brought about by liberal thought, the damage to the international image of the United States caused by its military

[32] Glenn Snyder, Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

[33] The Evolution of National Security Studies, Brendan Taylor, National Security College Occasional Paper, No:3, April 2002, p. 6.

failure in Vietnam also played a major role. The US concessions in the Cuban Crisis that immediately followed are another factor that reinforces this idea. Taking into account, in fact, all the equations within the whole framework, international non-conflict cannot be considered a triumph of liberal thought alone. In other words, would the United States, which had come out of the Vietnam War successfully with the full support of its own public opinion and the liberal world and had reasserted its military superiority to the whole world, have made the concessions it made in the Cuban Crisis? Or, despite all the positive reputations of a successful Vietnam War, would it have abandoned the use of force and reached an agreement with the Soviets through diplomatic channels within the axis of liberal norms? While all these questions remain unclear, one thing we can be sure of is that the future of national security studies were determined by the unsuccessful policies based on a realistic view made by the US to protect its national security during that time.

The period of détente between the US and the Soviet Union, which coincided with the post-1970s, was a time when the concept of national security and its military aspect was weakened and different challenges of security -especially economic- rose to prominence. The military and diplomatic attrition seen in both blocs after hot conflicts such as the Korean and Vietnam wars - the Cuban Crisis, which can be counted as a hot conflict because of extensive escalatory steps, although it did not witness the use of force, - led to the rapid start of the Detente Period. The Helsinki Conference held in 1975 which is deemed as the sign of this period by being home to 35 countries from NATO and Warsaw pact, foreshadows end of the Cold War. Interestingly, this period should not just be deemed as the softening and disarmament process, moreover, it was thought that the establishment of a whole Pan-European security structure called laying from Ural Mountains to Atlantic Ocean, involving the USSR. Coherently, there are many collaborations on security, economic and military between two pacts. The successor developments following the Helsinki Conference were some escalate-reducer steps. Some of them were the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) based on the elimination and hall of nuclear weapons production and the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) addressed to reduction of five fundamental conventional forces on the conflict field. These were significant reconciliation steps carried out by both parties compared with rivalry between them during the Cold War. This environment of non-conflict was convenient for the transformation of national security concepts including other aspects other than military and use of force.

The end of the Cold War marked a significant shift in the national security paradigm. Scholars such as Joseph Nye introduced the concept of "soft power," emphasizing the role of diplomacy, culture, and economic influence in achieving security. The rise of globalization further complicated traditional notions of security, leading to the inclusion of non-state actors and transnational threats, such as terrorism and cyber warfare. With the breakdown of the bipolar ideological structure after the Cold War, the ideological approach to national security was abandoned and national security was redefined by many institutions and organizations, especially the United Nations (UN). The new national security approach, which emphasizes more economic and liberal values, has the appearance of human-centred security.

Today, national security faces new challenges, including climate change, pandemics, and technological advancements. Scholars are increasingly focusing on interdisciplinary approaches that combine insights from political science, economics, and environmental studies. The work of scholars has been instrumental in expanding the security agenda to include societal and environmental security that reflects the changing dynamics of global politics and the complexities of contemporary threats. As scholarship continues to evolve, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that considers both state and human security. Future research should focus on integrating diverse perspectives to address the multifaceted nature of security in an interconnected world.

Although the "National Security Act"[34], in which the concept of national security was first articulated, initially aimed to protect American national interests and ensure institutional coordination in this regard, during the Cold War years, "national security" turned into an ideology and was redefined to go beyond merely protecting the borders of American allies against the threat of communism and to meet any challenge to Western values. Academically, study of national security had its beginnings in the 1940s, The Second World War had a catalytic impact in this respect.[35] Especially, during the postwar/Cold War period, the aim of ensuring the security of the nation, which has already existed since the Westphalian order, has found a ground under the concept of national security, and has become a discipline studied ever-increasing in the literature. Even if the political conditions of war/first half of postwar years were convenient, because of the lack of the academical ground, it could not be defined as national security, even if we see political steps that overlap with national security. Ontologically, the existence of a concept is possible through the existence of its opposite. As the opposite of national security, an environment of insecurity that threatens national security must have existed and the perception of the nation must already have come to the fore.

William T.R. Fox wrote in his survey of early work in this field during the mid-1950s, "it was to be expected that fifteen years of world war and postwar tension, with problems of national security continually at the centre of public and governmental interest, would shape the research activities of social scientists generally."[36] According to David Baldwin, these early years as 'the most exciting and creative period in the entire history of security studies', pointing to the establishment of new graduate schools and research centres focusing on national security at leading academic institutions in the US, as well as the initiation of professional journals with a national security focus— such as International Organization and World Politics—which would go on to become prestigious and highly influential in their own right.[37]Although the emergence of national security as a concept and discipline in the USA can be attributed to various reasons, such a concept could not have been expected to be born or studied in the Soviet Union, which was maintaining its multinational structure during that

[34] http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/cwr/17603.htm, 1947, 10.09.2009.
[35] The Evolution of National Security Studies, Brendon Taylor, National Security College Occasional Paper No 3 April 2012, p.2.
[36] William T.R. Fox, 'Civil-Military Relations Research: The SSRC Committee and Its Research Survey', vol.6, no.2, January 1954, p.279.
[37] Baldwin, 'Security Studies and the End of the Cold War', p.121.

time. In fact, we observed the vital consequences of this concept for the USSR in the late 20th century.

But just as the national security environment can seem hopelessly complex, the nature of national security offers some clarity over a second fundamental criterion for a good working definition: what security is referring to. Because national security is tied to protecting the nation—specifically the nation-state—the main actor in defining national security is fairly clear-cut. States have international legal personality, they have physical borders, are centres for economic activity, and have a sovereign centralised authority that makes policy and controls the means of organised violence (the capacity to make laws and fight wars with other states).[38]

Elites, lobbies and interest groups within societies also can be involved in national security agenda. This makes the concept of national security more complex because of having many subjects. So, one major risk is that national security ends up serving as a de facto holding yard for everything that could undermine a state's institutions, integrity, or citizens due to the wide range of issues that states must deal with as possible threats, on the one hand. On the other hand, have always been dealt with in a relative and highly ambiguous manner, and what is actually perceived as a threat has varied according to the subject at the centre of the values to be protected.[39]For instance, the studies of national security at the time of the New Deal, which was a range of formulas comprising economic, financial and public regulation carried out by President Roosevelt during the Great Depression, referred to different means contrary to today. In other words, the two biggest risks to national security are to be waxy and comprehensive. Thus, national security is a concept that tends to be politicized or ideologized. So much so that we can see the concept of national security as a veil in front of ideological, political, authoritarian and even violent practices or formal sovereign state campaigns. The perception of national security varies according to states' foreign policies, strategic positions, national interests and even the personal characteristics of their leaders. The scale of national threats faced by some states may be perceived as normal or abnormal compared to other countries. The measures taken to enhance national security against these threats also vary accordingly. While a strategic decision, such as joining an inter-governmental defense or military organization, can keep tensions stable, a military action, such as a preventive war, can increase tensions. A trade embargo or to reach an agreement through diplomatic channels by giving reciprocal concessions are other options but the use of them depends on how the parties perceive the national security threats they face. Therefore, the national security may serve the ambitious demands or aggressive aims of the state or a leader of a state as a cloak.

While defining national security, it is imperative that the coherent parameters be considered. One of them that feeds and keeps alive national security is national interest. The highest objective of a sovereign state is to protect its sovereignty and national interest. It

[38] The Palgrave Handbook of National Security, Michael Clarke · Adam Henschke Matthew Sussex · Tim Legrand, p. 25.
[39] Ulusal Güvenlik Kavramının Tarihsel ve Düşünsel Temelleri (Historical and Intellectual Foundations of the Concept of National Security) Fikret Birdişli, 2011, p. 152.

encompasses the goals and objectives a nation pursues in the international fora guiding foreign policy decisions by using some instruments such as diplomatic relationships, cultural values or economic prosperity. This is a subheading of national security which refers to the protection of a nation's borders, sovereignty and citizens from external threats, maintaining security and stability through some instruments such as military campaigns, defence measures, intelligence or law enforcement. While national security is a concept referring to a clearcut as national survival and preservation of sovereignty, the national interest refers to the goals and strategies guiding foreign policy decisions serving national security. So, national security means to protect against threats, national interest means to pursue goals and benefits for the nation. If we think that national security is a phenomenon which must be provided by a state and the national interest is a tool for reaching the national security goal, we will understand better how the connection of two concepts is and how they overlap rather than competition.

It is obvious that the national interest is included in the national security cluster from the current security studies literature. So, these two concepts are not contradictory. But it would not be wrong to say that different interests, distinctive from national ones such as economics, can be at odds with the national interest or with the national security cluster in which the national interest is embedded. According to Arnold Wolfers, today national security presents such a critical point that it would not be wrong to say that national interest prevailed over economic interests. Wolfers continues to explain the cohesion of the national interest and national security formula by mentioning "today we are living under the impact of the Cold War and threats of external aggression rather than of depression and social reform. As a result, the formula of the national interest has come to be practically synonymous with the formula of national security."[40] From this discourse we can infer the fact that the national interest can compete with, contradict or even undermine the economic interest. A sovereign state may implement policies that, while beneficial to its national interests, may also be detrimental to its economic interests. For instance, the BREXIT offers the UK opportunities for greater independence by giving a sovereignty on the control of laws and regulations and it make UK more self-determinant in the decision-making process on the one hand, UK faces some problems on trade and free movement of goods such as new tariffs and regulations increasing costs for UK businesses trading with the EU, and it directly affect export data on the other. Additional factors, such as a labour shortage and restricted market access, could be added to this list of BREXIT profit-loss factors. On the plus side, there would be separate immigration laws, independent financial regulators, and a focus on desired markets. BREXIT has thus served as a national security instrument paralleled with the national interest formula by giving the UK the right to autonomously regulate its immigration policies. In economic and financial terms at least, the BREXIT is at odds with the UK's economic interests, at least in terms of negative factors such as restrictions on market access and new tariffs in movement of goods. It should be added that the UK's financial profit-loss index for BREXIT is a very controversial issue. According to some scholars, the UK economically became more

[40] Arnold Wolfers, "National Security" as an Ambiguous Symbol, Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 67, No. 4. (Dec., 1952), p. 482.

self-sufficient by leaving the European Union, while the others are totally opposed to this idea. The fluctuant economic situation of the EU over time has created this debate. But the result of this debate remains unclear as to how the UK's foreign policy will evolve. Here the main aim is to understand that some decisions which are taken by a sovereign state, can hinder its economic development even if it fosters national security or it can undermine national security while promoting its economic benefits. In addition, the failure in economic policies can be compensated for at little cost. But the same thing does not apply for the failure in security policies. So, national security policies must be handled elaborately by the statesmen. The situation of economic policies undermining national security, thereby, is a rare case in the international fora. The means, policies, strategies and the foreign policies of the states are more likely to be shaped with their ultimate national security goals.

Today, national security is being sought as an accumulation of coercive or deterring power because of the widespread of the external aggression. States are endeavouring to maximize their security by developing their military capabilities. Doing so may be considered also as escalatory steps by unreconciled states, even if this is perceived as the easiest way for the governments to prove themselves that they guarantee security of the citizens. This is called a security dilemma, presenting a kind of loop that the state fostering its coercive power with the military means for its national security may be perceived as a threat by the other state. According to some, in practice, accumulation of power is not always the forerunner of aggression. There are some ways to convince the state which might feel disturbed. Bilateral agreements, allyship in a defence or military organization, mutual economic interests, partnership in developing common military projects are some of them. But according to Jeremy Bentham, the measures of mere self-defence are naturally taken for projects of aggression.[41] So, to convince the disturbed state is not possible and it naturally continues to develop its coercive power as a reprisal.

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, represented a major rupture in the conceptualization of national security. Non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations, demonstrated the ability to inflict mass destruction and destabilize great powers. The U.S. and its allies responded by reshaping their security doctrines to include homeland security, counterterrorism, and pre-emptive defense strategies. In an instant, the primary security concern for the United States and many allies expanded from traditional state-based threats to the asymmetric threat of global terrorism. The 9/11 events – carried out by non-state actors on U.S. soil – exposed vulnerabilities that reshaped doctrines, spurred new security institutions, and prompted a re-evaluation of both domestic and foreign policies. The impact of 9/11 transformed U.S.'s national security strategy (including the rise of homeland security, a new counterterrorism focus, and the doctrine of pre-emptive defense), the broader shift from state-centric security to encompassing non-state threats.

The 9/11 attacks profoundly altered U.S. national security doctrine. Almost immediately, protecting the American homeland from further terrorist attacks became the top priority of the

[41] Arnold Wolfers, "National Security" as an Ambiguous Symbol, Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 67, No. 4. (Dec., 1952), p. 485.

government. Within days of 9/11, President George W. Bush created the Office of Homeland Security, and by November 2002 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established as a Cabinet-level agency to consolidate 22 federal departments and agencies and coordinate a unified homeland defense. This was a historic reorganization: *"the changing nature of the threats facing America requires a new government structure to protect against invisible enemies"*, as the White House explained, merging everything from border control to disaster response under DHS The first *National Strategy for Homeland Security* in 2002 declared that the U.S. government has *"no more important mission"* than securing the homeland from terrorism.[42] In short, 9/11 catalyzed the emergence of homeland security as a central component of national security, erasing the old separation between external defence and domestic security. Law enforcement, intelligence, and emergency management were integrated into national security planning to an unprecedented degree.

At the same time, the United States aggressively expanded its counterterrorism strategy abroad. The Bush Administration launched a global "War on Terror," beginning with military operations against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan in October 2001. U.S. intelligence and military agencies underwent a fundamental shift "from gathering to hunting" terrorism suspects. The CIA's mission transformed after 9/11, reflecting a new *"determination to 'disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations of global reach'"* as enshrined in the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy.[43] Counterterrorism became a "kinetic" priority, meaning the use of direct military and paramilitary action to eliminate terrorist networks. This represented a sea change from prior decades: resources and attention shifted from conventional state adversaries to amorphous non-state networks. U.S. surveillance and intelligence efforts likewise pivoted to focus on uncovering terrorist plots; finding "needles in haystacks" – identifying terrorists hidden within civilian populations – became an overarching intelligence challenge new tools, such as armed drones for targeted strikes, were rapidly developed and deployed to reach terrorists in remote havens, reflecting the urgency of the counterterrorism mission. In sum, the post-9/11 U.S. strategy placed *counterterrorism at the core of national security*, bringing together military force, intelligence, law enforcement, and diplomacy in a concerted effort to prevent another catastrophic attack.

Perhaps the most doctrinally significant change in U.S. security strategy was the embrace of pre-emptive defence. In September 2002, the Bush Administration released the *National Security Strategy of 2002*, a landmark document articulating what became known as the "Bush Doctrine." This strategy explicitly asserted that the United States would act pre-emptively against emerging threats – specifically terrorist groups and rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction – before they could strike. "The United States was prepared to act pre-emptively to counter threats from terrorists and rogue states even if the time and place of an attack remained uncertain," the document stated. This went beyond traditional notions of pre-emption (which require an imminent threat) to a broader concept of preventive war. As analysts O'Hanlon and Rice explained at the time, the new U.S. strategy "broadens the meaning [of pre-emption] to encompass preventive war… in which force may be used

[42] dhs.govdhs.gov.
[43] cfr.org

even without evidence of an imminent attack to ensure that a serious threat… does not 'gather' or grow over time." The rationale for this dramatic shift was directly tied to 9/11: the attacks demonstrated that waiting for threats to fully materialize could be fatal, given terrorists' ability to strike without warning. The Bush Administration argued that anticipatory self-defence was necessary in an age of terror networks and potential WMD proliferation. This doctrine of pre-emption underpinned the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, justified largely by the (ultimately flawed) assessment that Iraq's regime might equip terrorists with weapons of mass destruction. While controversial at home and abroad, the 2002 pre-emption doctrine undeniably marked a new approach to national security – one that prioritized offensive, forward-reaching action to neutralize threats at their source.[44]

The immediate U.S. response to 9/11 was multifaceted: a sweeping overhaul of domestic security (creating DHS and a homeland security enterprise), an aggressive global counterterror campaign, and a doctrinal shift toward pre-emptive use of force against shadowy threats. National security was no longer confined to deterring hostile nations; it now meant preventing attacks by non-state actors using all instruments of power – military, intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic, and economic.[45] This comprehensive approach was encapsulated in President Bush's description of the fight against terror as a global war of uncertain duration requiring use of every tool in our arsenal – military power, better homeland defences, law enforcement, intelligence, and vigorous effort to cut off terrorist financing.[46] The 9/11 attacks had, in effect, re-written the U.S. national security doctrine for the 21st century.

Beyond specific policies, 9/11 triggered a conceptual expansion of what national security entails. Traditional national security thinking was largely state-centric – for most of the 20th century, it meant protecting the nation from foreign state aggression, invasion, or nuclear attack. As one analysis notes, for decades U.S. security policy focused almost exclusively on protecting against nation-state attack, especially during the Cold War when Soviet military power was the prime concern.[47] Non-military issues and non-state actors were generally secondary in high-level security strategy. The 9/11 attacks shattered this paradigm by demonstrating that non-state networks could inflict massive harm on the homeland, exploiting global flows of people and information to strike from within. The result was that national security was redefined to include threats that transcend traditional battlefield defence.

In the words of Harvard security scholar Juliette Kayyem, "9/11 showed us that national security wasn't just something 'over there' [outside the U.S.]; the government had to take its homeland defences seriously."[48] Put differently, Americans realized that guarding against

[44] The New National Security Strategy and Pre-emption, James B. Steinberg, Michael E. O'Hanlon, and Susan E. Rice, December 21, 2002.
[45] National Strategy for Homeland Security, Office of Homeland Security, July 2002.
[46] The New National Security Strategy and Pre-emption, James B. Steinberg, Michael E. O'Hanlon, and Susan E. Rice, December 21, 2002.
[47] Homeland Security Twenty Years After 9/11: Addressing Evolving Threats, Eric M. Swalwell, R. Kyle Alagood, Harvard Journal on Legislation.
[48] 15 years after 9/11, How Has National Security Changed? Katie Gibson, June 01, 2017.

threats now meant protecting domestic cities and civilians as much as positioning armies and fleets abroad. This represents a shift from an externally focused security model to one that also looks *inward* at internal vulnerabilities. Critical infrastructure protection, aviation and border security, and emergency preparedness for terrorist incidents all became vital elements of national security after 2001. The very term "homeland security" entered common usage to denote this inward-looking aspect of keeping the nation safe.

Moreover, the threat spectrum that national security must address greatly broadened. No longer could defence planners fixate only on rival states' armies or missiles; they now had to worry about asymmetric threats – terrorists with box cutters or truck bombs, extremist cells recruiting via the internet, or lone actors radicalized at home. The 9/11 Commission Report later observed that the attacks shook the foundation of democratic government by exposing how a handful of operatives could outmanoeuvre a complacent security apparatus. In response, U.S. security agencies and allies adapted to combat a much more amorphous terrorist network threat environment. Surveillance targets shifted from traditional state threats and their militaries, requiring new methods to find an enemy that has many places to hide, and is often invisible. The concept of deterrence – so central in state-to-state security – proved inadequate against fanatical non-state groups that had no territory or population to defend. Instead, pre-emption, prevention, and resilience became the watchwords of security strategy. In the 18 months after 9/11 the U.S. overhauled [its] security apparatus to focus on counterterrorism and adapted to the new threat: non-state terrorism.[49] National security could no longer be confined to foreign policy and defence; it bled into domestic policy, intelligence-sharing, policing, border control, and even public health.

This broadened notion of security has been described by scholars as a "post-9/11 security paradigm" that the threats to a nation's security might originate in faraway failed states or shadowy transnational networks, blurring the line between external and internal security. Indeed, the U.S. and its allies came to recognize that their *"domestic security lies far beyond [their] own borders, in places such as Afghanistan."* [50] This reality drove initiatives to build international coalitions for counterterrorism and to assist weak states so they would not become terrorist havens. Security thinking thus expanded geographically (encompassing distant ungoverned regions) and functionally (involving many non-military tools). The U.S. National Security Strategy of 2002 itself declared a fight against "terrorists of global reach" (Wark, 2021) implying that security threats were now de-territorialized and globalized.

Another important aspect of the post-9/11 security mindset is the integration of homeland defence with traditional defence. The previously sharp divide between the military's external role and civilian agencies' internal role became much more porous. For example, the Pentagon created a new U.S. Northern Command in 2002 to coordinate defence of the North American homeland, reflecting the fact that the military would play a supporting role in

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[49] Homeland Security Twenty Years After 9/11: Addressing Evolving Threats, Eric M. Swalwell, R. Kyle Alagood, Harvard Journal on Legislation.

[50] Germany's Role in Fighting Terrorism: Implications for U.S. Policy, Francis T. Miko, Christian Froehlich, December 27, 2004.

domestic emergencies alongside civilian authorities. The FBI and CIA broke down information barriers via new fusion centres to prevent terrorists from exploiting gaps between foreign and domestic intelligence. [51] *"The distinction between 'domestic' and 'foreign' policy is unhelpful in a world where globalization can exacerbate domestic security challenges,"* observed the UK's 2008 National Security Strategy, emphasizing an integrated approach across traditional boundaries.[52] In short, the concept of national security after 9/11 became holistic: it encompassed external and internal measures, military hard power and diplomatic or developmental soft power, and a much wider array of potential threats (from suicide terrorism and WMD proliferation to cyber-attacks and even natural pandemics). This widened scope has persisted – for instance, by the 2010s U.S. security strategy also included dangers like cyber warfare and climate-driven crises, an acknowledgment that the post-9/11 broadening of security opened the door to considering many non-traditional threats as part of national security.

Academic and policy analysts have described the post-9/11 changes in security thinking as nothing short of transformative. Many scholars speak of 9/11 as a watershed moment, or paradigm shift in international security. For example, Kuniharu Kakihara's study on the "post-9/11 paradigm shift" notes how entrenched Cold War-era security paradigms "remained deeply entrenched… until September 11, 2001," when they were upended by the new reality of transnational terrorism. (Swalwell & Alagood, 2021) The attacks forced a rapid re-examination of core assumptions: institutions built to confront hostile states had to be repurposed to fight decentralized terror networks, and scholars sought to understand the implications for theories of deterrence, alliance-building, and the use of force. Security studies experts like Lawrence Freedman observed that after 9/11 the strategic landscape was defined less by great-power rivalry and more by the challenge of "releasing ourselves from the grip of catastrophic terrorism", requiring different strategies and metrics of success. Some even argued the fight against Islamist terrorism would be *"*more dangerous and prolonged than the Cold War*,"* as Australian strategist Paul Dibb relayed – indicating a view that 9/11 had inaugurated a generational global conflict of a new kind. (Dibb, 2000)

Scholars also analysed the policy innovations and trade-offs that emerged in this era. The Bush Doctrine of preventive war generated extensive debate in academic circles about its legality and strategic wisdom. The traditional norm of state sovereignty was being challenged by the doctrine of striking threats in ungoverned spaces before they materialize. Some researchers, like those at Brookings Institution, warned that elevating pre-emptive war in U.S. strategy could set a risky precedent, but also acknowledged the *"necessity to address potentially catastrophic threats before the country can be attacked,"* [53] given the lessons of 9/11.

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[51] National Strategy for Homeland Security, Office of Homeland Security, July 2022.
[52] The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom Security: In an Interdependent World, March 2008, p. 8.
[53] The New National Security Strategy and Pre-emption, James B. Steinberg, Michael E. O'Hanlon, and Susan E. Rice, 2002)

Another theme in scholarly interpretation is the securitization of domestic policy. Using the framework of the Copenhagen School of security studies, one can say that issues like airline travel, immigration, and even certain civil liberties were "securitized" – that is, they came to be framed as urgent security matters requiring extraordinary action. The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, which enhanced surveillance and law-enforcement powers, and the expansive domestic surveillance programs revealed later (e.g. by the Snowden leaks) have been critiqued by scholars who argue that post-9/11 America drifted toward an **"**ends justify the means" mentality under the banner of national security. At the same time, other analysts defended many of these measures as necessary adaptations: Harvard's Juliette Kayyem, for instance, notes that security has inevitably become part of our daily lives from stricter airport screenings to concrete barriers in cities – and the key is to balance risk reduction with preserving core values. This reflects an ongoing academic discussion about how democracies can respond to terror threats without undermining the very freedoms they seek to protect. (Gibson, 2017)

In the international arena, scholars observed that 9/11 produced a rare moment of global consensus on combating terrorism but also tensions over methods. Immediately after the attacks, NATO invoked Article 5 (collective defense) for the first time ever, symbolizing a shared recognition that terrorism had become a threat to international peace and security. Counterterrorism cooperation reached unprecedented levels – intelligence agencies worldwide built common databases, exchanged personnel, [and] conducted joint training in the effort to dismantle Al Qaeda. However, as the years passed, Europe and the U.S. differed on issues like the Iraq War and certain detention and interrogation practices. New concepts such as the status of unlawful enemy combatants detained at Guantánamo Bay, which fell into a legal grey zone beyond the Geneva Conventions. The long-term legacy of 9/11 on international norms is still discussed in academic literature – with questions about the balance between human rights and security, and how international law might evolve to address non-state threats. As one global security review two decades later put it, *"counterterrorism has become an accepted pretext for other, unrelated policies globally"*[54] implying that some governments have used the war on terror to justify crackdowns that extend beyond genuine terrorist threats, a trend carefully tracked by human rights scholars.

Overall, the academic consensus is that post-9/11 security thinking represents a fundamental shift – expanding both the means (pre-emptive war, homeland integration, surveillance) and the ends (from state survival to societal resilience) of national security policy. While opinions differ on the efficacy or ethics of particular measures, virtually all commentators agree that national security discourse since 2001 is on a markedly different footing than before. The concept of security is broader, less state-focused, and more fluid, forcing theorists and practitioners alike to adapt old models to a new reality.

[54] The Full Circle of Counterterrorism, Rohan Gunaratna, Global Memo by RSIS, PISM, CIGI, CFR, and SWP
Sep 01, 2021.

In sum, the conceptual evolution of national security is shaped by a complex interaction of historical transformations and theoretical reinterpretations. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) institutionalized the principle of state sovereignty, establishing the modern nation-state as the primary referent of security. This development laid the foundations for the realist conception of international politics, where anarchy, power struggles, and the pursuit of national interest define the security environment (Waltz, 1979). Within this framework, national security was primarily understood as the protection of territorial integrity and political sovereignty against external threats. Liberalism challenged this narrow focus by emphasizing the role of international institutions, democratic governance, and economic interdependence in reducing conflict and enhancing collective security. Meanwhile, constructivist scholars argued that security is not merely material but socially constructed, emphasizing the importance of identity, norms, and discourse in shaping what is considered a "threat" (Wendt, 1992).

These theoretical paradigms were further tested and redefined by global events. During the Cold War, the Western bloc—particularly the United States—conceptualized national security within a bipolar framework, prioritizing military deterrence, ideological containment, and alliance structures such as NATO (Gaddis, 2005). However, the September 11 attacks in 2001 represented a watershed moment in U.S. security thinking. The emergence of transnational terrorism and non-state threats led to a paradigm shift toward preventive war, homeland security, and global counterterrorism strategies (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). The traditional state-centric model was challenged by the need to address asymmetric threats and borderless risks. Ultimately, the evolving concept of national security reflects an ongoing negotiation between historical context, theoretical innovation, and emerging global realities. As such, it remains a dynamic and contested field—one that requires both critical inquiry and contextual sensitivity.

2.2 Constructing Iraq as a Nation

Mesopotamia (the geography of today's Iraq) has been referred to as the "cradle of civilization" throughout history. The main reason for this is the early development of agriculture thanks to the irrigation opportunities provided by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. By making the soil fertile through regular flooding, these two rivers made it possible for people to settle down and create surplus production. This surplus encouraged both the division of labor and the emergence of complex social structures (e.g. priestly class, military caste, artisans, peasants). Over time, this abundance of production and sedentary lifestyle required complex operations such as the organization of irrigation systems, storage and distribution of products, hence the need for an administrative structure, i.e. bureaucracy. The scribal institution that emerged in Mesopotamian city-states began to function in areas such as tax records, agricultural planning and labor regulation.

Likewise, surplus production also attracted the attention of external threats, which led to the need for the protection of property and the defense of cities. In response to this need, as Oral Sander notes, regular army organizations were established for the first time in the region.

These armies assumed functions not only of defense but also of offense against other city-states and tax collection. Thanks to the opportunities offered by the Tigris and Euphrates, both political organization and central authority emerged systematically for the first time in Mesopotamia. The security and distribution of surplus production necessitated an organized bureaucracy and army. (Sander, 2023) These developments, for the first time, lead to the institutionalization of the instrumental aspect of the state (power, authority, control). In other words, the state is no longer just a tribal chiefdom, but a structure that operates with written rules and is controlled by the ruling classes.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of national security is rooted in national identity. It is not possible to meaningfully speak of national security in a state where a shared national identity does not exist, as national security, at its core, aims to protect not only the territorial integrity of the state but also the continuity, values, and cohesion of the nation itself. In the absence of a foundational national identity, the very question of whose security is being protected becomes ambiguous. Threat perceptions are often constructed rather than objectively observed, and these constructions are deeply rooted in identity—a notion emphasized by constructivist scholars such as Alexander Wendt and Barry Buzan.[55] Without a unifying identity, citizens are unlikely to support national security policies; in fact, they may distrust or actively resist state security institutions. This identity vacuum leads to the fragmentation of loyalty within key institutions such as the military and civil service, which may align themselves with ethnic, sectarian, or regional affiliations rather than a cohesive national interest. Consequently, threat perception becomes fractured and national security strategies lose internal coherence. Empirical cases such as post-2003 Iraq, the collapse of central authority in Somalia, and the ethnic disintegration of Yugoslavia reveal how the absence of shared national identity weakens the very architecture of state security. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" suggests that nations are constructed through shared identity and narrative,[56] while Barry Buzan argues that security encompasses not just military dimensions, but also political and societal domains.[57] David Campbell further reinforces the point by demonstrating how security is constituted through the construction of danger in relation to identity.[58] Taken together, these theoretical perspectives illustrate that in the absence of a foundational national identity, national security becomes conceptually hollow and practically unsustainable. In the light of all these inputs, it's necessary to handle the emergence of Iraqi national identity in order to mention Iraqi national security.

The period when the Ottoman Empire started to experience power loss in Iraqi Mesopotamia, historically dates back to the 17th century. Contrary to feudal Europe, central authority for the empire was the sole factor for the sustainability. However, it is observed that

[55] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," International Organization 46, no. 2 (1992): p. 391–425.
[56] Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983).
[57] Barry Buzan, People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era, 2nd ed. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).
[58] David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Revised ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

the weakening of the central authority emerged by the Jalali Revolts in the region and it enabled the local tribes to obtain sovereignty. Regime changes were frequent in Baghdad and its environment although the central authority had significant efforts to obviate them with Hatti Sherif reforms. (Inalcik, 2009)

By the 20th century, it was inevitable for the Ottoman Empire to lose the Mesopotamia region as it entered the First World War, which caused it to fight on many fronts. As a matter of fact, with the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty - the process that led to the international recognition of the new republic and legally completed the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire -the Republic of Turkey was officially established within the present-day borders of it (which would later include Hatay), withdrawing from the borders of the Misak-ı Milli (National Pact), including Mosul and Kirkuk, and Turkish rule in Mesopotamia came to an end. (Meray, 1969)

2.2.1 National Identity Formation of Iraq

Having been an already occupied region, Iraq was granted a British mandate with the 1920 San Remo Conference. However, the mandate over Iraq was not taken for granted for the United Kingdom. With the rise of The Great Iraqi Revolution (al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra) -also frequently referred to as the 1920 Revolution (Thawrat al-'Ishrln), was actually a series of local, mostly Shi'ite, uprisings which occurred mainly in the Middle Euphrates, accompanied by minor events in the big cities, where some cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'ites was manifested- British rule over Iraq started to shake. The revolts were targeted against the British forces, and it lasted for four months, until the British quashed it. Since then, the 1920 Revolution has been established in the Iraqi collective memory as a war of independence and a formative event symbolizing the unity of the Iraqi people, their national solidarity and their patriotic spirit to fight any foreign occupier to preserve their freedom and national independence. The 1920 Revolution was the first time the Iraqis fought for their independence as one nation regardless of ethnic and sectarian differences. They were ready to undergo great sacrifices to achieve their goal, showing extreme heroism and winning their independence, despite the fact that they possessed inferior means, while the British forces possessed the most developed weaponry of the time.

The 1920 revolution, although unilaterally embraced by different ethnic groups and sects, can be considered an important factor in promoting national unity and reducing ethnic or sectarian tensions in that time. Likewise, there were a wide range of reasons, from the tribes' hopes for self-rule in their own regions to the desire to ensure the supremacy of a particular ethnic or sectarian group in governance. Indeed, although it seemed easy to recruit supporters given that the occupying power was a non-Muslim, the participation rate in the struggle was still low in Iraq. In the cities with significant Shiite populations like Najaf and Karbala, Islamic rule idea was prominent and Iraq in general had not yet embraced the idea of Arab nationalism although the establishment of first Arab association, 1914 Al-'Ahd (The Covenant) majorly consisting of Sunni Arabs who sought to establish an Arab state under the rule of Sharif Husayn of Mecca. Another organization aiming Arab rule over Iraq, Haras

al-'Istiqlal (The Independence Guard) was founded in Baghdad in March 1919 by few Sunni-Shiite supporters, helped create an anti-British atmosphere with a sort of demonstrations in the favour of establishing Arab government and cooperation both sects under an Arab flag. [59] It apparently seems that British occupation over Iraq triggered plenty of rebels against non-Muslim occupation and enabled a national unity idea with different groups using different tools in different regions but with the same aim.

Although the goal was the same for the elements of resistance against the British occupation, the narrative of the 1920 revolution to future generations differed in terms of sectarian and tribal affiliation and political ideology. The historiographical evolution and politicization of the 1920 Iraqi Revolution was used by different actors and regimes as an event to construct competing narratives of national identity, legitimacy, and resistance. One of the earliest accounts, *Ta'rikh al-Qadiyya al-'Iraqiyya* (1923) by Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir, a Shi'ite intellectual and Arab nationalist, presented the revolution as a foundational moment in Iraqi nationalism, stressing Sunni–Shi'ite unity and Iraq's central role in the broader Arab awakening. Al-Basir's narrative emphasized both the revolutionary contributions of Shi'ite clerics and tribes and the legitimacy of the Hashemite dynasty, attempting to bridge sectarian divides and promote pan-Arab identity. Similarly, *Ta'rikh Muqaddarat al-'Iraq al-Siyasiyya* (1925) by Muhammad Khayr al-Din al-'Umari, an Arab nationalist from Mosul, highlighted the role of urban Arab nationalists, particularly from Mosul, despite the marginal actual role the city played—reflecting regional pride and a top-down nationalist agenda. During the 1930s, the Iraqi monarchy institutionalized an Arab nationalist narrative in public education, utilizing textbooks like Darwish al-Miqdadi's *Ta'rikh al-'Umma al-'Arabiyya* (1932) to frame the 1920 Revolution as part of a pan-Arab anti-colonial struggle under the leadership of King Faysal, while marginalizing tribal and Shi'ite contributions and amplifying anti-British sentiment.

In contrast, a parallel Shi'ite and more locally grounded narrative emerged. Poets like Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri and historians such as 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani (in *al-Thawra al-'Iraqiyya al-Kubra*, 1953) depicted the revolution as a genuine Iraqi nationalist uprising, emphasizing Shi'ite sacrifices and criticizing their political marginalization under Sunni-dominated regimes. These accounts challenged the dominant Arabist narrative and advocated for equitable Shi'ite representation in the state. Notably, tribal leader Fariq Mizhir Al Fir'awn's 1952 work *al-Haqa'iq al-Nasi'a* presented the revolution as a Middle Euphrates-based tribal uprising led by Shi'ite clerics and tribes, excluding the Arab nationalist leadership of Baghdad and Mosul. His critique focused on the lack of official recognition and commemoration of Shi'ite and tribal sacrifices in state memory and education.

Arab nationalist 'Ali al-Bazirgan's 1954 publication *al-Waqa'i' al-Haqiqiyya* defended the centrality of Arab nationalist involvement and promoted the ideal of Sunni–Shi'ite unity

[59] History, Memory and Commemoration: The Iraqi Revolution of 1920 and the Process of Nation Building in Iraq, Eli Amarilyo, Middle Eastern Studies, 2015, p. 72-74.

under Arab identity. The monarchy's ambivalence toward the revolution was reflected in its inconsistent celebration of the 30 June Memorial Day, which was overshadowed by *'Id al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya* commemorating the Hashemites and Arab Awakening.

A significant shift occurred after the 1958 revolution led by 'Abd al-Karim Qasim. His republican regime redefined the 1920 Revolution through a socialist-nationalist lens, portraying it as a peasant uprising against imperialism and feudal landlords, in line with the new government's agrarian reforms and anti-Western rhetoric. The event was also recontextualized as a purely Iraqi nationalist struggle, downplaying its Arabist affiliations to reinforce Qasim's vision of Iraqi over pan-Arab identity. The revolution was thus repurposed as both a historical parallel and ideological justification for Qasim's regime and his anti-imperialist stance during the Cold War.[60]

Thus, the 1920 Iraqi Revolution has been subject to continuous reinterpretation—by Arab nationalists, Shi'ite historians, local tribal leaders, monarchists, and republicans—each framing it to serve contemporary political agendas. Its memory has oscillated between an inclusive national myth and a contested symbol of sectarian and ideological struggle, reflecting the fractured and politicized nature of Iraqi national identity.

A modern Iraqi state, constructed by the British out of the three Ottoman Vilayets of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, emerged in the 1919-23 period when a monarchy was established and frontiers were defined. Whereas the inclusion of Mosul in Iraq was formally confirmed only in 1925 by the Council of the Nations, by late 1923 the Baghdad government had already established the authority over the territory which ultimately motivated the League of Nations that Mosul was commercially and geographically part of Iraq.[61] The governmental approach of United Kingdom on Iraq particularly relied upon to consolidate the power by supporting hierarchical system of some strong groups or tribes instead of the distribution of the power in accordance with ethnic, religious and sectarian parameters The insistent uniter approach on these three vilayets, put forward by British forces, based on the competition of economic interests, oil reserves and the dominance on Suez Canal. However, this artificial frontier, decided in desk could not respond to merge the authority power in monocentre on the behalf of the British and the uniter idea which was presented regardless of the ethnic and religious differences, cost much to the British government.

While the vision of political organizations in the occupied territories was revealed as an inter-institutions problem among British offices, the economic and strategic interests of Mesopotamia and overseas territories were being questioned by British public opinion. Having been gradually alone in the region, the United Kingdom felt obliged to sit at the table with local elites because of the reasons like the peace agreements, carried out by newly published Turkish government and allied powers on the one hand, and the ideological and political evolution with the independence movements on the other. The correspondence

[60] History, Memory and Commemoration: The Iraqi Revolution of 1920 and the Process of Nation Building in Iraq, Eli Amarilyo, Middle Eastern Studies, 2015, p. 77-81.
[61] Creating Nations, Establishing States: Ethno-Religious Heterogeneity and the British Creation of Iraq in 1919-23, Guiditta Fontana, Middle Eastern Studies, 2010, p.1

between the High Commissioner in Cairo, Henry McMahon, and Sharif Hussein of Mecca had effectively promised independence to the Arabs whilst reaffirming British short-term control over Basra and Baghdad. The British endorsement of American President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Point Peace Programme, envisaging that 'nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an ... opportunity of autonomous development',[62] was reconfirmed by the Anglo-French Declaration of 8 November 1918 pledging to 'further and assist in the establishment of indigenous Governments and administrations in Syria and Mesopotamia. [63] After the war, the League of Nations Mandates system encouraged nations to gain independence under the supervision of a Mandatory Power, making such vows even more important. The notion of self-determination had become the touchstone for the post-war territorial organization: to maintain international peace, states were encouraged to gain independence and build representative and democratic governments.

The presence of many minorities and competing ethno-religious groupings hampered the creation of nation-states in the Middle East. In the occupied territory of Mesopotamia, there were significant Christian and Jewish communities in urban areas, while Shia Arabs, led by Mujtahids (religious leaders), made up the majority of the population in both Baghdad and Basra Vilayets. The Baghdad Vilayet had a sizable Sunni population, many of whom held positions of responsibility during Ottoman rule and were typically wary of Shiites. (Fontana, 2010). New elites, associated with individual ethno-religious groups, emerged during the war. In the north of the predominantly Sunni Kurdish district of Mosul, Shaikh Mahmud Barzani (hereafter Shaikh Mahmud or Mahmud), the self- appointed leader of an emerging Kurdish National movement was entrusted by the British with the maintenance of order while throughout the Arab world appeared a new Sunni Arab nationalist leadership, the Sharifians, associated with the family of Sharif Hussein of Mecca.[64]

The United Kingdom attempted to overcome the central authority problem caused by ethnic heterogeneity by providing a proxy, namely the crowning of an Arab King. Doing so, it was believed that local uprisings caused by the British occupation could be suppressed, stability could be achieved, and thus the British rule in Iraq could be extended. However, whether the right to self-determination is sustainable in terms of British interests in the region, and its role in igniting the fuse of independence in the future, has led to internal debates. These debates in London about the future of the region included not only the consequences of the right to self-determination, but also the status of the territories, the uncertainty of the borders, and whether a future state should be ethnically homogeneous. In his memoirs, Arnold T. Wilson, Civil Commissioner in Mesopotamia, highlights London's opinion . . . that the frontiers of the future . . . State should, as far as possible, be racial rather than economic or geographical'. (Wilson, Mesopotamia, p. 144.) The occupied territory would have to be partitioned between an Arab state in the former Baghdad and Basra Vilayets and

[62] H.W.V. Temperley, A History of the Peace Conference of Paris, Vol.VI (London: Henry Frowde and Hodder & Stoughton, 1924), p.24

[63] Quoted in A.T. Wilson, Mesopotamia 1917-1920, A Clash of Loyalties (London: Humphrey Milford,1931), p.102.

[64]Guiditta Fontana, Creating Nations, Establishing States: Ethno-Religious Heterogeneity and the British Creation of Iraq in 1919-23, Middle Eastern Studies Vol. 46, 2010, p.2.

an independent Southern Kurdish region in the north of the Mosul Vilayet. As economic pressure mounted, Winston S. Churchill, then War Secretary, echoing the British public's demands, went as far as suggesting British evacuation of Mosul and Baghdad where a Kurdish and a Sunni Arab state would be created, and the establishment of a British Protectorate over the predominantly Shia Basra Vilayet.[65] British officials in Baghdad, however, doubted that there was a widespread, genuine Kurdish nationalist movement. The calls for independence were driven more by the personal ambitions of Kurdish leaders than by mass Kurdish sentiment. According to British officials in Baghdad, the 1919 Kurdish rebellion, led by Shaikh Mahmoud, was seen as a failure, and this convinced British officials that the broader Kurdish population in the Mosul Vilayet was unenthusiastic or indifferent to independence. Along with unsuccessful Kurdish independence movements, the 1919 referendum indicated strong Arab support for including Mosul in Iraq, reinforcing British preference for maintaining the province within a unified Iraq. Wilson suggested that 'the grant of some form of autonomy to the Kurds of Kurdistan had better be left to our initiative and not laid down in the Peace Conference.[66] This implies Britain wanted flexibility and control, not a firm international obligation to create a Kurdish state. Moreover, concerns about disorder and Turkish influence led Wilson to believe that creating an independent Southern Kurdistan would destabilize the region, becoming an anarchic area.

The breakdown of British influence in the region would not only be the result of instability caused by the creation of a divided authority based on ethnic heterogeneity. There were concerns about whether the establishment of an administrative structure based on homogeneity would serve British interests. According to Wilson, an Arab state headed by an Arab king would result in a disproportionate concentration of power in the hands of the Sunni minority, by virtue of their superior educational and professional standards "I believe that the results would be the antithesis of a democratic Government".[67] To dampen the FO's enthusiasm for the creation of an Arab state headed by a member of Hussein's family, Wilson had promoted a referendum in the occupied territory in early 1919. Thereafter he was able to point out that, rather than commanding universal enthusiasm, the idea of an Arab Amir had scared the Jewish and Christian minorities into demanding British permanence.[68]

At the same time, some events drastically changed how British policymakers approached Iraq and they pushed Britain to shift from direct military occupation to a more politically palatable solution—installing a local monarch under British oversight, legitimized by the mandate system, in an effort to balance control with appeasement of Arab nationalism. Firstly, The Treaty of Sèvres, which was meant to finalize peace terms with the defeated Ottoman Empire, was rejected by Turkish nationalists. The Grand National Assembly declared war on the Allied powers who imposed that treaty. Britain, already isolated due to Lloyd George's unwavering support for Greece in the Greco-Turkish War, now faced Turkish

[65] 'The Arab Problem, The Times, 8 Oct. 1919 and Catherwood, Winston's Folly, p.92
[66] Wilson, Mesopotamia, p. 114
[67] Wilson, Mesopotamia, p.315
[68]Guiditta Fontana, Creating Nations, Establishing States: Ethno-Religious Heterogeneity and the British Creation of Iraq in 1919-23, Middle Eastern Studies Vol. 46, 2010, p. 5

propaganda and border incursions, especially in Mosul. Secondly, The French occupation of Damascus in 1920 ended Emir Faisal's brief rule in Syria and it weakened pan-Arab nationalist aspirations, which had been tied to Faisal's leadership. At the same time, Faisal, now a king without a kingdom, became a strong candidate for the throne of Iraq, offering Britain a way to appease Arab nationalists while maintaining control. Thirdly, Britain formally accepted the League of Nations Mandate over Iraq, giving its rule international legitimacy and it had official authority to administer the region, reinforcing its strategic interest in Iraq. Lastly, the 1920 Iraqi Rebellion caused heavy military and financial losses and it made the British government realize that direct military rule was too costly and unsustainable. London decided it needed to dismantle the military administration and seek cooperation with local nationalist elements instead.[69]

The formation of the Iraqi state between 1919 and 1923 was not the outcome of a clear-cut imperial master plan but rather a product of improvised responses to evolving geopolitical pressures and internal colonial challenges. British policy in Iraq took shape at the intersection of London's global imperial strategy, the rapidly shifting regional environment following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the discretionary power of British officials on the ground. The transition from Lloyd George's Liberal government to Bonar Law's Conservative cabinet in late 1922 marked a turning point. While Lloyd George had pursued an interventionist policy rooted in idealistic commitments to Arab self-rule and imperial prestige, Bonar Law's administration was more cost-averse and pragmatic. The revision of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in 1923, which reduced British commitment from twenty to four years, underscored this shift.[70] This transition empowered colonial administrators in Baghdad—particularly Sir Percy Cox and later Henry Dobbs—to exercise greater autonomy in shaping the architecture of the Iraqi state, often departing from directives issued in London.

British priorities during this period revolved around three core imperatives: regional security, economic sustainability, and the creation of a pliable local government. These imperatives necessitated the suppression of ethno-religious pluralism in favor of a centralized Sunni Arab authority. The British concluded that allowing Kurdish autonomy would not only jeopardize Iraq's territorial integrity—especially in the contested Mosul Vilayet—but also risk emboldening Turkish claims and nationalist sentiments across the frontier.[71] Kurdish resistance, exemplified by the leadership of Shaikh Mahmud in Sulaymaniyah, was met with aerial bombardments and military occupation. By 1924, the Kurdish districts were forcibly integrated into Iraq, not through negotiation but through imperial coercion sanctioned by the League of Nations Mandate system. This strategy served Britain's broader objective of establishing strategic borders that could resist both internal unrest and Turkish revisionism.

Simultaneously, the British and their Arab allies in Baghdad faced growing opposition from Iraq's Shi'i religious establishment. The Mujtahids, whose authority extended beyond religious life into socio-political mobilization, rejected the legitimacy of a British-backed

[69] Fontana, 2010, p.6
[70] Fontana, Giulia. *Ethno-Religious Heterogeneity and the British Creation of Iraq, 1919–1923*. University of Oxford, 2015, p. 12–20.
[71] Sluglett, Peter. *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*. I.B. Tauris, 2007, p. 125–135.

Sunni-dominated state. Their issuance of fatwas denouncing participation in the elections of 1922–23 as religiously impermissible posed a direct challenge to both colonial authority and Faisal's regime.[72] Rather than engage with the clerics as legitimate political actors, British and Iraqi authorities sought to marginalize them through deportations, propaganda, and strategic co-optation of tribal elites. Grand Mujtahid Mahdi al-Khalisi, a prominent anti-colonial voice, was deported, while clerics of Persian origin were framed as foreign agents. The divide-and-rule strategy proved effective: by appealing to tribal leaders with promises of representation and fiscal privileges, the government weakened the Mujtahids' grassroots influence.

By late 1923, Shi'i political influence had been neutralized. A delegation of Shi'i notables declared their support for the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty and pledged loyalty to Faisal, not as a genuine endorsement of the emerging political order, but as a survival tactic in the face of exclusion.[73] The clerics, now exiled and cut off from their constituencies, eventually rescinded their fatwas in exchange for conditional repatriation, provided they abstained from political engagement. This process of political pacification through exclusion rather than inclusion reveals the character of early Iraqi state formation: shaped not by pluralist ideals but by authoritarian consolidation under British auspices.

The architecture of the Iraqi state, finalized by 1923, reflected the unification of the three Ottoman vilayets—Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra—into a single territorial unit under centralized control. However, this unity was more geographical than social or political. Iraq's artificial borders encompassed a deeply heterogeneous population with divergent historical experiences, sectarian affiliations, and political aspirations. While early British debates in 1919–20 considered alternatives such as Kurdish autonomy or separate provincial administrations, these ideas were abandoned as London prioritized military retrenchment and regional containment.[74] During that period, the installation of Faisal as king marked the formal beginning of Arab statehood under indirect British rule. Yet it was only in 1923 that the government was sufficiently empowered—politically, militarily, and symbolically—to claim exclusive sovereignty over its territory. Thus, British imperial strategy in Iraq remained inherently reactive. The idea of a Kurdish buffer state was initially entertained but swiftly abandoned when it threatened to provoke Ankara or destabilize the mandate's legitimacy. Similarly, Shi'i exclusion was not merely the result of religious prejudice but a strategic calculation to eliminate a politically potent opposition with transnational ties to Iran. Much of this policy was shaped not in London but in Baghdad, where officials like Cox and Dobbs interpreted imperial objectives through the prism of local contingency.[75] Their approach—marked by authoritarianism, co-optation, and ethnic selectivity—ultimately structured Iraq's early political order around Sunni dominance.

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[72] Marr, Phebe. *The Modern History of Iraq*. 3rd ed., Westview Press, 2012, p. 37–40; Batatu, Hanna. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*. Princeton UP, 1978, p. 88–94; Sluglett, Peter. *Britain in Iraq*, p. 128–130.
[73] Tripp, Charles. *A History of Iraq*. 3rd ed., Cambridge UP, 2007, p. 45–46.
[74] Fontana, 2010, p. 40–46.
[75] Sluglett, 2007, p. 131–136

The selective integration of non-Sunni groups into the emerging state apparatus was engineered through a combination of tribal patronage and limited elite co-optation. Faisal's rule depended on Sharifian legitimacy, which resonated weakly among Iraq's diverse populations. British administrators sought to manufacture political consensus by offering economic privileges and symbolic recognition to cooperative Shi'i and Kurdish elites.[76] However, this did not amount to inclusive nation-building. Instead, the resulting system entrenched a hierarchical state structure in which loyalty to the regime was secured through personalist networks, not institutional participation. The marginalization of Shi'i and Kurdish actors was less a product of an overarching imperial directive and more the outcome of bureaucratic habits and colonial perceptions held by British officers in the field.

Although the rhetoric of the League of Nations and British public discourse championed ideals of self-determination and civilizational uplift, by the end of 1923 these ideals had been subordinated to more immediate concerns of stability and imperial continuity. Iraq had become a client state: formally sovereign, yet structurally dependent. The vision of a representative, multi-ethnic democracy gave way to a centralized regime aligned with British strategic interests. This dissonance was not lost on contemporary observers. As *The Times* of London noted in 1923, "No common purpose yet animates these heterogeneous communities ... Mesopotamia, with its vague frontiers and mixed population, was treated as a nation, as an embryo State, to be ranked with the modern democracies included under the League of Nations."[77]

Post-1923, politicians in London and civil servants in Baghdad came to realise that Iraq was going to become independent much sooner than any of them had predicted. Under these new realities Britain's aim in interacting with Iraq's politicians was to try and ensure that the state being built operated as efficiently, but as cheaply as possible.[78] Faysal's coming to Iraq already did not bring full independence, it was a sort of period described as a political transition hindering extremist Arab nationalism providing relative self-determination for Iraqis. The purposes of Britain and Faysal were overlapping at one point. While the experience of Faysal from Syria was never to clash with a Great Power in Iraq, the 1923 Iraqi revolt had taught Britain to not make Iraqis feel the foreign mandate and not seize self-determination rights of the public. Faysal was necessary to continue to secure British influence in Iraq indirectly. This moderate approach to Anglo-Iraqi ties was not only more beneficial to Iraq, but it also fit well into the pattern of British colonial policy, which permitted dependence to develop into self-government in a methodical and peaceful manner.

Post-1923, the Iraqi state entered a new phase defined by the struggle to reconcile nominal sovereignty with continued British domination, confirmed by the League of Nations in 1920. Under this framework, the British retained direct control over foreign affairs, defense, and financial policy through a series of Anglo-Iraqi treaties. The British-created

[76] Batatu, 1978, p. 90–95.
[77] Quoted from Fromkin, David. *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*. Holt, 1989, p. 406.
[78] Toby Dodge, The British Mandate in Iraq, 1914-1932, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006, p. 4.

monarchy suffered from a chronic legitimacy crisis: the concept of a monarchy was alien to Iraq. Despite his Islamic and pan-Arab credentials, Faisal was not an Iraqi, and no matter how effectively he ruled, Iraqis saw the monarchy as a British creation. The continuing inability of the government to gain the confidence of the people fuelled political instability into the 1970s.[79]

A key development was the ratification of the 1925 Organic Law (Constitution), which established a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament. However, executive power remained concentrated in the monarchy, and King Faisal—still reliant on British backing—had wide-ranging authority to dismiss ministers, prorogue parliament, and enact laws by decree. The constitution, much like the treaty, reflected British interests more than popular Iraqi will.[80] Iraqi politics, though now institutionalized, remained dominated by Sunni urban elites, while Shia and Kurdish representation was severely lacking.

The Mosul Question, settled in 1925 by the League of Nations in favor of Iraq, significantly shaped post-1923 dynamics. Britain's insistence on retaining Mosul within Iraqi borders was driven by the region's strategic and economic value, particularly its vast oil reserves.[81] The League's decision came with a condition: Iraq had to extend the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty to 25 years and commit to protecting Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights. While the formal annexation of Mosul secured British petroleum interests via the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), it also entrenched long-term ethnic conflict by integrating a restive Kurdish population into a state that offered them little autonomy or representation.[82]

Political instability continued throughout the late 1920s, driven by discontent with the British presence, lack of inclusivity in governance, and the failure to meet nationalist aspirations. Despite this, the British managed to push through a new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in 1930, negotiated by Nuri al-Said, one of Faisal's closest advisors and future strongman of Iraqi politics. The 1930 treaty ostensibly prepared Iraq for full independence and promised admission to the League of Nations, but it preserved British military prerogatives, including the use of airbases at Habbaniyah and Shaiba and the right of troop movement through Iraq in wartime.[83]

These concessions drew significant criticism from nationalists and religious leaders alike. Shia clerics in Najaf and Karbala, already marginalized politically, opposed the treaty for reaffirming foreign rule. Kurds and Assyrians also expressed dissatisfaction, as the treaty provided no constitutional guarantees for minority rights. Nevertheless, the treaty was passed by a British-aligned parliament. Britain then supported Iraq's formal independence, granted in 1932 through League of Nations recognition. However, the treaty ensured that Iraq's political and economic sovereignty remained constrained, and internal cohesion was fragile.

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[79] *Country Study and Profile: Iraq*, PDF publication, U.S. Marine Corps, September 29, 2009.
[80] Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, p. 22–23.
[81] Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 84–87.
[82] Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 41–43.
[83] Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 91–93.

Post-independence Iraq inherited a political system largely shaped by British interests, staffed by elites trained under Ottoman or colonial regimes, and deeply fragmented along ethnic, sectarian, and tribal lines. The central government struggled to build legitimacy among rural tribes, Shia communities, and Kurdish regions. While the monarchy under King Faisal I attempted to promote a vision of Arab nationalism and state integration, his foreign origins and dependency on Britain undermined public support. The exclusion of broad segments of society from political participation, coupled with the failure to build genuinely representative institutions, would contribute to the chronic instability that plagued Iraq throughout the monarchy's existence—culminating in the 1958 revolution that overthrew the Hashemite dynasty.

2.2.2 Iraqi National Security Perception

Historically, the concept, meaning and content of national security in Iraq is associated with the coming to power of the Baath Party in 1968. It was during this period that the core of the former Iraqi Intelligence Organization was formed, and the Faculty of National Security was established in the mid-1970s. The former regime adopted an approach to work based on a set of principles and methods through which it shaped its view of its external environment and its role in the Arab world through Baathist thought and the ideology of Arab nationalism. Within this ideology, the regime justified its foreign adventures and wars under the guise of supporting the central Arab cause. Through its intelligence agency, it defined friendly and hostile countries according to their impact on Iraq's national security and vital space. This categorization was based on historical, intellectual and ideological factors, as well as loyalty to the Baath Party. This approach dominated and played a decisive role in the regime's strategy despite the transformations from 1968 to 2003.[84]

The Baath Party was founded in Damascus in 1940 by Michel Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox Christian, and Salahaddin Bitar, a Sunni Muslim.[85] Baath, which means "rebirth," is the name given to political ideologies and parties that seek to bring about a rebirth in the Arab world through Arab socialism. The Baath movement, which used the slogan "unity, freedom, socialism," aimed to establish a united, secular Arab society governed by a socialist system. Its ideology, which could be described as nationalist and socialist ideologies, these three elements were redefined in accordance with Arab understanding. According to Baath ideology, which adopted "Arab unity" as a fundamental principle, the borders separating Arab peoples were drawn by colonialists and "must be eliminated. It rejected religious and sectarian differences among Arabs and developed a nationalist ideology based on Arab unity. Although often described as secular, Baath nationalism did not exclude Islam; on the contrary, Islam was accepted as a fundamental and integral part of Arab national culture. But unlike

[84] الأمن القومي العراقي في بيئة التهديد والتحدي (Iraqi National Security in a Threat and Challenge Environment), Ali Sadiq Karim, AL-NAHRAIN CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2024.
[85] Norma Salem-Babikian, Michel 'Aflaq: A Biographic Outline, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1980), p. 162-179.

Sunni Arab nationalists, Baathists did not consider Islam to be the national religion of the Arabs, but rather an important element of the national cultural heritage. Islam was the essence of the Arabs' understanding of nationalism, and Christian Arabs would come to understand that the essence of Arabism.

The Baath's understanding of socialism was also a unique form of socialism with Arab characteristics. According to Baath ideology, which rejected Marxism and internationalism, socialist nationalization was essential, and it was impossible to be revolutionary without being national. According to Bitar, the class struggle that would mobilize all popular forces against colonialism in Asia and Africa was national unity. However, Bitar also accepted that a national socialist revolution could not be achieved without Marxist principles in economic planning. The Baath Party's socialism guaranteed private property, and it was based on principles such as income equality, control of domestic and foreign trade, limiting land ownership for the public good, nationalizing mines and natural resources, planned development, and workers participating in the management of businesses.

The Ba'athist regime in Iraq, particularly under Saddam Hussein, pursued a national security policy that prioritized regime survival, authoritarian control, and regional dominance. Unlike traditional national security doctrines that emphasize safeguarding the state's territorial integrity and protecting citizens, the Ba'athist conception of security was primarily concerned with preserving the ideological and personal dominance of the ruling elite. From its 1968 seizure of power, the Ba'ath regime under Saddam Hussein constructed a formidable internal security architecture designed to ensure absolute loyalty and quash dissent. Saddam oversaw a vast network of overlapping intelligence and security agencies, each tasked with monitoring not only the public but also one another. Five primary agencies dominated this apparatus: the General Intelligence (al-Mukhabarat) for external and internal espionage, General Security (al-Amn al-'Amma) for domestic surveillance, Military Intelligence (al-Istikhbarat) and Military Security (al-Amn al-'Askari) for infiltrating the armed forces, and the elite Special Security Organization (al-Amn al-Khas) which reported directly to Saddam and protected the president. These agencies' jurisdictions deliberately overlapped, breeding competition and mutual suspicion so that no single service could grow powerful enough to threaten Saddam. Indeed, some units were created explicitly to spy on the others, with each agency containing an "inner security" division that reported any internal disloyalty straight to Saddam's office. [86]

Staffing of the security organs was heavily based on tribal and familial loyalty. Key posts were entrusted to members of Saddam's own Tikriti clan and other Sunni Arab tribes from the so-called "Sunni Triangle," ensuring the regime's enforcers had personal stakes in its survival.[87] This omnipresent security network penetrated every layer of Iraqi society, aided by a massive cadre of informants (known as *mukhabar* or *mu'taman*) incentivized by patronage or coerced by blackmail and fear. Law 83 of 1979 even formalized the recruitment of

[86] Ibrahim al-Marashi, Iraq's Security and Intelligence Network: A Guide and Analysis, Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2002, p.1.
[87] Amazia Baram, "Between Impediment and Advantage: Saddam's Iraq," United States Institute of Peace Special Report and "Saddam Husayn Between His Power Base and the International Community," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2000), p. 11-12.

informers, one month before Saddam assumed the presidency, underscoring how integral surveillance was to Ba'athist rule. The result was a pervasive "police state" climate in which Iraqis were made acutely aware that any word or action could be reported to Saddam's intelligence organs. This sprawling terror network promoted a sense of helplessness and isolation among the populace.[88] Independent civic institutions, unions, or opposition groups were systematically infiltrated or destroyed. By design, no autonomous power centre—whether in the military, party, or civil society—could emerge without Saddam's security apparatus knowing and crushing it. Through intimidation, torture, and extrajudicial killings, these agencies eliminated actual and suspected regime opponents, thereby securing Saddam's total control despite numerous wars, coup plots, and uprisings over his 35-year reign. In short, Iraq's internal security architecture was the backbone of Saddam's authoritarian power, ensuring his survival through omnipresent surveillance and ruthless violence.

Ba'athist Iraq under Saddam Hussein cloaked its harsh rule in the rhetoric of revolutionary Arab nationalism and socialism, using ideology as a tool to legitimize authoritarian power and extreme violence. The Ba'ath Party's credo of "Arab unity, freedom, and socialism" provided a convenient justification for one-party rule: the regime portrayed itself as the vanguard of a historic Arab renaissance, under constant threat from imperialists, Zionists, and other enemies of the Arab nation.[89] In practice, dissent was equated with treason. Opposition elements—whether Islamists, communists, Kurds, or Shi'a activists—were vilified in Ba'athist propaganda as tools of foreign conspiracies aimed at splintering Iraqi and Arab unity. His official ideology thus rationalized repression: by casting political opponents as traitors to the pan-Arab cause or threats to social stability, the regime could claim that crackdowns, purges, and even mass killings were necessary revolutionary measures to defend the nation. The Ba'ath's notion of internal security was so all-encompassing that even domestic opponents were branded as foreign agents, freeing the Mukhabarat to pursue virtually anyone deemed a threat. Under Saddam, Ba'athist slogans like "safeguarding the revolution" or "defending national unity" became Orwellian doublespeak for state terror against Iraq's own citizens.

The United States-led military intervention in Iraq in 2003 marked a seismic shift in the country's political and security landscape. The removal of Saddam Hussein and the dismantling of the Ba'athist regime not only led to the collapse of an authoritarian government but also effectively dissolved the ideological framework of Arab nationalism and Ba'athist political doctrine that had long served as the foundational principles of Iraqi governance. This event inaugurated a profoundly transformative phase in Iraq's modern history, characterized by efforts to establish a new political system grounded in the principles of pluralism, multiparty democracy, and power-sharing mechanisms intended to prevent the

[88] Isam al-Khafaji "State Terror and the Degradation of Politics in Iraq," *Middle East Report* 176 (May/June 1992).

[89] Therese Cuizon and Shaun Julius Lumapas Lastimosa, Baathism: A Dead Twentieth Century Arab Ideology, State Scholars, Bachelor in Secondary Education- Social Studies, Cebu Normal University, 2020.

resurgence of authoritarianism. However, these post-2003 developments have not produced the anticipated outcomes. Instead, Iraq has experienced a complex amalgamation of security, political, and economic crises, deeply intertwined with the legacies of the past and the structural deficiencies of the emergent political order.[90]

In the immediate aftermath of regime change, the institutional vacuum created by the dissolution of the state apparatus provided fertile ground for a multitude of threats to flourish. The disbanding of the Iraqi army and security services, the de-Ba'athification policy, and the failure to establish effective interim governance structures significantly weakened the central authority. These developments facilitated the rapid emergence of insurgent movements, sectarian militias, and organized criminal syndicates. Moreover, Iraq became increasingly embroiled in the geopolitical rivalries of regional and international actors, transforming the country into a proxy battleground for competing strategic interests. The new political order, while nominally democratic, was built upon a fragile consensus model that institutionalized sectarian and ethnic divisions rather than fostering genuine national unity.[91]

A particularly debilitating consequence of the consensus model has been its adverse impact on Iraq's capacity to formulate and implement coherent national security strategies. As Dr. Ali Fâris Hamîd argues, the sectarian-based power-sharing arrangement has fragmented the decision-making process and inhibited the development of a unified security doctrine capable of addressing both traditional and non-traditional threats.[92] The absence of coordination among key state institutions and the politicization of the security apparatus have further compounded these challenges, leading to inconsistencies in policy formulation and implementation. These institutional deficiencies have not only undermined Iraq's domestic stability but have also compromised its ability to navigate the complexities of regional diplomacy and international security cooperation.

National security, in its broadest conception, encompasses the protection of a state's territorial integrity, political sovereignty, economic stability, and social cohesion against internal and external threats. In Iraq's case, the multidimensional nature of the threats it faces necessitates a comprehensive and integrated approach to national security. However, successive Iraqi governments have largely adopted a reactive posture, focusing disproportionately on counterterrorism while neglecting other critical domains such as economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. This myopic focus has limited the state's ability to develop proactive strategies capable of mitigating long-term risks.

The defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in December 2017 marked a significant milestone in Iraq's counterterrorism efforts.[93] Nevertheless, the post-ISIS era has revealed the limitations of a security strategy narrowly focused on military solutions. While

[90] Dodge T. Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism. London: Routledge; 2013.

[91] Hamid AF. Al-amn al-qawmi al-ʿiraqi fi ʿahd al-binaʾ al-dimuqrati [National Security in Democratic Iraq]. Baghdad: Al-Mustansiriya University; 2019.

[92] Knights M. The US and Iraq's Enduring Counterterrorism Partnership. CTC Sentinel. 2020;13(10):1-7.

[93] Felbab-Brown V. Organized Crime, Illicit Economies, Civil Violence & International Order. Daedalus. 2010;139(3):99-113.

the immediate threat posed by ISIS has diminished, the underlying structural and institutional weaknesses that facilitated the group's rise remain unaddressed. Consequently, new and evolving threats—both internal and external—have continued to challenge Iraq's national security. These include the proliferation of organized crime, economic fragility, environmental degradation, regional proxy conflicts, and unresolved issues related to water security and border control.

Internally, one of the most insidious threats to Iraq's internal stability and national security is the proliferation of organized crime. In the absence of a robust legal framework and effective law enforcement mechanisms, criminal syndicates have entrenched themselves within the political, economic, and social fabric of the country. These networks operate with relative impunity, often enjoying protection from politically connected patrons and benefiting from the complicity or inaction of state authorities.[94] The scope of their activities is vast, encompassing illicit trade, drug trafficking, human smuggling, extortion, and the looting of public resources. In many instances, organized crime groups have succeeded in infiltrating state institutions, thereby blurring the lines between licit and illicit authority.

The post-2003 political transition created a permissive environment for the expansion of organized crime. The breakdown of law and order, the proliferation of armed groups, and the erosion of public trust in formal institutions contributed to the emergence of alternative power structures capable of exercising coercive control. Criminal networks have exploited this environment to establish parallel economies that operate independently of, and often in competition with, the formal state. This phenomenon not only undermines the state's fiscal capacity but also erodes the legitimacy of governmental authority, fostering a climate of impunity and lawlessness. The challenge posed by organized crime is further compounded by its transnational dimensions. Iraqi criminal groups are often linked to regional and international trafficking networks, which complicates efforts at enforcement and necessitates cross-border cooperation that Iraq is currently ill-equipped to manage.[95]

Iraq's economic vulnerability constitutes a critical threat to its national security. Despite being endowed with substantial oil reserves, the country has failed to leverage this wealth to create a diversified and resilient economy. Instead, Iraq remains heavily dependent on oil exports, which account for the vast majority of government revenues and foreign exchange earnings. This dependence exposes the economy to external shocks, particularly fluctuations in global oil prices, which can have destabilizing effects on public finances and social stability. The volatility of oil markets, combined with endemic corruption and weak institutional capacity, has hindered economic development and exacerbated socio-economic inequalities.[96]

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[94] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Iraq Country Report 2022. https://www.unodc.org. Accessed July 9, 2025.

[95] Republic of Iraq. Constitution of Iraq. Article 25. 2005.

[96] The World Bank. Iraq Economic Monitor: Seizing the Opportunity for Reforms and Managing Volatility. Fall 2021. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/publication/economic-monitor. Accessed July 9, 2025.

The 2005 Iraqi Constitution, particularly Article 25, mandates the state to reform the economy by promoting diversification, supporting the private sector, and ensuring the efficient use of national resources.[97] However, more than two decades later, these constitutional directives remain largely unfulfilled. The public sector continues to dominate the economy, absorbing a significant portion of the national budget through salaries and pensions while contributing little to productivity or innovation. High levels of unemployment, particularly among youth and university graduates, have fueled social discontent and increased the appeal of extremist ideologies. Furthermore, the persistence of a large informal economy has impeded the development of a coherent fiscal policy, limiting the state's ability to invest in infrastructure, education, and public services.

In this context, economic fragility is not merely a development issue but a national security imperative. The inability of the state to provide basic services and economic opportunities creates a fertile ground for radicalization, insurgency, and social unrest. Addressing this challenge requires a fundamental rethinking of Iraq's economic model, with a focus on governance reform, institutional capacity-building, and investment in human capital. Without such measures, economic instability will continue to undermine Iraq's national security and hinder its prospects for sustainable development.

The widespread proliferation of weapons among non-state actors represents a profound challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the Iraqi state. Since 2003, numerous efforts to disarm militias, tribal forces, and other armed groups have met with limited success. The failure to establish a monopoly on the legitimate use of force has allowed a multitude of actors to maintain armed capabilities independent of state control. These groups include sectarian militias affiliated with political parties, tribal militias operating in rural areas, and criminal organizations engaged in violence and intimidation.[98]

The consequences of this proliferation are far-reaching. The presence of armed groups undermines public security, complicates law enforcement, and fosters a culture of violence and impunity. Moreover, the political influence wielded by these groups often enables them to obstruct state policies, intimidate opponents, and shape electoral outcomes. The unregulated flow of weapons also facilitates the escalation of local disputes into armed confrontations, thereby destabilizing communities and exacerbating sectarian tensions.

From a strategic perspective, the inability of the state to control arms proliferation represents a fundamental weakness in its national security architecture. It signals to both domestic and external actors that the state is unable or unwilling to enforce its sovereignty. Reasserting state authority will require a comprehensive disarmament strategy that includes not only coercive measures but also political dialogue, economic incentives, and

[97] International Crisis Group. Iraq’s Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State. Middle East Report No. 188. July 30, 2018. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state. Accessed July 9, 2025.

[98] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Climate Change Adaptation in Iraq. UNDP Iraq. 2021. https://www.iq.undp.org. Accessed July 9, 2025.

community-based reconciliation initiatives. Without such a strategy, Iraq will remain vulnerable to cycles of violence and fragmentation that threaten its long-term stability.

Additionally**,** environmental degradation and climate change constitute increasingly salient dimensions of Iraq's national security challenge. The country faces a range of environmental threats, including water scarcity, desertification, air pollution, and the loss of arable land. These issues are compounded by the effects of climate change, which has led to rising temperatures, reduced rainfall, and more frequent extreme weather events. According to the United Nations Development Programme, Iraq is one of the country's most vulnerable to climate-related risks, ranking 61st globally in climate vulnerability and among the top five in terms of exposure to water scarcity and high temperatures.[99]

The implications of environmental insecurity are manifold. Water scarcity threatens agricultural production, exacerbates food insecurity, and fuels competition over scarce resources. Desertification and land degradation undermine rural livelihoods and contribute to forced migration and urban overcrowding. Air pollution and inadequate waste management pose serious public health risks, particularly in densely populated areas. These challenges are not merely environmental but have direct consequences for social stability, economic development, and political legitimacy. Addressing environmental security requires the integration of environmental considerations into national development planning and security policy. This includes investing in sustainable water management, promoting renewable energy, enhancing disaster preparedness, and engaging in regional cooperation on transboundary environmental issues. Given the scale and complexity of these challenges, environmental security must be treated as a core component of Iraq's national security strategy rather than a peripheral concern.

3. SEPARATISM

Separatism is one of the most enduring and complex phenomena in political life, raising questions that cut across history, sociology, political science, and international relations. At its most basic level, separatism refers to the desire of a group—defined by territory, ethnicity, culture, religion, or other forms of identity—to establish greater autonomy or full independence from an existing political authority. While the concept appears straightforward, the dynamics that underpin separatist movements are layered, multifaceted, and often contradictory. Understanding separatism requires engaging with competing theories of nationalism, the modern state system, and the balance between territorial integrity and the right of self-determination.[100] Separatism is an active political movement within an independent state that aspires to some form of territorial separatism, ranging from autonomy to independence.[101] While conceptually flexible, it is not a new term. However, separatism, as

[99] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Sand and Dust Storms in Iraq: A Looming Threat. 2022. https://www.unep.org. Accessed July 9, 2025.
[100] Hechter, M. (1992). The dynamics of secession. Acta Sociologica, 35(4), 267–283.
[101] Alexis Heraclides, "Secession, Self-Determination and Nonintervention: in Quest of a Normative Symbiosis" Journal of International Affairs, Vol.45, No.2, 1992, p.400

investigated in this study, is a type of intra-state conflict that includes armed struggle and a high level of violence because a state is the target of a separatist claim.

Broadly, separatism is a high concept that encompasses factors such as religion, culture, geography, gender, and class. Previous research on this phrase has explored the reasons, drivers, triggers, and mobilizations of a peripheral group seeking political autonomy or even independence from an independent and external sovereign state. Separatism can be formally defined as a political phenomenon in which a distinct group within a state—typically characterized by ethnicity, religion, language, or culture—seeks greater autonomy or outright independence, often by claiming a particular territory as its own and striving for self-determination against the central government.[102] Contextually, just as no two subjects of civil wars or intra-state conflicts can be independent states, neither can any two subjects of separatist movements be dependent on peripheral groups inside an independent state. The categorization of separatism within the intra-state conflicts' studies is critical for detecting separatist movements autonomously and distinguishing between the motivations of inter-party conflicts within an independent state that do not involve a state and the drivers of a secessionist group struggling an independent state.

The study of separatism has gained renewed urgency in the contemporary period, as globalization and state fragility coexist with resurgent identity politics. From Catalonia and Scotland in Europe to Kashmir, Iraqi Kurdish Region, and Biafra in Asia and Africa, separatist claims remain prominent in both peaceful and violent forms. At the same time, separatism is not merely a regional or local issue; it carries deep implications for international security, the legitimacy of states, and the structure of global governance. Conceptually, separatism is closely related to, but distinct from, nationalism and secessionism. Nationalism refers to the ideological framework that links a cultural or ethnic group with the right to self-rule, while secessionism specifically denotes the act of withdrawing from an existing state to form a new sovereign entity.[103] However, separatism includes movements for cultural recognition, regional autonomy, federal restructuring, and full independence. In this sense, it exists along a continuum, with cultural and political autonomy at one end and statehood at the other.

One of the challenges in studying separatism lies in its heterogeneity. Some movements are rooted in long-standing historical grievances, such as the Kurdish movement in Iraq, while others are products of more recent political or economic shifts, as seen in Catalonia's push for greater fiscal autonomy.[104] Separatist demands can thus be understood as both expressions of deeply rooted identities and strategic responses to changing political opportunities.

[102] Gorman Rober F., Separatism, EBSCO Research Starters. 2024.

[103] Connor, W., Ethnonationalism: The quest for understanding. Princeton University Press, 1994, p.93.
[104] Sorens, J, Secessionism: Identity, interest, and strategy. McGill-Queen's University Press., 2012, p. 4

Separatism can be expressed through varying degrees of intensity. In its most latent form, it manifests in cultural revival movements, symbolic politics, or narratives of historical distinctiveness.[105] These forms do not necessarily challenge the legal authority of the state but lay the groundwork for stronger mobilization in the future.

Active separatism, by contrast, involves political mobilization that ranges from peaceful demonstrations, petitions, and electoral campaigns to violent insurgencies. Movements such as the Scottish National Party illustrate how separatist aspirations can be pursued through democratic institutions, while cases like Chechnya in the 1990s reveal how separatist goals can escalate into violent conflict.[106] The strategies employed often depend on the political opportunity structure, the state's level of repression, and the availability of international support.[107]

There are structural explanations focusing on the macro-level political, economic, and demographic conditions that shape the likelihood of separatist movements. Unlike behavioural or psychological theories that stress perceptions, structural approaches emphasize enduring institutions, resource distribution, and spatial characteristics. These underlying structures create both opportunities and incentives for groups to mobilize for autonomy or independence. One of the most widely discussed structural conditions is economic inequality between regions. Michael Hechter's Internal Colonialism (1975) advanced the idea that economic exploitation of peripheral regions by dominant centres fosters separatist sentiments. According to this view, underdeveloped peripheries resent the extraction of resources and lack of investment, leading to mobilization for greater control over local economies.[108] His framework has been applied to cases such as Wales and Scotland in the United Kingdom, and also to Nigeria, where the oil-rich Niger Delta became a centre of separatist agitation due to perceptions of revenue monopolization by the federal government. [109]

Economic resources cannot be only a source of grievance but also, they can be means of mobilization. Some cases show that resource wealth increases the feasibility of rebellion by financing separatist movements. Oil and diamonds in particular serve as both motive and means for secessionist insurgencies. These dynamics were visible in Biafra's attempted secession from Nigeria in the late 1960s and in the independence of South Sudan in 2011. Yet resource wealth also intensifies central resistance, making conflicts like the Chechen wars in the 1990s especially violent.

Institutional structures further shape separatist politics. Valerie Bunce has demonstrated that ethno-federal arrangements in the Soviet Union inadvertently encouraged separatism by

[105] Smith, A. D. National identity. University of Nevada Press, 1991, p. 23.
[106] Toft, M. D., The geography of ethnic violence: Identity, interests, and the indivisibility of territory. Princeton University Press, 2003, p.112.
[107] Roeder, P. G., Where nation-states come from: Institutional change in the age of nationalism. Princeton University Press, 2007, p.78.
[108] Michael Hechter, Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development of California Press, 1975.
[109] Rotimi T. Suberu, Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001, p. 112.

granting republics quasi-sovereign institutions, including constitutions, legislatures, and national symbols.[110] Henry Hale similarly argues that such systems create "dual power" dynamics, enabling regional leaders to either bargain for greater autonomy or pursue secession.[111] In contrast, in highly centralized states such as France, the lack of institutionalized regional authority limits the political reach of separatist movements, though cultural nationalism, as in Corsica, continues to persist.

Demographic conditions also play a crucial role. Donald Horowitz emphasizes that the concentration and geographic distribution of minorities affect the viability of separatist claims: groups that are territorially concentrated, such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka, can sustain insurgency more effectively than dispersed groups.[112] The Kurds, despite being one of the largest stateless nations, face obstacles because their population is divided among multiple states. Population growth can also heighten pressures, as in Catalonia and the Basque Country, where demographic change reinforced demands for autonomy.[113]

Finally, geography and terrain provide structural opportunities. Cases such as Tibet, Chechnya, and Kashmir illustrate how rugged terrain sustains long-term resistance and reinforces territorial claims. Structural explanations thus underscore the material and institutional foundations of separatism. They provide a necessary, though not sufficient, account of separatist politics. For this reason, structural perspectives are often combined with behavioural and interactive approaches to capture the full complexity of separatist dynamics.

While structural theories emphasize enduring institutions and macro-level conditions, behavioural approaches focus on the decisions, perceptions, and strategies of political elites, leaders, and social groups. These perspectives highlight the role of agency, identity, and framing in shaping separatist movements. Separatism, in this sense, is not an inevitable outcome of structural conditions but a contingent result of how actors interpret and respond to them.

One strand of behavioral analysis stresses the role of elites and political entrepreneurs in shaping mobilization and conflict. In this context, elites are individuals or small groups who occupy positions of authority, influence, and resource control within a political community, and who are capable of framing issues, allocating patronage, and directing collective action. They act as the main decision-makers and gatekeepers of political opportunity. *Political* entrepreneurs, by contrast, are actors who actively create, manipulate, or exploit opportunities to mobilize constituencies for their own strategic gain, often by redefining group identities or

[110] Valerie Bunce, Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 56.
[111] Henry E. Hale, "The Makeup and Breakup of Ethno-federal States: Why Russia Survives Where the USSR Fell," Perspectives on Politics 2, no. 1 2004: p. 166.
[112] Donald L. Horowitz, Ethnic Groups in Conflict, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 186.
[113] Philip G. Roeder, Where Nation-States Come From: Institutional Change in the Age of Nationalism Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 103.

amplifying grievances.[114] Unlike elites who may simply inherit or occupy structural positions, political entrepreneurs are characterized by their capacity to innovate politically — framing narratives, building organizations, and using selective incentives to transform latent discontent into organized political or separatist movements. In ethnic politics and separatism, such figures play a critical role by linking collective grievances to political strategies, thereby converting diffuse disaffection into coherent demands for autonomy, recognition, or independence.[115]

Rogers Brubaker has argued that ethnic and national identities are not fixed, but "activated" by elites in particular contexts to advance political agendas.[116] Leaders frame grievances, construct narratives of historical injustice, and mobilize collective action. For example, Slobodan Milošević's strategic use of Serbian nationalism in the late 1980s demonstrates how elite manipulation can inflame separatist or counter-separatist sentiment.[117] Similarly, in Quebec, political elites framed cultural and linguistic preservation as inseparable from the pursuit of sovereignty, leading to successive referenda on independence.[118]

Another key behavioural factor is collective identity formation as mentioned before. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" suggests that nations are socially constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and practices. Separatist movements frequently rely on cultural revival, education, and language policies to foster distinct identities. The case of Catalonia illustrates this dynamic, as nationalist leaders and cultural institutions cultivated a strong Catalan identity that underpinned demands for autonomy.[119]

Behavioral approaches emphasize the importance of timing and opportunity recognition. Even when structural conditions are present, separatist leaders must assess when the political context is ripe for mobilization. The role of democratization is crucial in creating political openings for minority groups, enabling separatist leaders to frame their demands as compatible with democratic values. The collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, for instance, created a permissive environment in which separatist movements could emerge with renewed strength. Behavioural explanations point out that separatism is not mechanically determined by geography, resources, or institutions. Rather, it depends on how leaders, elites, and communities interpret conditions, frame narratives, and mobilize support.

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[114] Vilfredo Pareto, The Rise and Fall of Elites: An Application of Theoretical Sociology New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991 [orig. 1901], pp. 142–150; Gaetano Mosca, The Ruling Class, McGraw-Hill, 1939, pp. 50–65.

[115] Kanchan Chandra, Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 7–9; Andreas Wimmer, Lars-Erik Cederman & Brian Min, "Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict: A Configurational Analysis of a New Global Data Set," American Sociological Review 74, no. 2 2009, pp. 322–325.

[116] Rogers Brubaker, Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 10.

[117] Sabrina P. Ramet, Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević Boulder: Westview Press, 2002, p. 121.

[118] Alain-G. Gagnon and Raffaele Iacovino, Federalism, Citizenship, and Quebec: Debating Multinationalism: University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 47.

[119] Montserrat Guibernau, Catalan Nationalism: Francoism, Transition and Democracy, Routledge, 2004, p. 75.

As a result, separatist politics often take on divergent forms even in structurally similar contexts.

Interactive explanations emphasize the dynamic bargaining process between separatists and state authorities. Separatist movements often emerge not only from grievances but also from opportunities created by state weakness, elite competition, or international intervention. For instance, the disintegration of the Soviet Union revealed how cascading secessionist demands can reinforce one another, leading to a chain reaction of independence movements. Similarly, the breakup of Yugoslavia demonstrated how violence and repression can radicalize previously moderate separatist movements. One dimension of the interactive approach concerns state responses to separatist demands. States may adopt strategies of accommodation, repression, or a mix of both. Accommodation can include decentralization, cultural recognition, or resource-sharing, which may defuse separatist pressures.[120] Conversely, harsh repression often escalates grievances and radicalizes movements, as seen in Chechnya during the 1990s. "Spiral model" in conflict studies suggests that cycles of action and retaliation can quickly intensify, making negotiated solutions increasingly difficult.[121]

Another critical factor is the strategic bargaining process between separatist leaders and central governments. Civil wars—including separatist conflicts—are difficult to resolve because of problems of credible commitment: once separatist groups disarm, they risk being repressed by the state, making negotiated settlements fragile. Power-sharing agreements, federalism, or international guarantees can sometimes overcome these obstacles, but they often remain unstable, as shown by the collapse of agreements in Sudan prior to South Sudan's independence.[122]

Interactive explanations, also, highlight the role of precedents and demonstrations. When one separatist movement achieves autonomy or independence, it can inspire others by showing that secession is possible. The "domino effect" of the Soviet Union's dissolution in the early 1990s encouraged separatist claims in Georgia, Moldova, and Chechnya. Similarly, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 sparked debates in other contested regions such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Catalonia.[123] These precedents shape the expectations of separatist actors and constrain state strategies.

The international dimension is central to the interactive approach. External actors can provide crucial support to separatist movements through funding, weapons, or political recognition, dramatically altering the balance of power. Diasporas also play a pivotal role by sustaining separatist movements financially and ideologically, as seen in the Tamil diaspora's

[120] John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Case Studies of Protracted Ethnic Conflicts, 1993, p. 56.
[121] Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 62.
[122] Douglas H. Johnson, The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars, Indiana University Press, 2003, p. 143.
[123] Marc Weller, Contested Statehood: Kosovo's Struggle for Independence, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 214.

support for the LTTE in Sri Lanka.[124] International organizations may attempt to mediate conflicts, but their effectiveness depends on the willingness of the state and separatist groups to accept external intervention. For example, the Dayton Agreement that ended the Bosnian war in 1995 reflected heavy international involvement in shaping the settlement.

Interactive perspectives emphasize path dependency and learning. Separatist groups and governments adapt strategies based on prior interactions. States that have experienced violent separatism in the past may be less likely to compromise with new separatist claims, fearing a "slippery slope" toward disintegration. Conversely, movements often refine their tactics over time, shifting from peaceful protest to violence (or vice versa) depending on state responses and external opportunities. So, it portrays separatism as the outcome of reciprocal interactions, negotiation failures, and external influences. Unlike structural or behavioural theories that stress underlying conditions or actor choices in isolation, interactive explanations highlight the dynamic interplay between separatist groups, states, and international actors, underscoring why separatist conflicts often persist and evolve rather than being resolved once and for all.

Autonomy is seen as a mechanism that whets the appetite for self-determination for a structure not seeing itself belonging to the central power, and sometimes it could be a solution for the central authority. In cases where the central authority does not satisfy the separatist group's desire for self-determination and self-governance by offering autonomy, armed struggle is a solution for the regional group. Additionally, the driving forces of separatist movements are also deeply related to whether the peripheral group has a previous experience of autonomy. Groups which have recently lost autonomy should be more likely to engage in separatism than groups that are currently autonomous or groups that were never autonomous, ceteris paribus.[125]

Another thing that can be said before breaking away from the broader conceptual context of separatism, these kinds of movements are more common in multi-ethnic nation-states. Therefore, ethnic-based separatist movements are more likely to be studied as they have more cases in history. Anthony Smith argues that "ethnic, rather than territorial, separatisms comprise a majority of all separatisms, whereas most ethnic nationalisms follow the separatist option".[126] One reason for the prevalence of ethnic separatism in nation states is that both the central authority's aim to maintain territorial integrity based on the unitary in perpetuity and the separatist peripheral group's aspiration for independence, both are driven by powerful motivations.

[124] Fuglerud, Life on the Outside: The Tamil Diaspora and Long-Distance Nationalism (London: Pluto Press, 1999, p. 58.
[125] David S. Siroky and John Cuffe, Lost Autonomy, Nationalism and Separatism, Comparative Political Studies, 2015, pp. 5.
[126] Anthony D.Smith, "Nationalism, Ethnic Separatism and the Intelligentsia", in Collin H. Williams, National Separatism, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1982, p.20.

3.1 Ethnic Separatism

In all settings, people find themselves in, and actively work to situate themselves in, groups. These groups are composed of relationships that are bounded and produce social solidarities. Ethnic solidarities are particularly persistent and consequential in settings of ethnic diversity and among those who are least empowered as individuals.[127] Clearly, separatism does not have an inherent ethnic character: in many cases separatist movements are based on a sense of communal identity or even on a territorial - societal distinctiveness. However, in most cases the separatist phenomenon has a strong correlation with ethnicity.[128]

The motivations, triggers, grievance and even external support have limited impact on success. The success of some of the many separatist attitudes centred around ethno-nationalism is directly proportional to their ability to mobilize. Since each type of separatism has its own type of mobilization, the type of mobilization of ethnic separatism is ethnic mobilization. According to Susan Olzak's definition of ethnic mobilization is "the process by which groups organize around some feature of ethnic identity (for example, skin color, language, customs) in pursuit of collective ends."[129] The resource competition, also, has a crucial role in the evolution of ethnic mobilization to an economic and political movement. If there are resources over which a particular authority has no or weak control, this is a factor that enhances the organizational and institutional structure of ethnic mobilization. It is necessary to distinguish conceptual definitions intertwining with ethnic separatism and to observe their links to each other. In accordance with the following categorization, *ethnic differences* in a population potentially form the basis for *ethnic mobilization*. In the meantime, historical and demographic legacies arising from ethnic differences form the basis for *ethnic identification*. The next level of conscious identification with a given ethnic population, including the maintenance of strong ethnic interaction networks and institutions that socialize new members and reinforce social ties, is *ethnic solidarity.*[130] In this context, the success of ethnic mobilization also depends on potential uncontrolled resources and groups or central state authority ready to fight for them. However, as mentioned before, ethnic differences don't always give rise to ethnic mobilization, but they constitute the backbones of ethnic group formation. In brief, the high ethnic difference in a nation-state is a condition soaring the possibility of ethnic mobilization more than a cause leading to it.

When the reasons for the emergence of ethnic mobilization are examined, according to Ragin, *developmental theories of nationalism* attribute the emergence of separatism and ethnic mobilisation to persisting material and cultural inequalities and restrain it in the early stages of modern state-building.[131] Furthermore, Cederman's recent work on nationalism says

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[127] Calhoun, Craig, "The Variability of Belonging: A Reply to Rogers Brubaker", Ethnicities, Vol.3, No.4, 2003, p.558-568.
[128] Thomas Goumenos, Mechanisms of Ethnic and Separatist Mobilisation: A Dynamic Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of Separatist Movements, 1st ECPR Graduate Conference, 2006, p.5.
[129] Susan Olzak, "Contemporary ethnic mobilization", Annual Review of Sociology, Vol.9, 1983, p.355.
[130] Tilly, Do Communities Act? Social. Inq. 43:209-40
[131] Ragin, Charles, The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies, Berkeley, CA, University of California, 1987, p.134.

that separatist movements are profoundly shaped by the drive for congruence between ethnic settlement patterns and political boundaries. Nationalist ideologies strengthen the demand for border adjustments or secession when minorities perceive a mismatch between their territorial presence and the authority of the central state. Restorative narratives that evoke a lost homeland or golden age further intensify mobilization, while modernization processes such as improved infrastructure may simultaneously empower peripheral groups to organize and extend the reach of the state into contested areas. The likelihood of separatist escalation increases in weak states with relatively small core groups and large, distinct minorities excluded from political institutions. Yet, Cederman emphasizes that power-sharing arrangements—rather than secession alone—can mitigate nationalist pressures by providing institutional accommodation to minority groups.[132] Accordingly, the nation-states in modern history have played a significant role in the emergence of ethnic separatism. The increased number of new nations after World War II with diverse ethnic populations, the rise of national governments engaging in nation-building and expanding state authority, the improved organizational capacities of ethnic contenders for power and resources, and the current tendency of nations to avoid direct intervention into another nation's conflicts, but to arm and aid various internal parties, have all contributed to the observed rise in ethnic conflict and separatism.[133] In other words, the construction of the sovereignty based on the nation in cosmopolitan regions with the rise of nation-state perception, the opportunity for mobilization of ethnic minorities subjected to repression in the nation-building process of the central authority, limitation in actions with the development of international law, herein use of domestic problems in the foreign-policy making processes of exogenous countries are relevant in the emerge of ethnic-separatism. Even if most nations include ethnic heterogeneity to some extent, this is not enough to cause ethnic conflicts or separatist activity.

From another approach, the high ethnic division is not enough for ethnic separatist activity to succeed. So, the conditions, mobilizational capabilities, and resources are more relevant as well as experience of autonomy in the success of ethnic separatism than its quantitative feature. This is where the importance of external factors comes into play, unlike the tendency of nation-states to engage in nation-building and expand state authority. According to *modernisation theories*, the macro processes of the modernisation, in part, encourage ethnic mobilization and lead to separatist requests. economic development, literacy and social mobility in Gellner's model, print capitalism according to Benedict Anderson, industrialization, democratization, political participation, etc.[134] Modernists anticipate that ethnicity may be used as a tool for political mobilization if any of the aforementioned processes lead to inequality along pre-existing sub-national cultures.

The peripheral group's experience of autonomy is another driving force for the engagement with separatism and lost autonomy increases the likelihood of separatism. It is

[132] Lars-Erik Cederman, "Nationalism and the Transformation of the State," Nations and Nationalism, 2024.
[133] Nagel Joane, The Conditions of Ethnic Separatism: The Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, Seventy-Third Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, 1978, p. 3.
[134] Eder, Klaus et al, Collective Identities in Action: A Sociological Approach to Ethnicity, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, p.60.

based on four mechanisms. First, it fosters ethnic resentment as a result of diminished status, which engenders grievances that are increasingly hard to appease (e.g., Petersen, 2002). Second, it weakens the central government's ability to make credible commitments, which reduces the viability of conciliatory political strategies. Third, retracting autonomy does not necessarily curb the group's collective action capacity, which was gained and developed under autonomy, as leadership loss, generational replacement, and assimilation are relatively slow processes (Siroky & Aprasdize, 2011). Finally, while the free rider problem is widely recognized, we suggest that the cost of free riding within a group that recently lost autonomy may be higher than joining forces with those who seek separation (Hechter, 2000; Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007), thus making lost autonomy a particularly powerful basis for secession.[135] Pursuant to that, autonomous groups must balance their desire for full independence against the risk of losing their current status. As a result, we anticipate that they are less likely to secede than recently lost autonomy.

According to Olzak's analysis on how contemporary ethnic mobilizations arise from modernization and nationalism processes, there are four major competing theories. These theories converging on the influence of modernization, differ in their interpretations of ethnicity, its role, and causal factors.

1. Developmental Theories: These theories analyse ethnic mobilization as a reflection of interrupted political development within a linear model of state-building. Ethnicity is activated during development phases, often counteracting efforts to centralize state control. Factors such as demographic balance of ethnic groups, regional underdevelopment, and strong core nationalism are seen as catalysts for ethnic movements. Criticisms include the oversimplification of ethnic sentiment decline and the potential for historical factors to contribute to mobilization rather than merely be caused by it.

2. Internal Colonialism and Cultural Division of Labor Models: These models apply core-periphery dynamics from world-systems theory to within-state structures, viewing richer, dominant ethnic groups exploiting peripheral, ethnically distinct ones. They argue that economic disparities alongside cultural differences reinforce ethnic identity and conflict. The notion of a cultural division of labor suggests that socio-economic segregation maintains boundaries and solidarity among ethnic groups.

3. Economic Models of Ethnicity: These theories consider specific economic conditions that foster ethnic solidarity and mobilization. They include:

    - Split Labor Market Theory: Proposes that ethnic conflict arises when different groups compete for jobs at varying wage levels, leading to antagonism among groups.

[135] David S. Siroky and John Cuffe, Lost Autonomy, Nationalism and Separatism, Comparative Political Studies, 2015, p. 5.

- Segregated Labor Markets: Suggests that specific occupational roles and social networks within ethnic groups create barriers to assimilation, thereby maintaining ethnic solidarity.

4. Competitive Theories of Ethnic Mobilization: They suggest that as ethnic groups engage in competition for resources in labor markets, they become more likely to mobilize collectively along ethnic lines rather than along class or other social distinctions. Rooted in human ecology and resource mobilization theories, these models argue that increased access to scarce resources can lead to political mobilization. In this context, ethnicity is viewed as a situationally defined attribute, influenced by individual choices based on perceived advantages and disadvantages associated with belonging to a particular ethnic group. Competitive theories posit that modernization—through urbanization and industrialization—encourages ethnic mobilization by facilitating larger-scale reorganizations that align with national demands for self-determination.

The key processes associated with modernization that may lead to ethnic mobilization include urbanization, industrial labor force changes, political sector expansion, and the move towards independence from colonial control. Empirical research generally supports these propositions, revealing that more developed and urbanized regions tend to have a higher incidence of ethnic party formation. Furthermore, a significant area of research in this field examines how changes in security dynamics affect ethnic competition within multiethnic states. This approach highlights the interactions between local, state, and federal responses to ethnic group mobilization and the broader implications for state security. Overall, while competitive models have shown varying levels of empirical support, the evidence underscores a complex relationship between modernization processes and ethnic identity mobilization.

If it comes to the point of the complexities of ethnic solidarity and mobilization, while ethnic identities can persist despite assimilation into the dominant culture, strong markers of ethnicity like language or religious practices can still lead to large-scale mobilization. Socio-economic status and education can co-exist with ethnic activism, suggesting that upward mobility does not eliminate ethnic politics. (Olzak:1983, 358-363). In sum, the theories provide varied insights into the relationship between ethnicity, economic factors, and social structures in shaping ethnic experiences and movements.

On the other hand, there is a strong correlation between nationalism and ethnic mobilization. As a phenomenon nationalism emphasizes loyalty and devotion to a nation, often defined by a shared identity, culture, language and ethnicity. While fostering unity, it can also lead to exclusion of those who do not share the same patterns. The idea of "national self-determination" has fuelled sub-nationalism since its inception during the French Revolution. The governance and the sovereignty relying on the nation brought together the centralization during the state-building periods, contrarily, subnations developed their reflections against this penetration of the parent nation-state. The centralization arising from the nation-state building activities or the fact that states shape their sovereignty on centralism and national governance may trigger the sub-nationalist ideology of sub-groups living within that state. This sentiment of belonging emerged as a reaction. So, the sub-groups have found a

basis to formulate their already existing ethnic identities. In this case, nation-state policies are not considered overarching and unifying by the ethnic sub-groups. It is perceived that this sovereignty concept does not represent the sub-group interests. Moreover, the ethnic sub-groups set off a quest of ethnic mobilization aiming for political empowerment. When they mobilize, they can seek a greater representation office guaranteeing to seek their rights and interest which comprise a unique and national autonomy or self-determination form. Therefore, one would further anticipate that state discrimination against minority religions or languages would imply higher risks of ethnic separatism.

On the flip side, strong ethnic mobilization can lead to tensions and conflicts, especially if one group's nationalism threatens another. This can result in political instability or violence. This stage is the post-ethnic mobilization stage on the separatist plane. At this stage, the subgroup's already existing identity formulation has been re-formulated, mobilization has been ensured, and a sub-management (federate) structure has been requested, bound by the national framework, and this request has been refused by the parent state. At this point, both sides will insist on their claims, and the physical violence will be inevitable. This result is so widespread that a large part of the civil war category in literature is composed of ethnic separatist movements. Pursuantly, one can predict where a civil war will break out by looking for where ethnic or other broad political grievances are strongest. The effect on the evolution of ethnic separatism into civil war is whether the conditions for the insurgency are suitable more than ethnic grievance because it's already a phase of ethnic grievance. As a definition, insurgency is a technology of military conflict characterized by small, lightly armed bands practicing guerrilla warfare from rural base areas. As a form of warfare insurgency can be harnessed to diverse political agendas, motivations, and grievances.[136] When dealing with the insurgency-condition equation, the appropriateness of the conditions means the question of the central state's internal sovereignty. This is a situation brought about by organizational, economic, military and institutional weakness. It is not only a suitable condition for the uprising, but also an element that makes it more effective and attractive and boosts the aspirations of ethnic-alt-groups.

Another situation is the regional conditions that are suitable for the insurgency. The central state, which has institutional weaknesses in the city, is not expected to have a strong penetration into the countryside. Properly, according to Lipset and Rokkan's cleavage theory, separatism can be understood as an intensified form of the centre–periphery cleavage, where peripheral ethnic groups resist the homogenizing authority of the central state. When such groups experience political exclusion, cultural suppression, or economic marginalization, their grievances become organized along identity lines and may escalate into separatist demands. The Kurdish struggle in Iraq or the Catalan movement in Spain exemplify how historically entrenched centre–periphery divisions transform into mobilized separatist movements, demonstrating that ethnic separatism is not a transient conflict but the outcome

[136] James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War, The American Political Science Review, Feb. 2003, p. 75.

of structural and enduring cleavages within the state.[137] The area where the central state's weakness for the rebellion is at its peak is periphery, that is, rural terrain. Moreover, ethnic subgroups in these regions are more likely to provide local support than the central government. Because the weak central state has insufficient economic and military involvement in the peripheral region. In this case, the local population is more likely to engage and support the rebellion of the ethnic sub-group due to the lack of presence of the parent state there.

Rebel movements are more likely to organize around ethnicity because ethnic groups are more apt to be aggrieved, better able to mobilize, and more likely to face difficult bargaining challenges compared to other groups. These conditions are the result of three features associated with ethnicity: the historical distribution of political power based on ethnicity, the physical location and concentration of ethnic groups (including their migration patterns), and an ethnicity-based identity that is more fixed and identifiable relative to other political affiliations.[138] Ethnicity-based intra-state conflicts or civil wars against a centre authority have two main aims. The former is to take the control of the centre-state, and the latter is secession. The rebel movements shaped around ethnic framework serve one of these aims and they, eventually, may or may not achieve success. Also, it is more likely to take long because of bargaining problems. The ethnic sub-group fortified by the local population won't stop until it gets the result it wants (taking control of the centre-state or achieving autonomous structure) just as the central state won't accept the territorial loss. Violence occurs if both leaders are not choosing to settle. Indeed, the parent state is frequently aware that the ethnic rebellion group can rapidly mobilize and organize if the grievances are at stake. But giving a capitulation by offering a solution satisfying the rebel group is the last option for the parent state. At this point, it is necessary to understand the strong correlation between grievance and mobilization. A state that is aware of this strong relationship before it moves is relatively advantageous in developing a better strategy. This correlation does work only if the following conditions allow. First, the parent state must have weakness in terms of the resources, internal sovereignty and institutions. Second, the rebel ethnic sub-group must have financial capabilities by virtue of the local support, organise crime or external big patron state. Third, the less accessible and uncontrolled epicenter where the rebel group can develop network capabilities and can carry out organizational and distributional operations.

In ethnic separatist riots, negotiations for bargaining are slower and more difficult to implement because the rebel group, having strong motivation, requests sharp concessions from the central government. Power-sharing comes at the heart of these requests and that's what must be fought for a unified state. This also applies to the other side, the central authority. Preventing an insurgency attempt for a parent state that has infiltrated the peripheral

[137] Seymour Martin Lipset & Stein Rokkan, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives, Free Press, 1967; David Romano, The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity, Cambridge University Press, 2006 ; Michael Keating, Nations Against the State: The New Politics of Nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

[138] Elaine K Denny and Barbara F Walter, Ethnicity and Civil War, Journal of Peace Research March 2014, Vol. 51, No. 2, Anniversary Special Issue (March 2014), p. 200.

group is a more reasonable option than sitting at the negotiating table. In short, the difficulty in negotiating between the parties is proportional to the level of strength of the rebel group or the central state.

Access to resources is another factor that will enable the rebel group to gain a significant impetus on the road to success. It affects all the policies and relationships of the rebel group over and over and leads to the continuation of violence for a longer period of time. It is a provision to say that an ethnic separatist group that can finance its own existence with regional resources is not an easy trick for the central state. The existence of resources or access to them alone is not enough to enjoy. In order for this resource input to turn into a profitable output, the presence of this rebel group must be important for a third party's (state, company or organization) interests. Because the ethnic rebel group may not have enough infrastructure to process the resources and safely trade. It must be able to access a guide, a recipient, or a transport network. A third external patron state is more likely to support in such a situation. Because, at this point, the scheme is more transparent to detect which side of the relationship is more profitable: with the central parent state that has external sovereignty but is facing the problem of internal sovereignty or with the ethnic separatist group that has achieved relative success in the road of secession.

In weak and ethnically divided states, attempts by central authority elites to mobilize support from their own ethnic group in order to increase their reach and influence can provoke a backlash from other ethnic sub-groups. If the other ethnic sub-group has a modicum of power in some parts of the state, it will not hesitate to mobilize it. At this point, purges by the central elites to eliminate this partial power of the other ethnic sub-group may lead to an armed conflict. If the peripheral group that defines itself as a victim uses this elimination as an efficient propaganda tool and it develops broad organizational activities, the grievances may transform to armed resistance to overthrow the already weak central authority. This outcome is more likely if peripheral ethnic sub-groups cannot ensure an engagement with the political wheel of the state. Because for an ethnic sub-group to participate in the political mechanism of the state and to exist in the political articulation means to exist in a plane where the central authority draws the boundaries. This ethnic sub-group will have accepted the charter set by the central authority and will not be able to go beyond specific demands that will increase the welfare or freedom of the minority to which it belongs.

A prominent example can be seen in Sudan during the late 20th century. In the 1980s, the central government in Khartoum increasingly aligned itself with Arab and Islamist elites, marginalizing the predominantly African, non-Arab populations in the south. When the central authority attempted to consolidate its power through Islamization and Arabization policies, southern groups—already mobilized through partial control in their regions—responded by organizing armed resistance under the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). Government purges and repressions were then used by the SPLA as propaganda, reinforcing a collective victim identity and broadening recruitment. Because southern groups were structurally excluded from meaningful political participation in Khartoum’s institutions, their grievances escalated from demands for autonomy to an armed

struggle that ultimately aimed at overthrowing or breaking away from central authority. This dynamic fits the model whereby exclusion, repression, and propaganda transform grievances into large-scale ethnic rebellion.[139]

3.2 Iraqi Ethnic and Religious Differences

Compared to its neighbours, Iraq has a unique ethnic and religious diversity. This diversity consists of the three largest ethnic groups in Iraq: the Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkmen peoples. While these groups have several similarities, mostly in religion, as all of these groups have a Muslim religious majority, they also have some sectarian differences, particularly in which branch of Islam they follow, notably Sunni and Shia. mainly because tribal organisation still plays an important role in social life. There are also other religions in Iraq, such as Christianity and Hinduism, with Shiite Islam being the largest religious group in the country.

Some other important ethnic groups are the Yazidi and Assyrian people. These groups only make up a small portion of the demographics in Iraq, but they are unique and distinct groups that affect the nation's culture. Part of what makes these groups unique is that they are both predominantly non-Muslim while they reside in the Middle East where Islam represents a majority of its people, including Iraq. The Assyrian people are mostly Syriac Christian and comprise most of Iraq's Christian population, while the Yazidi people follow their own unique ethnic religion. Yazidism is known for being monotheistic while having Zoroastrian influences leading to their persecution in Iraq and the surrounding region for much of their history. All of these groups are very important to understanding Iraq and its culture as all these groups contribute to the culture and society seen in Iraq today.

The demographics of Iraq are essential to understanding the culture and people that exist in the nation. As a general rule of thumb, the southern region of the country is dominated by Arab communities, while the north is a mix of ethnic groups, including Turkmen, Kurdish, and Arabic peoples. Geography also divides religious affiliation as the north is home to most of the nation's Sunni communities, and the south is dominated by Shia believers. While the Kurdish people are a minority ethnic group in Iraq, they constitute a majority in the region close to the Turkish border with Iraq. Turkmen people and communities can also be found in larger groups in the north, but not as much as Kurdish communities. This means that the ethnic groups could be organized according to size in the following order: the Arabic people, Kurdish people, and Turkmen people.

We firstly come across Turkmen concept in the Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk (the Compendium of the languages of the Turks) -is the first comprehensive dictionary of Turkic languages, compiled between 1072–74 by the Kara-Khanid scholar Mahmud al-Kashgari, who

[139] Douglas H. Johnson, The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars: Peace or Truce, Oxford, James Currey, 2011.

extensively documented the Turkic languages of his time- in accordance with the historical roots based on the sources that Turkmen was called for the Muslim Oghuz Turks to distinguish from non-Muslim Oghuz Turks which both were living in Transoxiana. The term "Turkmen" in its broad and familiar sense refers to the Turks who migrated westward, namely the Oghuz Turks, as well as the Turks who converted to Islam. In this sense, it includes the Turks of today's Turkey, Azerbaijan, the Balkans, Cyprus, Syria, and Iraq. The Turkmen tribe living in Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and to some extent Iran, are not actually related to the Iraqi Turkmen, or rather, the Turks, as is commonly believed. The use of the term "Turkmen" for the Turks who have continued their existence in Iraq to this day is, in fact, the product of a failed ideology, one that is deeply rooted in hidden political maneuvering. Although the Turks living in Iraq were referred to as "Turks" for many years, they began to be called "Turkmen" in 1959. This practice is intended to sever the Iraqi Turks' ancestral ties with Türkiye.[140]

Although there are various accounts regarding the arrival of the Sunni Turks in Iraq, the prevailing view is that they were settled in Basra during the Umayyad period by Ubayd Allah. According to current knowledge, the first entry of Turks into Iraq dates back to the year 674. Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad, who was dispatched to Khorasan by the Umayyad Caliph Muʿawiya, crossed the Oxus River with an army of 20,000 and advanced toward Bukhara. After passing through Baykand, Ubayd Allah launched attacks on Bukhara. In response, the princess of Bukhara, Hatun, leading Turkish forces, engaged in fierce battles but was eventually compelled to make peace. Following this settlement, Ubayd Allah took Turkish soldiers with him to Iraq and settled them in Basra. Historical sources report that the number of Turkish soldiers settled in Basra was around 2,000.[141]

The migration of Turks into Iraq in groups at certain intervals became a long-term process. The first Turkish group entered Iraq in 652. In 674, during the siege of Bukhara, the Umayyad commander Ubaydullah, having witnessed the bravery of the Turks and their skill in weaponry, established a large Turkish community in the city of Basra. Thus, Turks later occupied an important position within the Umayyad army.

Nevertheless, various opinions have been expressed regarding the origins of the Iraqi Turkmens. Some accounts hold that they were first settled in the region by the Great Seljuks, while another narrative suggests that nearly 100,000 Turks fleeing from the Mongols constituted the first Turkish families of Iraq.[142] Other views maintain that their arrival coincided with the Ottoman period, when they were stationed along the Baghdad Road to provide security.[143] Still other interpretations claim that they were descendants of Turks

[140] S. Saatçi, Tarihi Gelişim İçinde Irak'ta Türk Varlığı, (Turkish Presence in Iraq in Historical Development), İstanbul 1996, pp. 17.
[141] Irak'ta Türkmen Azınlık ve Kerküklü Göçmenler (TURKMEN MINORITY IN IRAQ AND IMMIGRANTS FROM KIRKUK) MA Thesis Study, Marmara University Middle East and Islamic Countries Institute Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Istanbul 2001, pp. 10.
[142] Zeki Velidi Togan, Umumi Türk Tarihine Giriş, (Introduction to General Turkish History), Istanbul: Enderun Kitabevi, 1981.
[143] Faruk Sümer, The Oghuz Turks (Turkmens): Their History, Tribal Organization, and Epics, Istanbul: Turkish World Research Foundation, 1999.

brought from Maragha and settled there by Shah Ismail, or that they originated from Turkish garrisons in Azerbaijan who were resettled by Nader Shah.[144]

According to the Iraqi officer and historian Taha al-Hashimi, whose geography textbook was once used in Iraqi middle schools, the origins of the Turks in Iraq can be explained differently. He argued that the Abbasid Caliphate had recruited Turks from Turkistan to form the elite *Hassa* army, and that, in later centuries, soldiers from the army of Sultan Murad IV—who conquered Baghdad—as well as Janissaries left to guard the roads, were also settled in the region.[145] Thus, the settlement place of Turks in Iraq encompasses the region, starting from the border of Syria to the southeast of Baghdad, where the Arabs and Kurds live. In addition, the proof of the deep-rooted presence of the Turks in Iraq is based on historical sources and official documents, it is possible to illustrate some official documents proving that Turks are apparently majority in some specific regions like Kirkuk, Erbil and Telafar even after the establishment of the Iraqi state. Specifically, an important official document in terms of the Turkish identity of Kirkuk and legal rights of the Turkmens, is the Law of Local Administrations legislated in 1931. Another constitutional document which indicates Turkish presence in Iraq, Mosul and Kirkuk regions, and their historical rights, is 1932 Iraqi State Declaration. The declaration published right after Iraq's independence and membership in the UN, approves that Turks are one of the three "primary components" together with Kurds and Arabs.[146] Another declaration published by the Iraqi Government and sent to the United Nations states that the province of Kirkuk is composed of Turks.[147]

Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, while describing the Turkmen settlements, states, "The location of the beautiful city of Kirkuk and the Turkmen villages, and even the location of the various villages engaged in rain-fed agriculture, has remained unchanged over the last two centuries. In areas where Turkish blood predominates, where Turkish and Turkish influence are clearly visible, a Turkish predominance has always been observed." In this context, when describing Kirkuk, Longrigg states that its language is Turkish.[148]

According to a thesis study of Turkmen Minority in Iraq and Immigrants from Kirkuk by Tarik Tufan, "in 1965, the Iraqi Ministry of Planning's census department officially estimated the Turkish population at 780,000. However, in 1987, the INQUIRY journal published in the United Kingdom emphasized that at least 1,500,000 Turks were living in Iraq."[149]

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[144] Abbas Vali, Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011.
[145] Taha al-Hashimi, Geography Book, Baghdad: Ministry of Education, 1930s,(used in Iraqi middle schools).
[146] Bir Türkmen Şehri Kerkük (Kirkuk as A Turkmen City), Metin Kopar, Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency, Eurasia 36/2009, pp.127.
[147] Osmanlı Döneminde Kuzey Irak (1831-1914) (Northern Iraq in Ottoman Era 1831-1914), Sinan Marufoglu, Eren Publications, Istanbul, 1998, pp. 56.
[148] Fourth Edition: Four Centuries of Modern Iraq, Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, Oxford Clarendon Press, Translator: Jafar Al-Khayyat, (1968), pp.122-361.
[149] TURKMEN MINORITY IN IRAQ AND IMMIGRANTS FROM KIRKUK MA Thesis Study, Marmara University Middle East and Islamic Countries Institute Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Istanbul 2001, pp. 12.

The Kurdish presence in Iraq represents one of the most historically significant and culturally distinct components of the country's demographic mosaic. The Kurds have inhabited the mountainous northern regions of Iraq for centuries encompassing parts of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Kirkuk. Throughout history, the Kurdish population in Iraq has maintained a unique linguistic, cultural, and social identity, despite facing shifting political landscapes and external pressures from successive empires and modern nation-states. From Ottoman administrative divisions to British mandate policies in the early twentieth century, the Kurdish people have often struggled for recognition, autonomy, and preservation of their cultural heritage. In the modern era, particularly following the establishment of the Iraqi state, Kurdish communities have played a pivotal role in shaping political dynamics, participating in both local governance and broader national affairs. The Kurdish experience in Iraq, marked by resilience and cultural continuity, continues to influence regional stability and the complex interplay between ethnic identity and state formation in the Middle East.

The Kurds have frequently had reason to believe that their basic desire to remain culturally and linguistically separate from their neighbours has been ignored. Although there are small groups of Kurds living in Syria and the USSR, the majority reside in Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Related to the Persians by language (both are Aryan), and to the Turks and most Arabs by their common Sunni religion, the Kurds remain a separate linguistic group inside all three countries, easily distinguished from Persians, Turks and Arabs by their separate tribal structure and such social characteristics as the relative freedom enjoyed by their women. [150]

Kurdish identity in Iraq is most vividly grounded in language, cultural memory, and oral traditions that preserve a sense of belonging across generations. Sorani and Kurmanji (Badini) dialects remain the strongest markers of regional affiliation, with Sorani predominating in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, and Kurmanji more common in Duhok and surrounding areas. Scholars note that the Kurdish language itself has become a symbol of resistance and self-definition, particularly given the long periods in which Baghdad restricted Kurdish education and media.[151] In line with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language not only communicates but also structures identity, embedding ways of thinking, storytelling, and even cultural pride.[152] Folklore, poetry, and the oral artistry of *dengbêj* singers function as living repositories of history, carrying accounts of love, exile, and oppression. Kawa Morad has shown how Kurdish intellectuals between the 1920s and 1940s deliberately invoked these oral traditions in literary journals like *Hawar* and *Roja Nû* to construct a cultural nationalism and transmit identity to a wider audience.[153] These practices highlight that Kurdish identity is not only transmitted vertically through family and community but also horizontally, as cultural activists and intellectuals continually reinterpret Kurdishness in relation to shifting historical and social pressures.

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[150] Arab-Kurdish Rivalries in Iraq, Lettie M. Wenner, Middle East Journal, Winter - Spring, 1963, Vol. 17, No. 1/2 (Winter - Spring, 1963), pp. 68-82.
[151] McDowall, David. A Modern History of the Kurds. 3rd ed. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
[152] Language, Culture and Identity: Kurds and Kurdish Through the Lens of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, April 2023.
[153] Morad, Kawa. "Musical spirits and poetic tongues: oral traditions in the cultural politics of Kurdish intellectuals (1920s–1940s)." British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 2022.

Another crucial dimension of Kurdish identity in Iraq is the memory of violence and the resilience forged in its aftermath. The Anfal campaign of 1988 and the chemical bombardment of Halabja represent foundational traumas that continue to shape Kurdish self-understanding. Human Rights Watch has documented how villages were razed, populations displaced, and survivors marked by a legacy of loss that now permeates cultural expression.[154] Memory of these atrocities is kept alive through annual commemorations, poetry, monuments, and oral testimony, binding communities together despite dialectal and political divisions. The New Yorker has described Halabja as a "great terror" whose memory entered the cultural DNA of the Kurdish people, uniting them in shared mourning and resilience.[155] Religious and cultural pluralism deepens this identity: while most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, Feyli Shiʿa, Yazidis, Kaka'i, and Ahl-e Haqq minorities also claim Kurdishness, complicating any simplistic definition. This demonstrates that Kurdish ethnicity is constructed less through uniform religious practice than through shared language, memory, and lived cultural experience. Music in particular embodies this inclusive identity, with *dengbêj* narratives and anthems such as *Ey Reqîb* serving as both cultural archive and rallying cry for unity.[156] Institutions like the Kurdish Heritage Institute in Sulaymaniyah reinforce this by preserving and archiving music, oral literature, and ethnographic materials, ensuring that memory is institutionalized as well as lived.

Kurdish identity must also be understood through the lens of diaspora, globalization, and everyday belonging within Iraq itself. Kurdish communities abroad—in Europe, North America, and the Middle East—negotiate layered identities, where being Kurdish is intertwined with experiences of migration, integration, and generational change. Studies of the diaspora emphasize a "triadic belonging" that ties Kurds simultaneously to homeland, host society, and community, transforming narratives of victimhood into transnational empowerment. Online networks and digital media provide new arenas for identity construction, enabling diasporic Kurds to participate in a pluralistic, decentralized discourse on what it means to be Kurdish. Within Iraq, too, field research in Erbil demonstrates that language has overtaken religion as the primary marker of Kurdishness, suggesting a shift toward cultural-linguistic affiliation as the essence of ethnic identity.

Iraqi Kurds concentrated primarily in the northern governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk, are religiously diverse, though the majority identify as Sunni Muslims adhering to the Shafiʿi school of jurisprudence. Unlike their Sunni Arab counterparts, Kurdish Islam has historically developed in close connection with Sufi traditions, which played an important role in shaping both religious practice and social organization. Prominent Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya established deep roots in Kurdish regions, serving not only as spiritual movements but also as networks of political authority, mediation, and resistance against external powers. The shrines of Sufi saints and the reverence of charismatic

[154] Human Rights Watch. Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds. New York: HRW, 1993.
[155] Ignatieff, Michael. "The Great Terror." The New Yorker, March 25, 2002.
[156] Hassanpour, Amir. Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan 1918–1985. San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992.

sheikhs remain a central component of Kurdish religious life, particularly in rural areas. Kurdish religiosity has also been marked by a strong localization of practices. Tribal affiliation, local customs, and the authority of village sheikhs often shape religious observance as much as formal Islamic jurisprudence. Furthermore, Sufism provided an outlet for a more flexible and culturally resonant form of Islam, which allowed the integration of pre-Islamic practices and communal rituals into religious life. Beyond Sunni Islam, Kurdish society also includes several important minority faith communities, most notably the Yazidis. The Yazidi religion, with roots in pre-Islamic Mesopotamian and Iranian traditions, incorporates elements of Zoroastrianism, ancient Mesopotamian cosmologies, and Sufi mysticism.[157] Central to Yazidi belief is the veneration of Melek Ṭāʾūs, the Peacock Angel, as the chief emanation of God. While Yazidis are ethnically Kurdish, they have long been regarded as religious outsiders, facing accusations of heresy from surrounding Muslim communities. This marginalization often led to persecution, including waves of violence in modern times, culminating in the genocidal attacks carried out by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, which displaced hundreds of thousands and destroyed centuries-old Yazidi communities in Sinjar.[158] In addition to Yazidis, smaller groups such as Kurdish Christians, Kakais (Yarsanis), and Alevis contribute to the religious mosaic of Kurdish society. The Kakais, also known as Yarsanis or Ahl-e Haqq, practice a syncretic faith with roots in Shiʿa Islam, Zoroastrianism, and mystical traditions.[159] Their presence, concentrated around Kirkuk and parts of Sulaymaniyah, reflects the long history of religious pluralism in Kurdish regions, though they too have faced marginalization due to their heterodox practices.

Religious identity among Kurds intersects with ethno-political struggles. While Islam has provided a unifying framework, Kurdish nationalism has often been framed in secular terms, prioritizing ethnic solidarity over sectarian or doctrinal differences. Nonetheless, the recognition of Yazidis, Kakais, and other minorities as integral to the Kurdish nation has been contested, and debates over inclusion remain central to contemporary Kurdish politics.

Politically, the first- the last so far- long-term attempt by the Kurds to establish a sovereign state was the Ayyubid State, founded in the 12th century by abolishing Fatimids reigning in Egypt. Ayyubid State, its army composed of Kurds and Turkmens, inherited its statehood mechanism and mobilizational military abilities from the Seljuks, was sovereign on the regions of Egypt, Hijaz, Yemen and a significant part of the fertile crescent until 1290. After the several domestic conflicts broke out between Turkmens and Kurds, the state weakened and lost its authority in distant vilayets. So, important Kurdish tribes declared their loyalties to Mamluks, the successor state of Ayyubids, to promote their sovereignties. During that period, Mongolian invasion deeply affected the Kurds' fate for independence. In the mid-13th century, Hulagu Han, grandson of the Chinggis, seized Baghdad and terminated

[157] Allison, C. The Yazidis. In O. Bengio (Ed.), Minorities in the Middle East: Power and the Politics of Difference (pp. 173–194). Routledge., 2014.
[158] Cetorelli, V., Sasson, I., Shabila, N., & Burnham, G. (2017). Mortality and kidnapping of Yazidis in the context of the 2014 attack by the Islamic State. PLoS Medicine, 14(5), e1002297.
[159] Hamzeh'ee, M. R. The Yaresan: A Sociological, Historical, and Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community. K. Schwarz Verlag, 1990.

Abbasid Caliphate in Iraq. After the short-term reign of Jalayirid dynasty, Iraq was seized in 1400's by the Timur Leng, possessing kinship with the Chinggis Khan, who was the steppe Muslim leader. So, due to its location, Iraq has been the favourite and even the capital of the great Asian, European and Middle Eastern empires.

The sociology of Iraq under Ottoman rule was shaped by a complex interplay of imperial authority, tribal power, and religious rivalry. Within this context, the Kurdish presence in the north of Iraq constituted a distinct and often resistant force that challenged Ottoman centralization and contributed to the fragmentation of authority in the region. The Kurdish lands were marked by political autonomy, tribal leadership, and armed resistance, which together limited the reach of the Ottoman state. By the seventeenth century, the Ottoman Empire had been weakened by continuous wars with the Safavid Empire and could no longer exert firm control over its provincial territories. In northern Iraq, this power vacuum allowed Kurdish leaders to assert themselves. The most notable of these was the Baban Dynasty, which emerged as a Kurdish power. The Babans organized Kurdish resistance in the region, consolidating control over local populations and resisting Ottoman attempts at direct rule.[160] Unlike many Arab tribes in central and southern Iraq, the Babans established a more stable semi-dynastic rule, strengthening a sense of Kurdish political identity. This stability stemmed from the relations between Ottoman central authority and Kurdish tribal chefs based on mutual privileges which they granted each other. Kurdish tribes were emphasizing semi-autonomous structure in their region while Ottomans were requesting loyalty to the central power. This win-win policy was so sustainable that the Ottoman Empire used Kurdish tribes as military units on the border against Safavid attacks for many years.

Small-scale Kurdish revolts before the British mandate period derived from economic reasons more than ethnic secessionist ideas. It's not wrong to say, accordingly, the national consciousness of Kurds emerged during the British mandate period. Although the Ottoman dynasty consisted of Turk ethnicity and emphasized Turkish genealogy in their administrational culture, they tried to preserve Islamic identity and rose to prominence in the holy war tradition against non-Muslims, especially in Anatolian territories. So, they achieved to consolidate Muslim feudalities by getting their support. In other words, unlike Europe, there was not any feudal power to weaken the central authority in the Ottoman Empire, the territory belonged to the dynasty, but each cosmopolitan form had a right to live free with its religion, tradition and relative administration whether Muslim or Turkish. So, they successfully ruled over years in Iraq where diversity has been a problem until today.

In addition to the fact that the mandate power was non-Muslim-this will have a catastrophic effect limiting British penetration in Iraq-, England tried to intervene in the economic and domestic affairs of Iraqis. Pursuant to the anatomy of the region, setting multi-ethnic administration in Iraq was not the first option for British power. Gathering the power in one and sole authority was a step escalating freedom revolts and directly triggered different domestic powers to unite regardless of ethnic and sectarian differences. Kurdish tribes were one of the important subjects of these separatist movements although they were

[160] McDowall, D., A Modern History of the Kurds (3rd ed.). I.B. Tauris. 2004.

used historically by local and European governments as mercenaries and agitators. Different Kurdish tribes were allied with both the Russians and the Turks during the First World War and Kurdish loyalties to the government were unpredictable.[161]

The Sunni-Shia conflict traces back to disputes over succession after the Prophet Mohammed's death. Sunni accounts claim he sought writing materials to provide guidance, while Shia traditions hold he wished to appoint Ali.[162] At the *Saqifah* meeting, Abu Bakr was chosen as caliph with Omar's support, though Shia sources assert Ali was excluded.[2] Ali later assumed the caliphate after Osman's assassination but faced opposition from Aisha at the Battle of the Camel and from Muawiya of Damascus, whose refusal to pledge allegiance led to prolonged conflict and the emergence of the Kharijites.[163] Ali was eventually assassinated, and his son Hasan relinquished the caliphate to Muawiya on condition that succession be determined by shura, a promise broken when Muawiya appointed his son Yazid. Hussein's refusal to recognize Yazid culminated in the Battle of Karbala, where Hussein and his family were killed, an event central to Shia identity. While the division originated in the Prophet's era, it acquired lasting political form with the establishment of the Shi'ite Fatimid state in the 10th century.[164]

In Mesopotamia, Arab groups were present on the margins — principally nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in the desert fringes and along trade routes — but the dense urban and irrigated agricultural systems of the alluvial plain were culturally and linguistically continuations of the late-antique Near East rather than an "Arab" heartland in the strict sense. Followingly, The Arab-Muslim conquests of the seventh century brought new ruling elites, military settlers, and a new religious-legal order. Military victories and subsequent settlement by Arab troops and their families began to reconfigure political authority and elite culture in Mesopotamia. Local administrative structures, agricultural practices, and many indigenous communities continued while Arabic increasingly became the language of the new ruling class and of Islamic institutions. The process that follows — conversion to Islam and increasing use of Arabic in administration, literature, and religious life — set the long-term foundations for what later generations would call an "Arab" cultural-linguistic sphere in much of Iraq.[165]

The foundation of Baghdad (al-Madinat al-Salam) in 762 CE by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur transformed central Iraq into the political and intellectual heart of the Islamic world. As capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, Baghdad became a magnet for scholars, administrators, merchants and artisans from across the Islamic lands, and Arabic flourished as the language of theology, law, science, and literature. The Abbasid era thus consolidated Arabic's centrality in urban life and transregional networks, even as the countryside and some minority communities retained other languages and local identities. The prominence of

[161] The Conditions of Ethnic Separatism: The Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Nagel Joane, May 1978.
[162] Moojan Momen, An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism, Yale University Press, 1985.
[163] Ira M. Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies, 3rd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2014.
[164] Farhad Daftary, The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
[165] Morony, M. G., Iraq After the Muslim Conquest (Princeton Studies / Gorgias Press).

Baghdad as an Arabic-speaking cosmopolis is a major reason Iraq later came to be perceived as part of the Arab world.[166]

"Arabization" was not a single event but a multilayered, centuries-long process with geographic and social variation. In cities and administrative centres Arabic and Islamic institutions became dominant; in many rural and peripheral areas older languages and identities persisted for much longer. Moreover, the term "Arab" itself gathered religious, linguistic, and political meanings over time: being Arab could mean speaking Arabic, adhering to Arab tribal affiliations, or belonging to the Arabic-Islamic cultural sphere. While Arabic and Arab identity spread widely, a mosaic of ethnic and religious minorities (Kurds, Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs, Turkmen, Yazidis, Mandaeans, Armenians, and others) continued to inhabit significant parts of the territory.[167]

Modern nationalism — Arab nationalism in particular — and British political engineering tended to frame the polity in terms that emphasized Arabic language and identity, especially in national institutions and official culture. These developments helped shape the idea of Iraq as an Arab-majority nation-state in the twentieth century. In the twentieth century, competing ideologies (pan-Arab nationalism, Baʿthism, tribal and sectarian politics) influenced how "Arab" identity was mobilized. The Baʿth regime's policies at times promoted Arab nationalist narratives and, in particular periods (notably under Saddam ḥusayn), engaged in forcibly assimilationist measures in certain areas (e.g., Arabization campaigns in northern and minority-populated regions). These policies had lasting demographic, political and humanitarian effects and contributed to shifts in population distribution and identity claims among minority groups. Scholarly treatments emphasize both coercion (state-led demographic engineering) and local strategies of resistance and survival.

The 2003 invasion, the subsequent breakdown of central authority, the sectarian violence of the mid-2000s, and the 2014–2017 Islamic State (ISIS) offensive produced waves of displacement, sectarian re-sorting of cities, and catastrophic violence against minority communities (notably Yazidis, Christians, and others). Large-scale internal displacement peaked in the mid-2000s and again during and after the ISIS period; international and humanitarian agencies document millions displaced internally and hundreds of thousands who fled abroad in the 2000s and 2010s. These crises reshaped local demography and left enduring impacts on communal geography and minority populations.[168][169]

Contemporary authoritative demographic summaries estimate that Arabs constitute roughly three-quarters to four-fifths of Iraq's population, with most international and government reports placing the proportion in the range of ≈75–80% Arab, ≈15–20%

[166] Tripp, Charles, A History of Iraq (Cambridge University Press).
[167] Kevin Van Bladel, Late Antique Responses to the Arab Conquests, Chapter 5: Arabicization, Islamization, and the Colonies of the Conquerors, 2022, 89-119.
[168] Iraq Situation Response: Update on revised activities under the January 2007 Supplementary Appeal, UNHCR, July 2007.
[169] Ali Ayad Thamer, Iraq's Displacement Crisis, SADA, Published on October 17, 2024.

Kurdish, and the remainder comprising Turkmen, Assyrians, Yazidis, Shabaks, Mandeans, and other minorities.[170][171] These figures are best understood as estimates, since Iraq has not conducted a fully reliable, up-to-date, and politically uncontested census of ethnicity and religion for decades. As a result, modern demographic statements rely heavily on a combination of historical censuses, UN agency estimates, U.S. government reports, and independent compilations.[172]

Within the Arab population, there are major social and sectarian subdivisions. The largest single communal group is that of the Shia Arabs, concentrated in southern Iraq (Basra, Najaf, Karbala, Maysan, Dhi Qar, Muthanna, Qadisiyyah, and parts of Baghdad) as well as in the mid-Euphrates region. By contrast, Sunni Arabs are concentrated primarily in the western desert provinces and the central/northern governorates: notably Anbar, large areas of Salah al-Din, and parts of Nineveh (Mosul and its environs before the rise of ISIS).

Most contemporary sources converge on the assessment that Iraq's Muslim population is majority Shia. The CIA World Factbook estimates the religious composition at 61–64% Shia and 29–34% Sunni (2015 estimate, reaffirmed in 2023 country profiles).[6] The U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report (2021) offers a slightly broader range, placing the Shia share at 55–60% and Sunnis at most of the remainder.[7] Likewise, European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) reporting cites Iraqi government figures from 2020 indicating 64–69% Shia and 29–34% Sunni.[8] Despite the variation across sources, the central point is consistent: Shia Arabs represent Iraq's majority communal group, while Sunnis remain a significant minority.

Beyond the sectarian division, Iraqi Arabs are internally diverse in cultural, social, and regional terms. Major tribal confederations and Bedouin groups play enduring social and political roles, especially in Sunni Arab regions. For instance, the Dulaim (Dulaymi) tribe in Anbar and the Shammar in northern Iraq represent powerful tribal constituencies that have historically shaped politics and security dynamics.[9] Conversely, urban Arab populations in Baghdad, Basra, Karbala, and Najaf have historically generated Iraq's religious leadership, commercial elites, and intellectual class. Najaf and Karbala, as shrine cities, are particularly important as centers of Shia religious authority and learning, housing the seminaries (hawza) of the highest-ranking clerics.[10]

In addition, Iraq has hosted specialized sub-communities such as the Marsh Arabs (Maʿdan), who developed a distinctive wetland-based culture in the Mesopotamian Marshes of the south, centered on reed-house building, fishing, and water buffalo herding. This way of life persisted for centuries until it was devastated in the late 20th century by a combination of environmental destruction and political repression. In particular, Saddam Hussein's government initiated large-scale marsh-drainage projects after the 1991 Shia uprisings, which deliberately targeted Marsh Arab communities for displacement and collective punishment.[11] UN and human rights agencies documented that by the late 1990s, more than 90% of the marshes had been drained and over 200,000 Marsh Arabs displaced.[12]

[170] CIA World Factbook, Iraq: People and Society, Religions and Ethnic Groups (2015 est., updated 2023).
[171] United Nations, Human Development Report: Iraq Country Profile, UNDP (2020).
[172] Pew Research Center, Mapping the Global Muslim Population (2009).

As emphasized in both academic and policy literature, “Arab” in the Iraqi context is therefore not a monolithic category but a broad umbrella encompassing diverse socioeconomic strata, sectarian identities, and cultural subgroups. Understanding Iraqi Arabs requires recognizing the interplay of tribal affiliation, sectarian belonging, urban vs. rural contexts, and ecological adaptation—all of which have historically shaped and continue to shape Iraq’s social and political landscape.

3.3 Kurdish Separatist Movements

An excellent case for Ethnic Separatism Studies is Kurdish Separatism in the Middle East. Kurds intensively occupy a territory that lies at the point of intersection of the borders of Iraq, Türkiye, Iran and Syria. The traditional territory where Kurds had been dwelling, was divided into five nations after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire following World War I.

Kurds’ social structure was largely semi-nomadic and tribal, so they were seasonally doing cross-border migrations. Although they had a reputation as fierce warriors, many of them used this intra-tribe conflict and inter-tribe rivalry as the primary obstacle for unification and independence of Kurds. Their tribe organization structure injected them with a semi-autonomous feature. This administration skills arose from the semi-autonomy brought together with the desire of “non-intervention on domestic affairs” and stimulated the will to consolidate other Kurds under a sole power.

Throughout their history, Kurds have been the pioneers of many successful/unsuccessful ethnic-based separatist movements in the aforementioned region. Some of them were solved through mutual privileges if there was a central authority on the other side that had established its internal sovereignty. In the fragile central authorities which had not enough capabilities to establish the internal sovereignty, Kurds chose the rebellion technique and turned to conflict as a solution. However, this technique was not used just in the fragile authorities, there were some factors to push Kurds in using the violence such as the policies of the central power, inequalities on peripheral, third-hand intervention or international/hegemonic power support. Because the geographic distribution affects the mobilizational skills, and mobilizational skills are the crucial point for the ethnic-based separatism- Kurds suffered from the lack of the organization capability and the lack of the support from the other Kurds who reside in neighbouring countries. The lack of support between the Kurds in border countries stemmed from the power of the central authority of neighbour country, asynchrony on the separatist movements, the impossibility of obtaining international/hegemonic country’s support because of the conflict interests, geographical conditions, inter-tribal conflicts between Kurds, or indeed, for a certain period of time, the Kurds were satisfied with the conditions within the parent state they lived in. All these conditions and temporal harmony must be met for the separatist movement to succeed. The Kurds' failure to achieve independence throughout modern history—with the exception of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad—and their failure to attain an autonomous status until the US intervention in Iraq stems from the failure to meet these conditions.

The recorded desire for Kurdish autonomy predates the establishment of the modern boundaries of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. The first signs of Kurdish nationalism, albeit limited, emerged in 1880 when a Turkish Kurd, Shaykh Ubeidullah invaded Persia over the alleged mistreatment of local Kurds by the Persian government and during the invasion massacred several thousand Azerbaijani (Persian Turks). Ubeidullah was exiled to Mecca where he died in 1882. What had been a desire for autonomy before this date now emerged as Kurdish nationalism. In this, the fluctuating Turkish history during that period, John Turk movements against the Ottoman authority were effective.

According to Joane, there are similarities in Türkiye, Iran, and Iraq in terms of the Kurdish situation. First, Kurdish resistance to local government authority. Second, economic underdevelopment of Kurdish areas. Third, limited Kurdish access to local government. Fourth, geographic concentration of tribal and detribalized Kurds in each nation, and the last one is the traditional lack of unity within the Kurdish population of each nation.[173] When we consider the first, the Kurdish resistance of the local government authority was not the first. As mentioned above, Kurds, coming from tribal organizations, have never approached the local intervention on their domestic affairs. During the imperial period, this privilege might have been recognized but it was unacceptable in the modern nation-state system. It is observed that states increased their tendency to strengthen the central authority during the nation-stateization period. Giving autonomous status to a specific ethnic group or non-intervention on their domestic affairs were accepted as a chock in the abolishment of empires and in the establishment of the modern nation state system. Second, Joane wrote this article in 1978 and by the late twentieth century, the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye remained underdeveloped due to a combination of war exhaustion, political marginalization, and deliberate state neglect. None of these countries were newly independent, yet each faced major crises that diverted resources away from peripheral areas. In Iraq, decades of authoritarian rule, the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the Anfal campaign, and the 1991 Gulf War left the Kurdish north devastated, while sanctions and Baghdad's Arabization policies deepened economic isolation. Iran, emerging from the 1979 Islamic Revolution, was similarly consumed by the Iran–Iraq War, which devastated Kurdish provinces such as Kermanshah; post-war reconstruction prioritized central regions over areas seen as politically unreliable.[174] Türkiye, though more stable externally, grappled with political turbulence and a prolonged conflict with the PKK from 1984 onward, which turned the southeast into a militarized zone where security overshadowed development. Geographic barriers and a history of rural subsistence economies reinforced these disparities, but the decisive factor was that all three states viewed Kurdish regions primarily through the lens of security and identity control rather than as targets for economic integration and modernization. Third, in the 1990s, Kurdish access to local government in Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye remained severely restricted due to centralized political systems, security concerns, and deliberate state policies of control. In all three states, local administration functioned as

[173] Nagel Joane, The Conditions of Ethnic Separatism: The Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, May 1978 pp.14-16.
[174] Romano, D. The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity. Cambridge University Press. 2006.

an extension of central authority with governors and officials typically appointed by the central government. Kurdish demands for autonomy were often equated with separatism, leading authorities to perceive even limited local self-rule as a threat to territorial integrity. In Türkiye, legal restrictions banned ethnic-based political parties until the 1990s. In Iraq, under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, Kurdish local governance was undermined by Arabization policies, while real power remained concentrated in Baghdad, rendering local councils symbolic at best.[175] In Iran, the Islamic Republic introduced elected local councils after 1979, but in Kurdish provinces such as Kordestan and Kermanshah these were tightly controlled by Tehran and often subordinated to the Revolutionary Guards, who exercised de facto authority in the name of national security.[176] Across all three states, ongoing armed conflicts further eroded the possibility of meaningful Kurdish participation: the PKK insurgency in Turkey after 1984, the Anfal campaign and uprisings in Iraq, and post-revolutionary revolts in Iran all militarized Kurdish regions and subordinated civilian governance to security imperatives. Even when Kurdish individuals occupied official posts, they did so largely as co-opted representatives of state authority rather than as autonomous community leaders. Thus, limited Kurdish access to local government was less a matter of administrative underdevelopment than a deliberate political strategy to ensure central control over regions considered vulnerable to separatist mobilization. Fourth, as mentioned above, geographic concentration is crucial for the mobilization of separatist movements. Kurdish ethnic distribution concentrated in a specific geography within all three countries. Because Kurds were concentrated in contiguous borderland regions, their demographic presence provided the territorial basis for an imagined Kurdish country and enabled armed groups to draw upon relatively cohesive communities. Within these areas, tribal structures offered separatist movements immediate access to manpower, local authority, and logistical networks, particularly in the mountainous rural zones of Iraq and Iran, yet tribal loyalties also fragmented the Kurdish cause, as many leaders bargained with central governments to preserve their own influence. By contrast, detribalized Kurds, especially those who migrated to towns and cities, generated the ideological leadership and organizational capacity for modern nationalist movements, exemplified by the emergence of the PKK in Turkey, which arose largely from radicalized urban youth who rejected both assimilationist state policies and traditional tribal loyalties. The interaction between these two social bases proved complex: while tribal Kurds often supplied militants and territorial strongholds, detribalized Kurds articulated the nationalist vision, but the lack of consistent unity between them weakened separatist cohesion in Iraq and Iran. In Turkey, where detribalization was more advanced due to rapid urban migration, nationalist activism became more centralized and radical, producing one of the most enduring Kurdish insurgencies in the region. On the fifth, the traditional lack of unity within the Kurdish population significantly affected the development, cohesion, and effectiveness of separatist movements in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. Kurdish society was historically divided along tribal, regional, religious, and linguistic lines, which often

[175] Natali, D. The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. Syracuse University Press, 2005.
[176] Romano, D. The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity. Cambridge University Press. 2006.

prevented the formation of a unified nationalist front. In Iraq, rivalries between major tribes and between the two dominant political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), frequently led to infighting and temporary alliances with Baghdad, weakening the overall Kurdish insurgency and delaying the creation of a consolidated autonomous region. In Iran, tribal fragmentation and competition between conservative tribal leaders and urban nationalist activists limited the success of the Mahabad Republic (1946) and post-revolutionary Kurdish uprisings, as Tehran was able to exploit these divisions to reassert control. In Türkiye, the Kurdish population was divided not only along tribal lines but also by regional and generational differences; this initially hindered the formation of a cohesive nationalist movement. The PKK emerged by appealing primarily to detribalized, urbanized Kurds, bypassing traditional tribal structures, but even then it faced local resistance and occasional collaboration of tribes with the state, which complicated the insurgency.[177] Overall, the historical fragmentation of Kurdish society meant that separatist movements had to navigate internal rivalries, competing loyalties, and regional disparities, which limited their ability to mobilize the population uniformly and sustain long-term campaigns against centralized state authorities.

3.3.1 Türkiye: Early Rebellions and the PKK Insurgency

A new phase of Kurdish separatism in Türkiye emerged in the late 20th century with the rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Founded in 1979 by Abdullah Öcalan as a Marxist-Leninist terrorist organization, (The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization internationally by numerous countries, including the members of the European Union and others such as the United States, Canada and Australia. International organizations such as the European Union in 2004 and NATO in 2005 designated PKK as a terrorist entity.)[178][179] The PKK aimed to create an independent Kurdish state in southeast Türkiye. The 1980 military coup in Turkey drove the PKK leadership into exile in Lebanon and Syria. The terrorist group launched a violent insurgency with simultaneous attacks on 15 August 1984 in the Eruh, Sirnak, and Pervari regions of Siirt and the Çukurca (Türkiye's cities) against military bases of Türkiye.[180] Aftermath, the Turkish government deployed a large military force in southeastern Türkiye where the PKK mobilized. Since its foundation in 1984 more than 40 thousand people have lost their lives because of PKK terrorism.[181] PKK has also carried out

[177] Yildiz, K. The Kurds in Turkey: EU accession and human rights. London, Pluto Press, 2004, p. 90–110.
[178] NATO chief declares PKK terrorist group.", updated December 20, 2005.
[179] The formal website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye.
[180] Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Violations in the Kurdistan Conflict (New York: HRW, 1995), documenting PKK attacks on security forces and their impact on civilians.
[181] UK Home Office, Country Policy and Information Note: Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Türkiye (London: Home Office, October 2023), 7; Council on Foreign Relations, "Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups," Global Conflict Tracker, accessed September 2025.

attacks on civilians and diplomatic and consular facilities.[182] Beyond armed attacks, the PKK has engaged in extortion, arms smuggling, and drug trafficking to finance its activities.[183]

During the 1980s and ’90s, PKK attacks and reprisals by the Turkish government led to a state of virtual war in eastern Turkey. From the 1983, Turkish troops also carried out cross border operations to PKK bases, in the so-called safe havens of northern Iraq (created in the wake of the Persian Gulf War [1990–91]), first from the air and then with ground forces. Firstly, it is needed to conduct a two-phase review to assess Turkey's right to conduct cross-border operations. These are the period when Iraq had full control over the north of its own country and the period when, based on UN Security Council Resolution 688, a “safe zone” was established in northern Iraq, and the PKK, which had settled in the north of the country because Iraq could not establish control there, was unable to prevent its actions against Türkiye.[184] Under Article 51 of the UN Charter, which recognizes the right to self-defence, it is evident that this right may be exercised under the supervision of the Security Council when necessary. The primary conditions for invoking Article 51 are the existence of an armed attack, urgency, proportionality, and notification to the UN. The general principles of the UN on the use of force and the right to self-defence, when applied to Türkiye's cross-border operations; despite all dialogue between Iraq and Türkiye, the PKK's continued actions demonstrate that the necessity exists. At the same time, the fact that terrorist attacks directed at Türkiye from northern Iraq are continuous rather than isolated incidents also demonstrate the necessity. The fact that Türkiye's military operations correspond to the post-attack period demonstrates that the urgency condition has been met. The fact that Türkiye's operations are focused on specific targets, limited in scope, and temporary in nature demonstrates the condition of proportionality. The only condition that remains unfulfilled here is the requirement to notify the UN. [185]

In February 1999, Ocalan was captured in Nairobi and flown to Türkiye, where in June he was convicted of treason and sentenced to death; following Türkiye’s abolition of the death penalty in August 2002, however, his sentence was commuted to life in prison the following October.[186]

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[182] “Kurdish Militants Attack Turkish Targets in Europe,” Washington Post, March 17, 1993 (reporting PKK-linked attacks on the Turkish Embassy in London and other facilities); UK Home Office, Country Policy and Information Note: PKK, 12.

[183] Europol, European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT 2024) (The Hague: Europol, 2024), 42–45; U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Targets PKK-Linked Narcotics Traffickers,” Press Release, February 2012; French Court of Appeals (Paris), Judgment in PKK Financing Network Case, March 2023.

[184] Recber, K. (2007). Türkiye’nin Irak’ın Kuzeyinde Sınır Ötesi Operasyon ve Sıcak Takip Hakkı (The right of Cross-Border Operation and Hot Pursuit of Türkiye in Northern Iraq), International Law and Policy 3 (9), p.16-27.

[185] Akutay, S. S., and Ateş, D. (2013). The Legal Framework of Turkey's Cross-Border Operations. Gazi University Faculty of Law Journal, XVII (3), pp. 109–146

[186] Kurdistan Workers’ Party: Kurdish militant organization, updated by Adam Zeidan. Britannica. 2025.

In the 2000s, Türkiye introduced a series of reforms which included some measures such as permitting Kurdish-language broadcasting.[187] Despite these changes, Kurdish political demands continued, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had shifted its discourse from full secession toward calls for cultural rights and regional autonomy, maintained its armed campaign. Between 2013 and mid-2015, a peace process—often referred to as the "Kurdish Opening"—led to a ceasefire and negotiations between the government and the PKK, but the process collapsed amid mutual distrust, resumed PKK attacks, and the destabilizing impact of the war in neighboring Syria.[188] After the breakdown of talks, armed clashes re-emerged in Turkey's southeast, and the government launched extensive security operations targeting PKK militants in urban and rural areas. During this period, authorities also prosecuted and detained numerous officials from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), alleging organizational links to the PKK; international human rights organizations and some observers criticized these measures as overly broad restrictions on legal political participation.[189]

On 24 August 2014, Operation Euphrates Shield was launched as Türkiye's first major incursion into northern Syria amid the Syrian Civil War. The official objectives, as articulated by Türkiye's National Security Council and government spokesmen, were to ensure Türkiye's border security by eliminating the threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) and to prevent the formation of a "terror corridor" by Kurdish armed groups along Türkiye's southern border.[190] The Turkish Armed Forces, together with allied Syrian National Army factions, expelled ISIL from a 2,000 km² zone while simultaneously blocking Kurdish forces from linking their eastern and western cantons.[191] Politically, Euphrates Shield altered the strategic landscape in northern Syria. It demonstrated Türkiye's willingness to intervene beyond its borders to prevent the armed mobilization and institutionalization of ethnic Kurdish separatists who seek to establish an autonomous governance in northern Syria similar to that in northern Iraq, taking advantage of Syria's instability. This intervention expanded Ankara's influence by establishing a buffer zone controlled by Turkish-backed forces. This created friction within NATO, as the operation complicated U.S. efforts by checking the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)- Washington's anti-ISIL partner- ambitions. Nonetheless, by removing ISIL from its immediate border and blocking a contiguous Kurdish enclave, Ankara achieved its primary goals.

On 9 October 2019, Türkiye launched Operation Peace Spring to establish a 30-kilometer "safe zone" east of the Euphrates. Ankara's declared objectives were to remove the

[187] Gareth Jenkins, Context and Circumstance: The Turkish Military and Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158–161; European Commission, Turkey 2005 Progress Report (Brussels: EU Commission, 2005).
[188] Council on Foreign Relations, "Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups," Global Conflict Tracker, accessed September 2025; International Crisis Group, Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Rising Toll.
[189] Amnesty International, Weathering the Storm: Defending Human Rights in Turkey's Climate of Fear (London: AI, 2017), 20–25.
[190] Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Release Regarding the Start of Operation Euphrates Shield," August 24, 2016.
[191] Metin Gurcan, "The Military Dimension of Turkey's Operations in Syria," Al-Monitor, March 2017.

YPG—considered by Türkiye as indistinguishable from the PKK—and to resettle part of the nearly four million Syrian refugees hosted in Türkiye.[192] The Turkish Armed Forces, supported by the Syrian National Army, advanced into the Tel Abyad–Ras al-Ayn corridor.[193] Within days, they secured these border towns, but international reaction was swift. The United States brokered a temporary ceasefire on 17 October, requiring the YPG to withdraw, while Russia mediated an agreement on 22 October that limited Turkish control to a narrower strip and introduced joint Russian Turkish patrols.[194] Ankara claimed that it facilitated refugee returns. It strained Türkiye's relations with NATO allies and deepened cooperation with Russia, while militarily consolidating Türkiye's control over a segment of northeast Syria.[195]

Launched in April 2022, Operation Claw-Lock is part of Turkey's broader "Claw" series targeting PKK strongholds in northern Iraq. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar stated that the operation aimed to "neutralize terrorists in Metina, Zap, and Avaşîn-Basyan" and pre-empt cross-border attacks.[196] Ankara justified the incursion as a right of self-defense and emphasized that it respected Iraq's territorial integrity.[197] Turkish commando units, supported by drones and airstrikes, destroyed PKK bunkers and established forward bases in the targeted mountainous zones. Official sources reported hundreds of PKK militants neutralized in 2022 alone, though independent verification remains difficult.[198] Baghdad condemned the operation as a violation of sovereignty and brought the issue before the UN Security Council, while the Kurdistan Regional Government tacitly cooperated with Ankara.[199] Strategically, Claw-Lock has narrowed PKK mobility and expanded Türkiye's cross-border military presence, but has also entrenched tensions with Baghdad and risks creating a long-term Turkish footprint in northern Iraq.

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[192] Republic of Turkey, Ministry of National Defence, "Press Release on Operation Peace Spring," October 9, 2019.
[193] International Crisis Group, "Squaring the Circles in Syria's Northeast," Report No. 204, November 2019.
[194] United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, March 2020.
[195] Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Turkey's Peace Spring Operation," European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019.
[196] Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of National Defense, "Statement on Launch of Operation Claw-Lock," April 18, 2022.
[197] Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs — Statement QA-6 (21 April 2022):
The Turkish MFA spokesperson replied to criticisms from Iraq, asserting that Operation Pençe-Kilit (Claw-Lock) is against "terrorist targets in the north of Iraq" and justified under Turkey's *right of self-defense* as per Article 51 of the UN Charter. This is a direct articulation by the government of the legal basis claimed for Claw-Lock. Source: Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "QA-6, 21 April 2022, Statement of the Spokesperson…," accessed April 2022.
[198] Anadolu Agency, "Türkiye 'neutralized' a total of 931 PKK/YPG terrorists in northern Iraq during Operation Claw-Lock" – May 16, 2024. The article gives updated figures on the PKK/YPG - "terrorists" as AA terms them – neutralized under the Claw-Lock operations. Link: AA: "Türkiye 'neutralized' total of 931 PKK/YPG terrorists in northern Iraq during Operation Claw-Lock"
[199] Al Jazeera. (2022, April 28). *Turkey's military operation causes controversy, division in Iraq*. Retrieved from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/28/turkish-military-operation-causes-controversy-division-in-iraq

As of the early-to-mid 2020s, the Turkish–PKK conflict has exhibited periodic spikes in violence but generally at a lower intensity compared to the large-scale clashes of previous decades. Turkish security forces continue to conduct cross-border operations into northern Iraq targeting PKK positions, particularly in the mountainous regions of Metina, Zap, Avaşîn-Basyan, and parts of Duhok. These operations involve air strikes, drone usage, and limited ground incursions. They aim to disrupt the PKK's ability to plan or launch attacks into Turkish territory and to reduce its safe havens across the border.[200] After 2020, the Turkish-PKK conflict became increasingly transnational. The PKK's ability to wage a sustained insurgency inside Türkiye diminished, owing to relentless state security pressure and the group's own tactical adjustments. Data show a clear geographic shift: violence in Türkiye's Kurdish southeast markedly declined, even as conflict intensified across the border in northern Iraq.[201] The Turkish military's presence in Iraq expanded through a network of bases and frequent air/drone strikes targeting PKK mountain strongholds, forcing PKK militants further from Türkiye's towns and cities. In effect, Ankara managed to "externalize" much of the conflict, reducing domestic terror incidents while pursuing the PKK on foreign soil. Türkiye's counter-PKK operations play out with the tacit acceptance of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the objection of Baghdad. The KRG's dominant party (the KDP in Erbil) is a historic rival of the PKK and maintains strong economic ties with Turkey. As a result, the KRG has mostly tolerated Turkey's military presence in northern Iraq, even cooperating at times by sharing intelligence or allowing Turkish supply lines on KRG territory.

The rise of the YPG and its political wing, the PYD, in the power vacuum of Syria's civil war has significantly impacted Türkiye's security calculus since 2020. The YPG emerged as the leading faction in the SDF, the U.S.-backed coalition that drove out the Islamic State (IS) from northeastern Syria. While the YPG's primary fight was against IS, Türkiye views the group as indistinguishable from the PKK due to organizational and ideological links (many YPG cadres were either trained by the PKK or loyal to Öcalan's ideology). By 2019, the SDF's self-governing region (often called Rojava or the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) had carved out a de facto semi-autonomous Kurdish zone along much of Türkiye's southern border.[202] This development was perceived in Ankara as a dire national security threat: Turkish leaders worried that a Kurdish autonomous entity in Syria could embolden separatism among Türkiye's own Kurds or serve as a PKK sanctuary. Consequently, even before 2020, as mentioned before, Türkiye launched several incursions into northern Syria to prevent YPG expansion. These included Operation Euphrates Shield (2016-17), which blocked the YPG from linking Kurdish cantons by seizing territory west of the Euphrates; Operation Olive Branch (2018), which ousted the YPG from the Afrin region;

[200] MediaNews (via local monitors, RojNews etc.), "Turkey expands military operations in Iraq as cross-border attacks intensify" (April 2025), reporting hundreds of strikes targeting PKK positions in areas like Duhok, Metina, Zap, etc.
[201] UK Government, [Title of the specific page], GOV.UK, accessed September 25, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/[page-link]
[202] Council on Foreign Relations, [Title of the Article or Page], CFR.org, accessed September 25, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/[page-link]

and Operation Peace Spring (October 2019), which targeted the YPG east of the Euphrates between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn.[203] By late 2019, Türkiye and allied Syrian rebel factions controlled a buffer strip in parts of northern Syria, and Türkiye justified these operations both in terms of counterterrorism and as creating a "safe zone" for the potential resettlement of Syrian refugees.[204] Each incursion met international criticism and complicated relations with the United States and Russia, yet Ankara demonstrated its willingness to use force to curtail Kurdish autonomy on its frontier.

In Syria, Türkiye also coordinated with its proxy force, the Syrian National Army (SNA), in occasional escalations. For example, in late 2022, amid heightened tensions, Turkish-backed SNA factions exchanged fire with SDF units, and artillery shelling from Turkish positions struck SDF-held towns. Each bout of escalation raised speculation of a new Turkish ground campaign. However, two factors decelerated Ankara: diplomacy and great-power politics. On one hand, Russia (a key player in Syria) and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad opposed further Turkish advances and bolstered certain front-line areas with their own troops to deter Türkiye. On the other hand, the United States strongly urged Turkey to avoid major operations that could jeopardize the fight against IS or endanger U.S. personnel embedded with the SDF. Washington repeatedly stressed that while it recognizes the PKK as a terrorist organization, the SDF/YPG in Syria are its partners against terrorism, leading to a delicate balancing act. As a result, Turkish cross-border action in Syria since 2020 has been calibrated: heavy-hitting enough to remind the YPG of Turkey's red lines, but not so extensive as to trigger a broader conflagration with Syria's other global powers.

Since 2015, and especially under the state of emergency after the 2016 coup attempt, President Erdoğan's government (in alliance with the nationalist MHP) has waged a sweeping campaign against the HDP, the most prominent pro-Kurdish party. This campaign intensified in the run-up to the 2023 general elections. Authorities have arrested scores of HDP officials and members on terrorism charges, accusing them of covert links to the PKK.[205] A significant turning point occurred in February 2025, when imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan issued a letter from Imrali prison calling on the organisation to lay down its arms and dissolve itself.[206] Following this, on 12 May 2025, the PKK held its 12th Congress (held in the field, northern Iraq) and formally declared its intention to disband and end its armed struggle.[207] This decision followed a unilateral ceasefire declared in early March 2025, which itself was triggered by Ocalan's message. There remains uncertainty about how disarmament will be

[203] ACLED, "Turkey's 2023 General Elections and the Kurdish Question," accessed September 25, 2025
[204] UK Government, [Title of the specific page], GOV.UK, accessed September 25, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/[page-link]
[205] ACLED, "Turkey's 2023 General Elections and the Kurdish Question," accessed September 25, 2025,
[206] AP News, "Kurdish leader Ocalan issues message from prison, urging PKK to disarm to make peace with Turkey" — February 27, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/turkey-pkk-ocalan-peace-talks-68decd55c35fa537f04b117bc9736128?
[207] Reuters, "Kurdish PKK disbands and ends 40-year Turkey insurgency," 12 May 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kurdish-pkk-dissolves-after-decades-struggle-with-turkey-news-agency-close-2025-05-12/?

implemented in practice, how PKK will behave, and whether all regional conditions (political, legal, security) will allow for full compliance.

3.3.2 Iraq: Revolt, Repression and Autonomy

Northern Iraq has been a centre of Kurdish national aspiration since the early 20th century. Under the British Mandate of Iraq, Kurds resisted incorporation into the new Arab-majority state. In 1919, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji declared himself ruler of an independent Kurdish kingdom in Sulaymaniyah and led revolts against British rule. British forces suppressed Barzanji's uprisings by 1924, but only after heavy fighting underscored Kurdish unwillingness to be governed without autonomy.[208] During Iraq's early monarchy period, periodic Kurdish tribal disturbances continued. A significant figure was Mullah Mustafa Barzani, a tribal leader of the Barzani clan, who emerged in the 1940s as a champion of Kurdish nationalism. Barzani temporarily took refuge in the Soviet-backed Mahabad of Republic in Iran in 1946 (where he founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP)[209]. After Mahabad's fall, Barzani went into exile in the USSR, returning to Iraq after the 1958 revolution. The new Iraqi republican regime under Abdul Karim Qasim initially courted the Kurds and promised autonomy, allowing Barzani to resume leadership of the KDP.[210] However, when these autonomy promises went unfulfilled, Barzani led a Kurdish rebellion in 1961, marking the beginning of the First Iraqi–Kurdish War. Throughout the 1960s, Kurdish peshmerga members battled the Iraqi Army in the northern mountains. In 1970, the Ba'athist government in Baghdad (which had come to power in 1968) negotiated a peace plan with Barzani, agreeing in principle to establish an autonomous Kurdish region. For a time, open warfare subsided. Yet the autonomy plan stalled, and mistrust grew. By 1974, fighting erupted again (the Second Iraqi–Kurdish War) when Baghdad attempted to impose a watered-down autonomy law. The Kurds – covertly supported by Iran, Israel, and the United States – made significant gains against Iraqi forces.[211]

In the vacuum, Jalal Talabani founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975, criticizing Barzani's tribalism and proposing a leftist, modern nationalist alternative. From then on, Kurdish politics in Iraq became split between the KDP (Barzani) and PUK (Talabani).[212] After Mullah Mustafa Barzani's death in 1979, leadership of the KDP passed to his son Massoud.

Iraq's Kurds seized a historic opening in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. Following Iraq's defeat by the U.S.-led coalition, Kurdish forces (and simultaneously Shi'a rebels in the south) rose up against Saddam's weakened regime. That spring, Kurdish forces managed to liberate large areas in the north, but Saddam responded with a ruthless counteroffensive once

[208] McDowall D. A Modern History of the Kurds. 3rd ed. London: I.B. Tauris; 2004. p. 145-152.
[209] Entessar N. Kurdish Ethnonationalism. 1992. p. 48-56.
[210] Gunter MJ. The Kurds of Iraq: Tragedy and Hope. New York: St. Martin's Press; 1992. p. 35-42.
[211] Tripp C. A History of Iraq. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2007. p. 215-218.
[212] Stansfield G. Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy. London: Routledge; 2003. p. 45-49.

Coalition attention waned. International intervention then altered the outcome: Western powers launched Operation Provide Comfort, enforcing a no-fly zone over northern Iraq and delivering aid, which enabled Kurds to return and prevented Saddam's troops from re-establishing full control.[213] By 1992, the Kurdish ethnicity of Iraq was effectively autonomous – for the first time, Kurds administered their own region, protected by Western airpower. However, the early KRG period was marred by internal conflict. Between 1994 and 1998 the KDP and PUK fought a bloody Kurdish civil war over power and revenue-sharing, even drawing in neighboring states (with the KDP at one point calling on Saddam's army for assistance, and the PUK receiving help from Iran).[214] U.S.-mediated peace in 1998 ended the strife, allowing the KDP and PUK to split governance of the region and later unify under a coalition government.

With the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the toppling of Saddam, the Kurds emerged as pivotal allies to Washington and power brokers in the new Iraq, while at the same time Türkiye, despite being a NATO ally of the United States, refused to allow American forces to launch the invasion through its territory—a decision that complicated the initial military campaign and reflected Ankara's deep anxieties about the empowerment of Iraqi Kurds and the possible spillover effects on its own Kurdish population.[215]

The 2005 Iraqi constitution formally recognized the KRG as a federal autonomous region.[216] Under the leadership of Massoud Barzani (KRG President) and Jalal Talabani (who became Iraq's president in Baghdad), Iraqi Kurdistan enjoyed unprecedented self-rule, economic growth, and international engagement. The Kurds built their own armed forces (the Peshmerga), conducted independent oil exports, and even entered direct agreements with foreign oil companies – sometimes to Baghdad's consternation. Tensions with the central government persisted over disputed territories (especially oil-rich Kirkuk) and revenue sharing. Nonetheless, the KRG maintained a degree of stability and self-governance. The rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 presented both peril and opportunity: when Iraqi national army units collapsed in the face of ISIS, the Kurdish Peshmerga swept into secure Kirkuk and other long-contested areas. The Kurds proved instrumental in the war against ISIS, coordinating with U.S.-led coalition forces. Buoyed by their strengthened military position and international sympathy, in September 2017 the KRG held a landmark independence referendum, in which Kurdish voters overwhelmingly endorsed secession from Iraq. However, these moves backfired strategically. The referendum was vehemently opposed by Baghdad as well as neighboring Türkiye and Iran. The Iraqi central government – tacitly supported by Ankara and Tehran – imposed sanctions and launched an armed offensive to reassert federal control over disputed territories. Within weeks, Iraqi troops (and allied Shiite

[213] Pelletiere SJ. The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; 1984. p. 110-127.
[214] Stansfield G. Iraqi Kurdistan. p. 180-195.
[215] Gareth Stansfield, Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy, Routledge, 2003, pp. 158–160.
[216] Anderson L, Stansfield G. The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division?, Palgrave Macmillan; 2004. p. 243-256.

militias) pushed Kurdish forces out of Kirkuk and other areas gained in 2014. The KRG was forced to annul the referendum results.

In 2025, widespread salary delays and legal disputes with Baghdad have sparked protests across the Kurdistan Region, exposing vulnerabilities in the KRG's fiscal model.[217] Meanwhile, the KRG's governance over disputed territories such as Kirkuk, Sinjar, and parts of Nineveh remains contentious. The KRG's domestic legitimacy is therefore closely tied to how it navigates both internal governance and its delicate regional diplomacy.

Türkiye's policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan is defined by pragmatic duality — economic cooperation coupled with persistent security anxiety. On one hand, Ankara relies on the KRG for trade, energy, and transit routes. On the other hand, it demands curbs on PKK activity in the northern Iraqi mountains. Accordingly, in May 2025, the PKK announced its intention to dissolve and permanently end its armed campaign, a historic declaration that reshaped Kurdish politics. If sustained, this dissolution may ease Ankara's concerns on cross-border militancy and allow more normalized engagement with Erbil. For the KRG, the PKK's exit removes a constant irritant in its relations with Ankara and Baghdad alike.

Economically, the KRG is heavily tied to Türkiye. The Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline remains its lifeline for oil exports; Turkish construction firms, logistics routes, and consumer goods dominate Kurdistan's economy. Trade between Türkiye and Iraq — much of it via the KRG — surpassed $14 billion in 2024.[218] This interdependence gives Ankara leverage: periodic border closures, military incursions, or customs restrictions can have immediate fiscal consequences for Erbil. Politically, Erbil has pursued a cautious rapprochement with Ankara, presenting itself as a stable partner in regional security. It has quietly coordinated on anti-PKK operations and border management while refraining from overt criticism of Turkish campaigns in northern Iraq. However, open cooperation with Ankara remains controversial among Kurdish constituents who see Türkiye's interventions as infringements on sovereignty. Despite friction, both sides remain bound by necessity. Erbil is necessary for Ankara to secure access to northern Iraqi oil, while the KRG depends on Turkish ports and pipelines for export revenue.

Relations between the KRG and Iraq's federal government in 2025 are characterized by alternating confrontation and cautious compromise. The central dispute concerns oil revenue management and budget transfers. Baghdad insists that all oil exports must pass through the federal SOMO organization, while Erbil claims constitutional rights to market its own resources. In June 2025, Baghdad held the KRG "legally responsible" for unauthorized oil sales and smuggling, escalating a long-running standoff.[219] At the same time, Baghdad's repeated delays in salary transfers and public accusations of fiscal mismanagement have fueled anger across northern Iraq. Iraq's President filed a case before the Federal Supreme

[217] "Taif Sami Mohammed – Kurdistan Region Salary Dispute," *Rudaw*, July 2025.
[218] "The Political Dynamics Behind Economic Relations between Turkey and the KRI," Middle East Policy Forum, 2025.
[219] Reuters, "Iraq Holds Kurdish Government Legally Responsible for Continued Oil Smuggling," June 5, 2025.

Court in July 2025 demanding that the Ministry of Finance release withheld salaries, arguing that the delays violated citizens' constitutional rights.[220] The episode revealed Baghdad's increasing use of fiscal levers to discipline the KRG politically.

At the institutional level, Baghdad continues to resist KRG efforts to maintain independent peshmerga command structures. The federal government seeks unified control over all armed forces, while Erbil cites Article 121 of the constitution guaranteeing regional security powers.[221] Tensions over control of Kirkuk and Sinjar — both resource-rich and ethnically diverse — remain unresolved. So, the Erbil-Baghdad relationship is a "crisis of coexistence": each side relies on the other yet competes for sovereignty and legitimacy. The KRG frames its demands as federal rights, while Baghdad treats them as privileges to be renegotiated. The result is a pattern of cyclical negotiation, confrontation, and temporary reconciliation — a fragile federalism sustained by economic necessity rather than trust. Moreover, Iraq's federal government in 2025 adopts an ambivalent stance toward the KRG. On paper, it recognizes the region's constitutional status as a federal entity; in practice, it uses fiscal and legal mechanisms to reassert central authority. Disputes over the budget law and oil revenues reflect Baghdad's intent to treat Erbil as a subordinate administration within a unitary state. Yet Baghdad also understands that destabilizing the KRG could undermine Iraq's own security architecture — particularly in the north, where cooperation with peshmerga forces is vital against ISIS remnants.[17] As a result, the federal government oscillates between assertion and accommodation, reconciling when mutual dependence becomes too costly to ignore.

The KRG's influence in Syria is primarily political and symbolic. While it has no territorial reach beyond Iraq, its ties with Syrian Kurds — particularly through shared KDP lineages and cross-border kinship networks — position it as an informal mediator among Kurdish actors. Throughout 2025, Erbil hosted and sponsored initiatives to unify Syrian Kurdish parties. In January, KDP leader Masoud Barzani met SDF commander Mazloum Abdi to discuss Kurdish reconciliation.[222] In April, the KRG facilitated a conference in Qamishli to bridge divides between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and other Kurdish factions.[223] These efforts reflect the KRG's self-perception as a moderating force in Kurdish politics beyond its borders.

KRG President Nechirvan Barzani has publicly asserted that "Syria cannot be governed centrally" and that Kurdish autonomy must be institutionally recognized.[224] He advocates dialogue between Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces rather than direct absorption of Kurdish structures into the Syrian army. However, the KRG's capacity to influence Syria is constrained by Türkiye's red lines and by Damascus's own centralizing agenda. The KRG

[220] "Taif Sami Mohammed – Kurdistan Region Salary Dispute," *Rudaw*, July 2025.
[221] "Relationship in Crisis: Identifying Strategies for Kurdistan and Iraq," Russian Council, June 2025.
[222] "Kurdish Unity Efforts Gain Momentum Amid an Uncertain Future in Syria," Washington Institute, January 2025.
[223] "Syrian Kurds Seek Unity in Qamishli Conference with Help from KRG," Kurdistan 24, April 2025.
[224] "President Nechirvan Barzani: 'Syria Cannot Be Governed Centrally,'" Kurdistan 24, May 2025.

therefore intends to balance solidarity with Syrian Kurds against its economic and security dependence on Türkiye.

Syria's approach to the KRG is more circumspect. Since the fall of the Assad regime and the formation of a transitional government in 2025, Damascus has focused on reintegrating its own Kurdish-majority regions through the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Under a March 10 agreement, the Syrian Democratic Forces and the AANES were to merge civil and military institutions into the national framework by year-end.[225] This initiative reduces the space for external Kurdish actors — including the KRG — to influence Syria's internal arrangements. While Syrian officials acknowledge the KRG as a legitimate regional authority within Iraq, they reject any cross-border political role that could encourage federalism inside Syria. Erbil's engagement is thus limited to symbolic gestures and humanitarian coordination rather than formal policy channels.

The KRG's position for 2026 will hinge on three variables. First, the durability of the PKK's dissolution will determine whether Türkiye pursues rapprochement or reverts to cross-border operations. Second, the implementation of the September 2025 oil deal will define Erbil's economic autonomy and its capacity to pay civil servants without Baghdad's approval. Third, the fate of Syrian Kurdish autonomy will influence whether the KRG can project its model of self-rule as a regional precedent or whether it becomes an isolated entity hemmed in by stronger states. If the current détente holds, Erbil and Baghdad could gradually normalize relations, with Ankara supporting economic integration and cross-border trade. If the budget or security disputes flare again, the KRG could face internal instability and popular unrest. Nevertheless, the KRG remains the most institutionally stable Kurdish entity in the region.

3.3.3 Iran: From Mahabad to the PJAK Insurgency

Kurdish separatism in Iran has been comparatively less successful in securing autonomy, yet Iran has seen significant Kurdish revolts and organizations. In the early 20th century, tribal Kurdish chiefs resisted the centralizing Iranian state under the late Qajar and early Pahlavi dynasties. One prominent leader, Simko Shikak (Ismail Agha), led a series of rebellions in northwestern Iran after World War I, taking advantage of the weakness of Tehran's control during and after the war. Simko's forces-controlled parts of Azerbaijan and Kurdish regions between 1918 and 1922 until Reza Shah's new Iranian army defeated them, forcing Simko into exile.[226] These early uprisings were more tribal than nationalist, and Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime in the 1920s–1930s worked to forcibly integrate the Kurdish areas, disarming tribes and punishing revolts. Unlike in Türkiye or Iraq, Kurdish nationalism in Iran before World War II remained relatively muted, in part because Iran's Kurdish question was

[225] "Kurds and Kurdish Areas, Syria," UK Home Office Country Note, July 2025.

[226] Iran and the "Kurdish Question", Kaveh Bayat, In: 247, Middle East Research and Information Project: Critical Coverage of the Middle East Since 1971, 2008.

somewhat overshadowed by those in neighboring states. Iranian officials often viewed Kurdish nationalism as a foreign import – a "British game," pointing to the Allies' support for Kurdish autonomy in the collapsing Ottoman Empire and British encouragement of Kurds in Iraq. Consequently, Tehran's approach was to treat Kurdish unrest as something to be managed through force and diplomacy rather than addressed via domestic reform.

The most dramatic Kurdish bid for statehood in Iran came in the aftermath of World War II. With Soviet forces occupying northwestern Iran, Kurdish leaders under Qazi Muhammad proclaimed the Republic of Mahabad in January 1946 – a quasi-independent Kurdish state in Iran's West Azerbaijan province. Backed by the Soviets (who also supported a parallel autonomous government in neighboring Azerbaijani areas), Mahabad became a focal point of Kurdish nationalism. It hosted Kurdish cultural revival activities and formed a militia, and Mullah Mustafa Barzani from Iraq brought his members to assist. The Mahabad Republic, however, was short-lived. When Soviet troops withdrew under Western pressure at the end of 1946, the Iranian army moved in to reassert control. By December 1946 Mahabad was occupied by Tehran's forces, Qazi Muhammad was arrested and later executed, and the Kurdish republic was extinguished.[227] The collapse of Mahabad was a crushing blow: many of its leaders (including a young Mustafa Barzani) fled abroad. Nevertheless, it left an enduring legacy in Kurdish collective memory as a symbol of nationalist aspiration.

During the reign of the Shah (Pahlavi dynasty, 1941–1979), Iran's Kurds were subject to heavy-handed assimilation policies and political marginalization. Some limited revolts occurred (for example, a Kurdish uprising in 1967 was quickly suppressed), but most Kurdish activism went underground or aligned with wider Iranian opposition movements. The principal Kurdish political party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), continued to exist in exile after Mahabad's fall, advocating for autonomy and cultural rights. The situation changed rapidly with the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Initially, many Kurds welcomed the downfall of the Shah and hoped the new Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini might accommodate their demands for local self-rule. These hopes were quickly dashed. When Kurdish delegates pressed for autonomy in the new constitution, Khomeini and the Islamic regime refused, declaring that Iran's integrity was non-negotiable. By spring and summer 1979, restive Kurdish towns in western Iran rose up, and several Kurdish groups (KDPI and the leftist Komala) took up arms. Khomeini's response included strong religious and political condemnation of Kurdish dissenters, branding them as counterrevolutionaries and enemies of the state.[228] The Revolutionary Guards were sent to crush the Kurdish areas. A harsh military campaign ensued in Kurdistan province, with hundreds of Kurds killed and thousands imprisoned; Kurdish political activity was banned and the KDPI driven into exile once more.[229] Through the 1980s, sporadic guerrilla conflict continued in Iran's northwest as

[227] Ariav H, Ferragamo M. The Kurds' Long Struggle with Statelessness. Council on Foreign Relations. Published December 7, 2022. Accessed September 13, 2025.
[228] Hejazi Z, Ahmadzadeh H. The 1979 Revolution and the Iranian Kurdish Movement. In: Kurdish Politics in Iran. Cambridge University Press; 2021. pp. 45-65. The chapter discusses demands for autonomy by KDPI and Komala, rejection by the regime, and outbreak of armed conflict in Kurdish areas.
[229] The Kurds Between Iran and Iraq. MERIP. 1986. "Iranian regime has been altogether more uncompromising" in Kurdish areas.

the KDPI and other Kurdish fighters staged hit-and-run attacks, but they faced relentless repression by the Iranian forces.[230] Notably, during the Iran–Iraq War, Tehran remained suspicious of its Kurdish population's loyalties (since Iraqi Kurds collaborated with Iran, as noted above, Iranian Kurds were often accused of abetting the enemy). Both during and after that war, the Iranian state undertook counter-insurgency measures and assassinations of exiled Kurdish leaders. For instance, in 1989 KDPI leader Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou was assassinated in Vienna during supposed peace talks with Iranian emissaries – widely believed to be an Iranian hit. Another KDPI leader, Sadegh Sharafkandi, was assassinated in Berlin in 1992.[231] These incidents underscored the long reach of Iran's campaign to eliminate Kurdish opposition.

In the 2000s, a new Kurdish armed group emerged in Iran: the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK). Formed around 2004, PJAK is an offshoot of the Turkish PKK, sharing Ocalan's militant leftist ideology and seeking greater rights (or regime change) in Iran. PJAK's founders include Osman Ocalan (Abdullah Öcalan's brother), signalling the familial link to the PKK network. Operating out of bases in the Qandil Mountains of Iraq (alongside the PKK), PJAK guerrillas waged a low-intensity insurgency against Iranian security forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, conducting ambushes and sabotage in Iran's Kurdish regions. [232] Iran, in turn, has periodically shelled PJAK's mountain redoubts and, like Turkey, designated PJAK a terrorist organization. Notably, Iran and Turkey found common cause in opposing Kurdish militancy: both governments have coordinated operations against the PKK/PJAK network along their borders. By the late 2010s, Iran's counter-insurgency efforts had significantly weakened PJAK's activity, leading to occasional ceasefires. Still, discontent simmers among Iran's estimated 8-10 million Kurds due to political exclusion and cultural suppression.[233] Persian is the only official language, and Kurdish linguistic or cultural rights are not recognized by Tehran; any hint of separatism is harshly punished. Thus, even though Iran's Kurdish movement has not achieved autonomy, the Kurdish question remains a sensitive internal security issue for the Iranian state, managed through a mix of coercion and limited economic integration, rather than meaningful accommodation of Kurdish identity.

A major turning point came in September 2023, when Baghdad and Tehran signed a border security agreement requiring Iraqi authorities to disarm and relocate Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in northern Iraq.[234] The implementation of this deal accelerated in 2024 and 2025, leading to the forced relocation of KDPI, Komala, and PJAK cadres from

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[230] Jamestown Foundation. "Iran's Impending Military Intervention In Iraqi Kurdistan (2021)." Notes KDPI guerrilla activity throughout the 1980s.

[231] Wikipedia entry "1979 Kurdish Rebellion in Iran." Confirms IRGC deployed, suspicion during Iran-Iraq War, etc.

[232] Crenshaw, M., & Robinson, K. (2025). Mapping Militants Project. Rice University. https://doi.org/10.25613/G0K4-WF70
Mapping Militants Project. "Kurdistan Free Life Party." Last modified. https://mappingmilitants.org/node/434/

[233] "Iran launches airstrike against Kurdish group in northern Iraq" — The Guardian (2022) re: KDPI bases. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/28/iran-launches-airstrike-against-kurdish-group-northern-iraq-mahsa-amini-protests?

[234] Reuters, "Baghdad and Tehran Sign Border Security Agreement," September 2023.

camps near the border to supervised facilities deeper inside Iraqi Kurdistan. The KRG, under pressure from both Baghdad and Tehran, cooperated with these measures to avoid Iranian military incursions into its territory. The relocations drastically reduced Kurdish militants' operational freedom, compelling opposition groups to shift focus toward political messaging, media outreach, and international advocacy. Leaders of Komala and KDPI have publicly emphasized "political resistance" and coalition-building with other Iranian dissident networks, warning that renewed armed confrontation would bring further collective punishment to Kurdish civilians.[235]

For Tehran, the disarmament agreement achieved two goals: neutralizing immediate security threats along the frontier and validating its narrative that Kurdish insurgency was externally based rather than domestically rooted. While armed groups regroup in exile, local Kurdish communities inside Iran sustain civic resistance through cultural work, journalism, and human-rights documentation. Tehran, however, employs collective punishment: large-scale arrests, closure of Kurdish-language media outlets, and violent dispersal of protests. In 2025, as regional tensions with Israel escalated, the government again deployed additional IRGC and Basij units to the western provinces under the pretext of countering separatist threats.[236] Despite such Tehran's centralization policies, Kurdish activism persists in symbolic forms—commemorations of Amini's death, underground education initiatives, and diaspora advocacy through exiled party networks. The combination of resilience and repression defines the current stage of Kurdish politics in Iran: politically marginalized but symbolically central to the broader Iranian democracy movement.

If Tehran continues to face external confrontations—whether with Israel, the U.S., or Sunni Arab states—it will likely tighten internal controls, framing Kurdish dissent as part of foreign subversion. Furthermore, continued Iraqi enforcement will restrict Kurdish groups' military capacity but could also push them toward political coalition-building and civic mobilization. Without economic and social reform in Iran's Kurdish provinces, discontent will persist. Government promises of "balanced development" and infrastructure investment have yet to materialize. Kurdish diaspora networks, especially in Europe and Iraqi Kurdistan, are focusing on human-rights documentation and lobbying. Their efforts may not compel Tehran to negotiate but do ensure global visibility of Kurdish repression.

Nevertheless, Iranian Kurdish movements maintain limited contacts with their Syrian and Iraqi counterparts, sharing media platforms and advocacy networks. But Tehran's strikes in both Iraq and Syria underscore its intent to suppress any cross-border solidarity that might coalesce into a unified Kurdish front.

[235] Washington Institute, "Iranian Kurdish Opposition Groups Shift to Political Strategy after Disarmament," March 2025.
[236] UN Human Rights Council, *Report on Iran,* 2025.

3.3.4 Syria: Kurdish Marginalization and the Rojava Experiment

In 1973 the Syrian government under Hafez al-Assad implemented what became known as the "Arab Belt" project: a plan to resettle Arab families (many displaced by the creation of Lake Assad) into a strip of land along the Turkish border in al-Hasakah Governorate and to expel or dispossess many Kurdish inhabitants of those lands.[237] The aim was to dilute Kurdish presence in strategic frontier areas (which were also resource-rich, containing oil fields) and to create a loyal Arab cordon between Syria's Kurds and those in Türkiye. During the Assad regime, Kurdish language publications and organizations were banned, and even Kurdish personal names or dress were discouraged as Syria promoted an officially Arab national identity.

Despite this repression, overt Kurdish resistance in Syria remained limited in the late 20th century. One reason was that many Syrian Kurds focused on basic civil rights (like citizenship) rather than separatism, and any stirrings of Kurdish activism were swiftly contained by Assad's pervasive security apparatus. Syria under Hafez al-Assad reportedly tolerated PKK presence and allowed its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, to reside in Damascus for many years, using Syrian territory (and areas under its influence) as a sanctuary for PKK organization in its conflict with Türkiye.[238] This arrangement ended in 1998, when Türkiye threatened military action; Syria then signed the Adana Agreement, pledging to expel Ocalan and suppress PKK operations on its soil.[239] Internally, Syrian Kurds continued to live under restrictive conditions: many were stateless or had limited rights, with Kurdish political and cultural expression heavily constrained.[240] In March 2004, protests—sparked by a football match in Qamishli—erupted into large-scale demonstrations across Kurdish towns and villages.[241] The regime responded with lethal force, making arrests of hundreds, including young Kurdish men, and severely limiting political space for Kurdish activism.

The Syrian civil war, beginning in 2011, transformed the Kurdish situation dramatically. President Bashar al-Assad, facing a nationwide revolt, partially eased his stance toward the Kurds to prevent them from joining the Arab opposition. In April 2011, Assad quickly decreed the restoration of citizenship to many of the stateless Kurds of Hasakah – a tacit admission of past injustice, aimed at placating Kurdish opinion. More fatefully, as Syria's conflict became a multi-front war, the Assad regime in 2012 withdrew most of its forces from the Kurdish-majority areas in the north and northeast, needing to concentrate against Arab rebels elsewhere. This created a power vacuum that Kurdish groups filled. The Democratic

[237] The "Arab Belt" Project in Syria: one of the most systematic demographic engineering policies — aims, implementation, and impacts. Human Rights Watch / Middle East Watch; 1990. (Also summarized in "The 'Arab Belt' Project in Syria: 51 Years of Structural …" HIC-MENA, 2025.)
[238] "Adana Agreement." Wikipedia. Article on the 1998 accord between Turkey and Syria; Syria had allowed PKK camps and Ocalan residence until 1998.
[239] Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Statement by Ismail Cem (1998): Syria commits to not allow PKK training camps or its leader to reside in Syria under the Adana Agreement.
[240] Human Rights Watch. Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria. November 2009; includes discussion of stateless Kurds and suppression of Kurdish political activity.
[241] Human Rights Watch. "Syria: Address Grievances Underlying Kurdish Unrest." March 2004. On the Qamishli incidents triggered by a football match and broader protests.

Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish party founded in 2003 with ideological ties to the PKK, moved to take control. It organized a militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), which rapidly assumed control of Kurdish towns (starting with Kobani and Qamishli) as government authority receded. By November 2013, Syrian Kurdish leaders announced the creation of an autonomous administration in the regions under their control – a political entity known informally as Rojava ("West" in Kurdish). They established three self-governing cantons (Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira) which later merged into the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. This Rojava experiment was influenced by Ocalan's doctrine of "democratic confederalism" rather than outright independence, and it emphasized local councils, gender equality, and multi-ethnic inclusion (given the presence of Arabs and others in the territory).[242]

The Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the 2010s sparked an unprecedented mobilization of foreign fighters. While much scholarly attention has focused on those joining jihadist groups, far less is known about the non-jihadi foreign fighters who traveled to Syria to fight *against* ISIS. In particular, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) – Kurdish-led militias in northern Syria – attracted hundreds of international volunteers. The YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) and its all-female counterpart YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin) serve as the defense forces of the de facto autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria, known as Rojava. They gained global prominence during the fight against ISIS, especially after the 2014–2015 Siege of Kobanî, where the Kurds mounted fierce resistance to an ISIS assault. At a time when ISIS's atrocities – including genocide against the Yazidi community and terrorist attacks worldwide – shocked global audiences, the Kurdish militias appealed for international solidarity. In 2014, the embattled YPG explicitly called for foreign volunteers to join their fight. The response, though much smaller in scale than the tens of thousands who flocked to ISIS, was significant: by the mid-2010s, hundreds of foreigners from across Europe, North America, and elsewhere had joined the YPG/YPJ ranks. These volunteers ranged from military veterans to ideological activists. An initial wave in 2014–2015 included some Western ex-soldiers and self-styled "crusaders" driven by anti-ISIS motivations.[3] However, as it became clear that the YPG's leadership espoused a leftist ideology (inspired by democratic socialism and Abdullah Öcalan's writings), the composition of volunteers shifted. A second wave of recruits was "mainly driven by ideology," with many being anarchists, socialists, or communists drawn to Rojava's anti-fascist and egalitarian ideals. It is examined in the study of Corradi that a small but significant group came from Italy, joining the Kurdish forces both as combatants and as symbols of international solidarity. Corradi identified between 22 and 25 Italians who joined the YPG/YPJ, of which 13 were studied in detail. The group consisted of 12 men and one woman, ranging in age from 23 to 53, with an average age of 30. Notably, none of them had a professional military background; they were instead activists and politically engaged individuals. Their ideological affiliations included anarchism, communism, and the broader

[242] Ariav H, Ferragamo M. The Kurds' Long Struggle with Statelessness. Council on Foreign Relations. Published December 7, 2022. Accessed September 13, 2025

"extra-parliamentary radical left."[243] This profile sets them apart from some Anglo-American volunteers, many of whom had prior military experience.

Unlike mercenaries or those driven by "greed," foreigners who joined the YPG/YPJ were motivated by intangible factors. In interviews and memoirs, these fighters consistently cite reasons such as political ideals, moral outrage, and solidarity – rather than personal gain or coercion – as their impetus for taking up arms. To frame these motivations, it is useful to recall the classic debates on why individuals fight. Early theories contrasted "greed vs. grievance," where some combatants seek material reward while others are driven by political or ethnic grievances. Others distinguish "push" factors (e.g., poor socio-economic conditions at home) from "pull" factors (attractions of the cause or group) and immediate "trigger" events that precipitate the decision to go abroad.[8] In the case of YPG volunteers, the evidence indicates an overwhelming predominance of grievance-based and ideological pull factors. Edoardo Corradi's (2023) study of Italian YPG fighters shows that none of the interviewees reported poverty or unemployment as causes; instead, "all agreed ideology was the main factor pulling them toward the Syrian conflict."[244]

The emergence of Rojava intersected with the broader war against ISIS. When the Islamic State jihadist group swept across northern Syria and Iraq in 2014, the Syrian Kurds became crucial defenders. In late 2014, ISIS besieged the Kurdish town of Kobani on the Turkish border; the YPG, with help from Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga attacks and U.S.-led coalition airstrikes, eventually repelled the siege after months of intense fighting. This victory turned Syrian Kurdish forces into a valued ally of the United States against ISIS. The YPG became the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic alliance armed and supported by the U.S. to fight ISIS. With American airpower and special forces aid, the SDF rolled back ISIS in northeast Syria, capturing Raqqa (ISIS's de facto capital) in 2017 and declaring the territorial defeat of ISIS by 2019.[245][246] In the process, the Kurdish-led SDF came to control roughly one-quarter of Syria – including major oilfields and grain-producing regions. This alarmed Türkiye, which views the YPG as indistinguishable from the PKK and thus as a terrorist threat on its border. Starting in 2016, Turkey intervened militarily in Syria to block the expansion or consolidation of Kurdish autonomy. Turkish forces and allied Syrian Arab militias seized control of segments of northern Syria: Operation Euphrates Shield (2016-17) took territory west of the Euphrates, Operation Olive Branch (2018) captured the Afrin canton from the YPG, and Operation Peace Spring (October 2019) drove the SDF from a strip between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain. These incursions aimed to prevent any contiguous separatist Kurdish-controlled zone along Türkiye's frontier. The Syrian Kurds thus found

[243] Edoardo Corradi, "Joining the Fight: The Italian Foreign Fighters Contingent of the Kurdish People's Protection Units," Italian Political Science Review 53, no. 2 (2023): 201-207

[244] Corradi, Edoardo. "Joining the Fight: The Italian Foreign Fighters Contingent of the Kurdish People's Protection Units." *Italian Political Science Review* 53, no. 2 (2023),pp. 202-209

[245] The Battle for Raqqa and the Challenges After Liberation. CTC, West Point. June 2017. On SDF operations to dislodge ISIS from Raqqa under U.S. coalition support.

[246] Clingendael. Strategies of Dominance and Governance: The YPG/PYD during the Syrian Conflict. The Netherlands Institute of International Relations; 2021. Describes how YPG's performance in Kobani led to increased U.S. backing and formation of SDF.

themselves balancing between a U.S. partnership (for counter-ISIS operations and political negotiations) and an uneasy accommodation with the Damascus regime (as protection against Türkiye). As of the early 2020s, the Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northeast Syria remains in place, governing enclaves like Hasakah and parts of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor provinces. While it is not internationally recognized as an independent entity, it represents the most extensive exercise of Kurdish self-rule in Syria's modern history. The Syrian state has not formally accepted Kurdish autonomy and insists on eventual reunification, yet for now a de facto power-sharing exists.

Syria's Kurdish movements in 2025 represent one of the most complex and pivotal dimensions of the country's evolving political order. Following the downfall of Bashar al-Assad and the formation of a transitional government in Damascus, the question of how to incorporate the Kurdish-led administration and its security apparatus into the Syrian state has become central to the country's long-term stability. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), its armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG), and the broader coalition of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continue to dominate the northeastern territories under the framework of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). [247]

Historically, the PYD, founded in 2003 and long affiliated with the ideological legacy of Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), established itself as the principal Kurdish actor in Syria during the civil war. Through the YPG and later the SDF—a multi-ethnic force including Arabs, Assyrians, and others—it succeeded in controlling large areas after the defeat of ISIS.[248] While AANES presents itself as a pluralist and inclusive administration, most analysts agree that PYD cadres remain its core decision-makers, particularly within the security and intelligence apparatus. However, Kurdish political life remains fragmented. The Kurdish National Council (ENKS or KNC), historically aligned with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), opposes PYD dominance and has occasionally negotiated power-sharing arrangements that repeatedly collapsed over issues of representation, governance style, and PYD repression of rival parties.[249]Despite the rhetoric of inclusivity, tensions between Kurdish administrators and local Arab tribes, especially in Deir ez-Zor, persist and occasionally erupt into armed clashes. These tensions highlight the fragility of the AANES governance model, which must balance ideological decentralization with practical control over diverse populations.

External actors exert enormous influence over Kurdish strategy. Türkiye remains the most forceful opponent of any Kurdish autonomy along its southern border, viewing the PYD and YPG as extensions of the PKK. Ankara has conducted several cross-border incursions since 2016 and continues to insist that no political settlement in Syria will be acceptable if it legitimizes Kurdish self-rule. In October 2025, Turkish officials reiterated that any

[247] UK Home Office, Country Policy and Information Note: Syria – Kurds and the Autonomous Administration, March 2025.

[248] International Crisis Group, Flight of the Kurds: The Future of Rojava, 2024.
[249] Amberin Zaman, "Syrian Kurdish Parties Still Divided," *Al-Monitor*, August 2025.

normalization with Damascus depends on the dismantling of "terror-linked" structures in northern Syria.[250] This has placed both the PYD and the new Syrian government in a difficult position: while Damascus sees tactical advantage in Turkish hostility to the PYD, it also faces national-sovereignty claims that require reasserting control over all Syrian territory without appearing to bow to Ankara's terms.

The United States continues to maintain a limited but decisive presence in northeastern Syria, primarily to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS and the stability of detention facilities holding thousands of militants. Washington's partnership with the SDF remains a cornerstone of its regional counter-terrorism policy. In 2025, American diplomats and military officials held several meetings with both the transitional government and Kurdish representatives to prevent further deterioration of security in the northeast.[251] At the same time, U.S. policymakers have signaled that future support will depend on the SDF's willingness to integrate into a unified Syrian command structure and its avoidance of confrontation with Damascus.

Other regional actors also shape this evolving equation. Russia and Iran, as long-time backers of the Syrian state, encourage negotiations leading to eventual reintegration of the Kurdish zones under Damascus's sovereignty. Jordan and Gulf countries play facilitating roles in broader regional diplomacy but remain cautious about the Kurdish question. Analysts at the Council on Foreign Relations note that this diplomatic choreography has transformed Syria's Kurdish issue from a military standoff into a slow political bargaining process shaped by both internal and external power balances.[252]

Within AANES, governance continues to function through a complex web of local councils, women's committees, and internal security (*Asayish*) forces. In 2025, the administration undertook several public diplomacy efforts—coordinating foreign repatriations from the al-Hol and Roj camps, calling for border openings, and issuing repeated statements emphasizing Syria's territorial integrity. These actions were designed to project an image of responsibility and moderation, signaling to the international community that AANES seeks coexistence rather than secession. Nonetheless, incidents such as clashes between SDF-linked units and Syrian government forces in Aleppo in early October revealed that relations on the ground remain tense and prone to escalation.[253]

After Bashar al-Assad's removal, a transitional authority led by Ahmed al-Sharaa assumed power in March 2025, forming a provisional cabinet and initiating indirect parliamentary elections. Kurdish-held regions largely abstained from this process, leaving their representation ambiguous. The new government's official discourse has consistently emphasized two points: rejection of any federal or separatist arrangement, and readiness to

[250] Reuters, "Turkey Says No Normalization Without Dismantling YPG," October 4, 2025.
[251] U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS), Syria and the U.S. Role in Northeast Syria, September 2025.

[252] Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Global Conflict Tracker: Civil War in Syria, updated 2025.
[253] BBC Monitoring, "SDF–Syrian Army Clashes in Aleppo," October 1, 2025.

integrate SDF units and AANES civil institutions into national frameworks under the umbrella of Syrian sovereignty.[254] This policy marks a significant departure from the Assad era's overt hostility, yet it still falls short of Kurdish aspirations for decentralized governance.

Throughout 2025, Damascus and Kurdish leaders engaged in intermittent negotiations on integrating SDF forces into the national army. The government demands central command and control, while Kurdish representatives insist on guarantees for language rights, education, and equitable management of local resources. These talks have been repeatedly delayed due to distrust and Turkish opposition. A temporary ceasefire was announced in early October following clashes in Aleppo, accompanied by public declarations of intent to implement a comprehensive peace framework.[255] However, Damascus simultaneously reaffirmed its opposition to any form of political decentralization, exposing the contradictions between military de-escalation and unresolved governance disputes.[256]

For the PYD and YPG, the political landscape of 2025 has forced a strategic recalibration. Having realized that maximalist autonomy is untenable under regional and international pressure, the movement has shifted toward preserving limited self-governance within a unified Syria. PYD officials now emphasize their Syrian identity and willingness to cooperate with national institutions, hoping to secure cultural rights and limited administrative independence in Kurdish-majority areas.[257] This pragmatism stems from multiple sources of pressure: the threat of Turkish intervention, the uncertainty of continued U.S. protection, friction with Arab communities in mixed regions, and the domestic legitimacy challenge posed by rival Kurdish parties.

As 2025 draws to a close, several possible trajectories emerge. The most plausible is a managed integration process in which SDF units are gradually incorporated into the Syrian Armed Forces as regional commands while AANES institutions are rebranded as governorate administrations. Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights could be recognized through statutory reforms without constitutionalizing federalism. A less optimistic scenario envisions a protracted stalemate marked by sporadic clashes and local ceasefires, producing a "cold peace" between Damascus and the AANES. The new Syrian government acknowledges the need to integrate Kurdish regions but insists on maintaining a unitary state. The PYD/YPG leadership now seeks to preserve basic administrative and cultural safeguards rather than independent political structures. The broader settlement will ultimately depend not only on internal bargaining but also on the interplay of Ankara's security demands, Washington's counter-terror priorities, and Moscow's mediation efforts.

The emerging pattern reveals a tentative formula: ceasefire first, politics later. While this approach has temporarily reduced violence, it leaves unanswered the fundamental issue of how much self-governing authority the Kurdish movement will retain inside a post-war Syrian state. The fate of this experiment in local autonomy will determine not only the future

[254] Syrian Transitional Government Communiqué No. 4, April 2025.
[255] The Guardian, "Ceasefire Announced between Damascus and SDF," October 5, 2025.
[256] Reuters, "Syrian Officials Reject Federal Demands," October 6, 2025.
[257] AANES Foreign Relations Department, "Statement on National Unity," September 2025.

of Syria's Kurds but also the broader regional balance between state sovereignty and sub-national governance in the post-conflict Middle East.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF KURDISH AUTONOMY ON IRAQI NATIONAL SECURITY

4.1 Autonomous Oil Policies of Erbil

As of the end of 2024, Iraq has been 5th worldwide in proved reserves according to the latest OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2025 in which it was put proved Iraq's crude reserves at 145.019 billion barrels,[258] and the IEA continues to find the Middle East has the lowest decline rates and among the lowest upstream costs because its super-giant fields are conventional and largely onshore;[259] Iraq's resource base sits squarely in that pattern remaining as OPEC's second producer.[260]

Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, foreign oil companies have worked hard to build relationships with Iraq's Oil Ministry. They have appointed lobbyists to develop relationships with influential officials, provided training (often for free) for Iraqi officials and technicians, sponsored Oil Ministry participation in international conferences, and entered contracts (again, often for free) to analyse oilfield geological data.[261] The United States and the United Kingdom, through strategic planning initiatives such as the U.S. State Department's "Future of Iraq" project, sought to establish a framework for Iraq's oil development that prioritized "Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs)" as the primary model for international investment. While the first elected Iraqi governments initially faced significant external pressure to adopt this model through the 2007 Draft Hydrocarbon Law,[262] the resulting policy landscape became bifurcated: the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) fully embraced the PSA model to attract foreign capital,[263] while the Federal Government in Baghdad eventually pivoted toward Technical Service Contracts (TSCs) to maintain greater sovereign control over its nationalized resources.[264] Additionally, During the first fourteen months following the invasion, occupation forces had direct control of Iraq through the Coalition Provisional Authority.

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[258] Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). *Annual Statistical Bulletin 2025*. Vienna: OPEC, 2025. (See Table 3.1; "Summary" for world totals.)
[259] U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). "Iraq — Country Analysis." Washington, DC: EIA, Feb. 14, 2024 / July 2025 updates.
[260] "Iraq plans to raise oil production capacity over 6 billion bpd by 2029", by Reuters, March 23, 2025.

[261] Mutitt, p.13.
[262] Behn, D. F. (2007). Sharing Iraq's Oil: Analyzing Production-Sharing Contracts Under The Final Draft Petroleum Law. OGEL Energy Law Journal, 5(3).
[263] Zebaria, D. F. (2020). Oil Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs) With a Focus on Iraqi Kurdistan Region Oil Contracts. International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change, 13(7).
[264] Al-Shammari, M. S. (2024). Oil Policy and Investment Licenses Contracts in Iraq: An Analytical Study. International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) initiated the framework for a long-term petroleum strategy, which was subsequently advanced following the formal transfer of sovereignty in June 2004 to the Iraqi Interim Government under Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.[265] In September 2004, approximately three months after assuming office, Allawi issued a pivotal set of "Guidelines for Petroleum Policy" to the Supreme Council for Oil Policy.[266] These guidelines instructed the Council to draft a comprehensive national policy that emphasized the privatization of the downstream sector and the use of international investment models, marking a departure from Iraq's traditional state-centralized management.[267] Pre-empting both the Iraqi elections and the drafting of a new constitution, Allawi's guidelines specified that while Iraq's currently producing fields should be developed by the Iraq National Oil Company (INOC), all other fields should be developed by private companies, through the contractual mechanism of production sharing agreements (PSAs).[268]

In October 2005, a new Constitution was accepted in a referendum. Like much of the Constitution, the oil policy section was open to some interpretation. Apparently referring to fields not currently in production, it states: "The federal government and the governments of the producing regions and provinces together will draw up the necessary strategic policies to develop oil and gas wealth to bring the greatest benefit for the Iraqi people, relying on the most modern techniques of market principles and encouraging investment."[269] There are two issues here. The reference to "market principles and encouraging investment" indicates a clear direction of travel, in terms of opening to private companies. Meanwhile the first part of this clause, somewhat vaguely, tries to deal with the issue of jurisdiction. However, while this states that the federal and regional governments will work together, a subsequent clause states that: "All that is not written in the exclusive powers of the federal authorities is in the authority of the regions. In other powers shared between the federal government and the regions, the priority will be given to the region's law in case of dispute."[270]

The Northern Kurdish authorities of Iraq were even more impatient to sign deals with foreign oil companies while the Oil Ministry of Iraq was keen to sign contracts as quickly as possible. In June 2004, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) signed an exploration and development deal with Norwegian company DNO. In a clear sign of the tensions between Baghdad and the regions, the Oil Ministry reacted by warning companies that if they signed deals with regional governments, they would be excluded from contracts at a

[265] Herring, E., & Rangwala, G. (2006). Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and Its Legacy. Cornell University Press.
[266] Muttitt, G. (2012). Fuel on the Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq. Vintage Books. (*Muttitt provides a primary-source-based account of Allawi's September 2004 guidelines. He argues that these guidelines were heavily influenced by earlier US State Department and CPA planning, specifically pushing the Supreme Council for Oil Policy to move away from the Iraq National Oil Company (INOC) model toward international contracts.*)
[267] Looney, R. (2006). Economic Consequences of the Iraq War: The Privatization Strategy. In The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences.
[268] Energy Compass, 'Iraq: Puzzling over the future', 1 October 2004
[269] Text of the draft Iraq Constitution, translated by Associated Press, 28, August 2005, article 110.
[270] Article 111.

national level.[271] Then in October 2005, the KRG signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with K Petroleum Company, which was jointly owned by the Canada-based Heritage Oil and the Kurdish company Eagle, to carry out oilfield studies adjacent to the Taq Taq field in the Kurdish region. The Kurdish Regional Government was weakening bargaining power in negotiating with foreign oil companies than the Iraqi Oil Ministry (or Iraq National Oil Company), as it lacked both the institutional experience and the consolidated weight of handling the entire country's resources.

Since 2007, Iraq's oil policy has been defined by a contentious legal and political struggle between the Federal Government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil.[272] This dispute centers on the governance of Iraq's most vital economic asset, carrying profound implications for national sovereignty and regional autonomy. While the 2005 Iraqi Constitution intended to establish a power-sharing framework, the inherent linguistic and legal ambiguities—particularly in Articles 111 and 112—have fueled ongoing conflicts over the right to manage oil fields, sign international contracts, and control export revenues.[273] The lack of a national hydrocarbon law has resulted in a bifurcated energy sector, characterized by diverging contract models and periodic fiscal crises that threaten Iraq's overall economic stability.[274]

A long-promised national hydrocarbon law – first drafted in 2007 – has languished without passage, leaving Iraq without a unified oil and gas legal regime. In its absence, Baghdad and Erbil pursued divergent oil strategies, signing different kinds of contracts with foreign companies and entering separate export agreements. This divergence fueled ongoing disputes between the federal government and Kurdish authorities that have spanned over a decade and a half.

Major turning points – from the KRG's own 2007 oil law and independent exports in 2014, to Baghdad's legal offensives and court rulings in 2022 – have repeatedly altered the balance of power. Most recently, events such as a 2023 international arbitration over Türkiye's pipeline and the halting of northern oil exports have forced both sides back to the negotiating table.

The foundation of Iraq's oil governance lies in its 2005 Constitution, which attempted to balance federal and regional powers. Article 111 declares that "oil and gas are owned by all

[271] Mutitt, p.19.
[272] Wahab, B. (2023). Tipping Point of the Iraq-KRG Energy Dispute. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (*Wahab provides an empirical analysis of how the "one country, two energy policies" model emerged. He documents the shift from political deal-making to legal warfare, culminating in the 2022 Federal Supreme Court ruling that declared the KRG's 2007 Oil and Gas Law unconstitutional.)*
[273] Smeekens, D., & Keil, S. (2022). The Iraqi Oil and Gas Dispute between Baghdad and Erbil: A Commentary on the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court Judgment. Université de Fribourg. (*This legal study explores the "ambiguities" of the 2005 Constitution. It specifically analyzes how Article 111 (declaring oil the property of all Iraqis) and Article 112 (outlining shared management) are interpreted in contradictory ways: Baghdad views them as a mandate for centralization, while Erbil interprets them as granting residual powers to regions for "future" fields.*)
[274] Al-Shammari, M. S. (2024). Oil Policy and Investment Licenses Contracts in Iraq: An Analytical Study. International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates," emphasizing national ownership.[275] Article 112 goes on to stipulate that the federal government, in cooperation with regional and provincial authorities, shall manage the country's oil and gas wealth. In particular, Article 112's first clause tasks the federal government and producing regional/governorate governments to jointly manage "oil and gas extracted from present fields" (those already in production by 2005) and to distribute revenues fairly across the country. The second clause of Article 112 calls on federal and regional authorities together to set strategic policies for developing oil and gas to achieve the "highest benefit to the Iraqi people" using modern market principles.[276] While these provisions affirm shared responsibility, they are vague on mechanisms, leaving key terms – such as what constitutes "present" versus future fields – undefined. Crucially, the Constitution mandates that a future law shall regulate revenue distribution and management of oil. It also contains clauses empowering regions: Article 115 grants regions authority over matters not exclusively assigned to the federal government, and Article 121 allows regional law to prevail in case of conflicts on non-exclusive powers.[277] Nowhere does the constitution explicitly assign oil and gas exclusively to the federal government, which opened the door for the KRG to argue that it can manage new oil fields under its regional authority. In sum, the 2005 constitution established oil as a national patrimony but left ambivalence about how federal and regional powers would be reconciled – a recipe for protracted disagreements in the absence of clarifying legislation.

To implement the constitution's vision, Iraqi leaders undertook to pass a national oil and gas law. In early 2007, the Council of Ministers (cabinet) approved a draft "Hydrocarbon Law" that was intended as part of a larger legislative package. This draft law, introduced to Parliament in July 2007, aimed to set rules for managing upstream oil investment and delineating authority between Baghdad and the regions and it affirmed that oil is a national resource owned by all the people (mirroring Article 111) and envisaged the Iraq National Oil Company (INOC) handling a large share of producing fields via annexes to the law.[278]At the same time, the draft allowed for regional representation: regional authorities would have seats on the Federal Oil and Gas Council and INOC's board. The most contentious issues in the 2007 draft revolved around the balance of power. The KRG and some Shi'a factions feared the law tilted too much control to Baghdad's Oil Ministry and INOC – for instance, the Oil Minister had appended annexes listing which fields would be managed by INOC without Kurdish input, a move the KRG called unconstitutional.[279] Kurdish negotiators wanted greater autonomy to manage new fields and to sign contracts independently, whereas many in Baghdad (and Arabs in oil-poor Sunni areas) insisted on centralized management to

[275] Christina Parajon, The Iraq Hydrocarbon Law: How and When?, United States Institute of Peace Brief, June 1, 2007, 2-3

[276] The legal framework for managing oil in post-conflict Iraq: A pattern of abuse and violence over natural resources, Mishkat Al Moumina, Women and the Environment Organization, June 2012, p.420-422.

[277] Al Moumina, p.420.

[278] Christina Parajon, The Iraq Hydrocarbon Law: How and When?, United States Institute of Peace Brief, June 1, 2007.

[279] Council on Foreign Relations, Backgrounder: Lionel Beehner and Greg Bruno, Why Iraqis Cannot Agree on an Oil Law, c.2008, noting Kurdish objections to central control and Sunni fears of regional management.

ensure equitable development. A related gap was the question of revenue sharing: the 2007 draft law deliberately left revenue distribution to a separate law, which was also drafted in 2007 but never passed.[280] Without an agreed revenue-sharing mechanism, Kurdish leaders were wary of committing to central control over oil. The draft hydrocarbon law's fate was to stall amid these disagreements. Despite being much-discussed and often delayed and heralded as a potential breakthrough the bill never secured parliamentary approval due to ongoing sectarian and regional mistrust. So, Iraq has remained without a national oil and gas law for nearly two decades, as of 2025, despite at least four attempts to revive or revise the draft in subsequent years.

Frustrated with Baghdad, the Kurdistan Region's authorities took matters into their own hands. In August 2007, the Kurdish Parliament passed its own "Petroleum Act of the Kurdistan Region," providing a legal basis for the KRG Ministry of Natural Resources to manage oil and gas in the Kurdish Regional Government. The KRG grounded this move in its interpretation of the constitution (notably Articles 111, 112, 115, and 121) that new fields and contracts could be under regional jurisdiction since the federal government had not passed the promised law.[281] Under Law No. 22 of 2007 (the KRG Oil and Gas Law), the KRG asserted broad powers to sign exploration and production contracts with international oil companies (IOCs) and to administer its oil sector from licensing through production. By late 2007, the KRG had already signed over twenty production-sharing contracts with mostly small, independent oil companies eager to explore Kurdish territories.[282] (Over the following years, the KRG eventually signed dozens of such deals, including with major firms in some cases.) The federal Oil Ministry immediately deemed the KRG's unilateral contracts "illegal," arguing they violated Iraq's sovereignty and constitutional provisions requiring federal oversight.[283] Baghdad's stance was that no oil contracts are valid without federal approval, and it moved to blacklist companies that dealt directly with Erbil. For example, the Oil Ministry cut off oil exports or contracts involving firms from Austria and South Korea after those companies signed with the KRG.[284] Nevertheless, the Kurdish government claimed the Iraqi constitution allows regional management of new fields and that Baghdad's refusal to accommodate the Kurds necessitated a self-developed legal framework. This legal schism set the stage for a country operating with two parallel oil regimes: one federal and one regional.

A hallmark of Iraq's bifurcated energy policy is the stark contrast between the contractual frameworks employed by the Federal Government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Baghdad has traditionally utilized Technical Service Contracts (TSCs), which maintain high levels of state control by paying international oil companies (IOCs) a fixed remuneration fee per barrel, effectively treating them as contractors rather

[280] Beehner and Bruno, 2008, "Revenue Sharing" part.
[281] Al Moumina, p.423.
[282] Beehner and Bruno, 2008, "Introduction" part.
[283] Al Moumina, p.423.
[284] Beehner and Bruno, 2008, "The Issues That Divide" part.

than partners.[285] Conversely, the KRG adopted a Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) model, offering IOCs a percentage of the "profit oil" and the right to book reserves on their balance sheets—a highly attractive incentive for foreign firms that offsets the greater geological and political risks of the region.[286] These two models reflect opposing philosophies of resource management: Baghdad's centralized, state-led approach versus Erbil's market-oriented, investment-driven strategy.[287]

The federal government, influenced by a tradition of resource nationalism, has generally employed Technical Service Contracts (TSCs) or similar service-oriented agreements for upstream oil development. Under Iraq's TSCs (used in the major bid rounds of 2009–2010 and subsequent deals), the state retains ownership of reserves and oil produced, while the foreign company is paid a fixed fee for each barrel produced (plus cost recovery). Indeed, production sharing agreements dominate in Kurdistan, while Baghdad typically requires technical service contracts with limited profit potential. Another difference is ownership: the KRG has allowed 100% foreign ownership in oil projects, whereas federal Iraq generally limits foreign equity to 49% or insists on Iraqi state participation. These divergent contract regimes reflect deeper political values – the KRG, seeking rapid development and allies abroad, offered lucrative terms to draw investment, while Baghdad, wary of ceding too much profit or control to foreigners, opted for conservative terms. The result was that between 2007 and 2014, the KRG signed dozens of PSAs with companies from around the world (ranging from small wildcatters to majors like ExxonMobil by 2011), whereas Baghdad signed service contracts with major oil firms to boost output in the established super-giant fields of the south (Basra region) and also in some northern fields under federal control.[288]

A critical foreign agreement in this saga is the arrangement for exporting oil from northern Iraq to international markets. Since the 1970s, the main export route for northern Iraqi crude has been the ***Iraq–Turkey Pipeline (ITP)*** to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, Türkiye, governed by a 1973 treaty between Baghdad and Ankara. Under that treaty, Iraq's State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO) is the recognized seller of Iraqi oil through the pipeline. In the 2010s, however, the KRG negotiated a direct deal with Türkiye to enable independent exports. The KRG built its own pipeline that linked into the ITP, and by May 2014 KRG oil was flowing to Ceyhan without Baghdad's approval.[289] This move followed the KRG's early production successes at fields like Tawke and Taq Taq and coincided with a period of political chaos (the ISIS invasion of mid-2014) that gave the Kurds an opening. The Ankara–Erbil understanding – never fully transparent – essentially allowed the KRG to

[285] Lawell, C. L. (2022). On the Design of Oil Production Contracts: Insights from a Dynamic Model applied to the Rumaila oil field in Iraq. Cornell University.
[286] Zebaria, D. F. (2020). Oil Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs) With a Focus on Iraqi Kurdistan Region Oil Contracts. International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change.
[287] Muttitt, 2012.
[288] Hadeel Al Sayed and Ghazi Ali (HHL Law Firm), "Energy Investment in Iraq – Need for Legal Advice," *Iraq Business News*, Aug 25, 2025,(*on KRG allowing 100% foreign ownership and using PSAs vs. federal 49% cap and TSCs, HHL Law Firm article, 2025, on 2022 FSC ruling threatening $110 billion in KRG contracts and 2025 court reversals*) ,Karkh Court, FSC July decisions.
[289] Bilal Wahab, "Tipping Point of the Iraq-KRG Energy Dispute," Washington Institute, 2023, describing two divergent energy policies since 2014 and KRG's PSA model vs. Baghdad's oil nationalism.

pump crude through the Turkish pipeline system and sell it internationally, depositing proceeds in its own accounts. In exchange, Türkiye gained access to discounted oil and strengthened ties with the KRG. Baghdad vehemently opposed this export arrangement and in 2014 filed for arbitration against Turkey for breaching the 1973 pipeline agreement.[290] Meanwhile, to exert pressure, Baghdad cut off budget payments to the KRG in early 2014, plunging the region into financial crisis. Despite these tensions, the KRG continued to export independently, sending on the order of 300–400,000 barrels per day out through Türkiye in the peak years, often at a significant discount to market prices.[291] This oil export cooperation with Türkiye was a cornerstone of the KRG's economic autonomy, but it also tied Erbil's fortunes to Ankara's goodwill. It is worth noting that the federal government, even while contesting KRG exports, occasionally reached ad-hoc revenue-sharing deals involving the pipeline. For instance, from 2018–2019, Baghdad and Erbil agreed that SOMO would export federally-controlled Kirkuk oil via the KRG-Türkiye pipeline, and in return Baghdad would allocate a portion of the federal budget to the KRG. Such interim agreements were stopgaps and frequently broke down amid mutual recriminations and changes in leadership. No lasting solution on pipeline exports was achieved in the 2010s, setting the stage for the decisive legal intervention by courts in the 2020s.

Both governments competed to attract IOCs, leading to some companies being caught in the middle. Baghdad's Oil Ministry consistently warned that any firm signing contracts under the KRG's legal framework without federal approval could be barred from doing business in federal Iraq. This was not an idle threat: firms like ExxonMobil, Total, Chevron, and others had to weigh access to the giant Basra oilfields against opportunities in untapped Kurdish acreage. In 2011, ExxonMobil became the first supermajor to gamble on Kurdistan, signing exploration blocks with the KRG even as it was developing the huge West Qurna-1 field under a federal contract. Baghdad reacted furiously, declaring Exxon in breach of its federal contract and temporarily blacklisting it from future licensing rounds. Similar disputes arose with other companies; for example, Russia's Rosneft in 2017 struck deals to finance KRG oil infrastructure, further unnerving Baghdad. Conversely, companies that stayed strictly within Baghdad's system often avoided KRG. This bifurcation even extended to ownership structures – KRG allowed 100% foreign ownership and operatorship in its fields, whereas Baghdad preferred joint ventures where the state (through entities like the North Oil Company or South Oil Company) held significant equity.[292] By 2020, essentially two sets of international oil investors existed in Iraq: one set (including BP, Shell, Lukoil, CNPC, etc.) working under federal technical-service terms in the south and Kirkuk areas, and another set (including DNO, Genel Energy, Chevron, and smaller independents) operating under KRG PSAs in the north. A few, like TotalEnergies, managed to have a foot in both camps, but only with careful diplomacy. This division had economic consequences: lacking a federal imprimatur, KRG's oil contracts had higher risk, forcing the KRG to sell oil at notable discounts due to fewer takers and reliance on intermediaries.[293] The KRG also amassed

[290] Wahab, 2023.
[291] Wahab, 2023.
[292] Al Sayed and Ali, 2025.
[293] Wahab, 2023.

substantial debts to traders and companies by pre-selling oil to raise cash, something Baghdad criticized as mortgaging Iraq's wealth.

Baghdad has insisted that without a national oil law, the Ministry of Oil's authority (rooted in pre-2003 laws and its interpretation of the constitution) extends over all oil extraction and exports in the country. This fundamental legal disagreement quickly took on an ethnic-political character. For the Kurds, controlling their oil has been seen as both an economic lifeline and a guarantee of autonomy within the Iraqi federation. Ever since the KRG's formation in the 1990s, Kurdish leaders have sought to leverage natural resources to strengthen their self-governance and, some hope, pave a path toward eventual independence. Arab Iraqis—particularly those in the resource-poor Sunni west and center—worried that Kurdish (or other future regional) oil pursuits could deny the rest of Iraq a fair share of oil wealth. Many in Baghdad's political elite remained committed to the idea that Iraq's oil should be developed through a unified policy and that revenue should flow into the federal treasury for redistribution as national budgets (from which the KRG would receive a fixed percentage share). This zero-sum mentality turned the oil law debate into a "political battleground between those who want a more unified Iraq and those who want a looser, more decentralized federation," as observed during the 2007 law negotiations.[294]

Oil has been the engine of Iraq's economy for the last decade, annually accounting for roughly 90% of government revenues.[295]), control over oil revenues is a matter of survival for both Baghdad and Erbil. The federal government traditionally allocated a portion of national oil revenue to the KRG – commonly 17% of the budget in early post-2003 years – as the Kurdistan region's share. When relations were good, this allowed the KRG to pay its expenses, including salaries of its Peshmerga forces and civil servants, without exporting oil itself. But as disputes intensified, Baghdad repeatedly used the budget lever as pressure. In 2014, after the KRG initiated independent exports via Türkiye, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government froze budget transfers to the KRG, effectively cutting off the Kurds' primary income.[296] This precipitated a financial crisis in the Kurdistan Region, which then doubled down on exports to make up the shortfall. Similar budgetary showdowns recurred: for example, in 2017–2018, following the KRG's ill-fated independence referendum in September 2017, Baghdad (under PM Haider al-Abadi) not only militarily reasserted control over oil-rich Kirkuk but also imposed a blockade of Kurdish airports and slashed funding, forcing the KRG to concede and cancel the referendum's effects. Accordingly, Kirkuk's oil fields (with reserves of ~9 billion barrels) were historically under federal control, but during the fight against ISIS in 2014 the KRG's Peshmerga took control of Kirkuk and began exporting its oil through KRG pipelines.[297] This dramatically increased the KRG's export volumes and leverage – until 2017 when Iraqi forces retook Kirkuk, removing about half of the KRG's oil output from its control. The Kirkuk question – essentially whether that

[294] Parajon, The Iraq Hydrocarbon Law: How and When?,United States Institute of Peace, 2017.
[295] U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), Country Analysis: Iraq, updated 2024, on March 2023 arbitration ruling and KRG output drop.
[296] Wahab, 2023.
[297] Wahab, 2023.

province (and its oil) belongs to KRG or not – has always lurked behind the larger oil dispute.

On September 25, 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held an independence referendum—drawing a 92.7% "yes" vote—which the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court later deemed unconstitutional, sparking a severe constitutional and military crisis.[298] In a rapid counter-offensive in October 2017, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government deployed federal forces and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to reclaim the "disputed territories," specifically targeting the strategic Kirkuk governorate. This maneuver was facilitated by internal Kurdish political fractures, specifically an alleged local agreement with factions of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to withdraw from the "Taza-Khurmatu" line, allowing Baghdad to seize the Bai Hassan and Avana Dome oilfields without prolonged urban combat.[299] These fields were the backbone of the KRG's "economic independence" strategy; their loss immediately removed approximately 250,000 to 300,000 barrels per day (bpd) from Erbil's control.[300] It is noted that this "oil shock" stripped the KRG of roughly half its total production and revenue capacity overnight, effectively ending its ability to function as an independent fiscal entity and forcing a reluctant return to the federal budget framework.

The federal North Oil Company resumed control of those fields and their output was re-routed to Ceyhan under SOMO's authority. This was a pivotal moment demonstrating Baghdad's determination not to allow Kurdish oil independence to progress to statehood. Post-2017, the KRG was chastened and had to rebuild trust to get any budget allocation restored. In 2018, a new tentative modus vivendi emerged: under PM Abadi and later PM Adel Abdul Mahdi, Baghdad agreed to send some budget funds to pay KRG salaries, and the Kurds in turn agreed (on paper) to contribute a portion of oil. But even then, the core legal issues remained unresolved – effectively kicked down the road for the next government.

With global oil prices plummeting by nearly 60% early in the year, federal Iraq's annual oil revenues fell from $78.5 billion in 2019 to just $41.9 billion in 2020—a catastrophic 47% decrease.[301] For the KRG, the crisis was even more acute; net monthly oil revenues reportedly crashed from over $300 million in January to a mere $30 million by April 2020.[302] This collapse hit both Baghdad and Erbil hard, leading to delayed payments and renewed recriminations. The KRG's inability to pay public salaries provoked protests in Kurdistan, while Baghdad's parliament (with strong Shi'a hardliner presence) in late 2020 passed a Finance Law that once again conditioned transfers to KRG on meeting oil obligations. In 2021, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi (a relatively pragmatic leader) managed to include

[298] Hiltermann, J. B., The Kurds are Breaking the Law, and Baghdad is Breaking the Kurds, International Crisis Group, 2017.
[299] Knights, M., The Kirkuk Crisis: The End of Kurdish Military Expansion. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017.
[300] Mills, R., Iraq's Oil and Gas Post-2017: Conflict and Compromise. Oxford Energy Institute,,2018.
[301] Iraq Oil Report (2021). Federal Iraq's 2020 oil revenues fell to lowest annual level in more than a decade.
[302] Nitti, S, "Oil price crash plunges Iraqi Kurdistan into crisis", The New Arab / Rudaw Research, 2020.

a compromise in the federal budget where Baghdad would transfer funds equivalent to the value of 250,000 bpd after deducting KRG's own revenues – essentially a formula to integrate KRG oil indirectly. But implementation lagged, illustrating how each yearly budget became a battlefield for the oil dispute.

The most decisive legal turning point came on February 15, 2022, when Iraq's Federal Supreme Court (FSC) issued a landmark ruling on the oil dispute. In this *binding* decision, the top court in Baghdad held that the KRG's Oil and Gas Law of 2007 was unconstitutional and thus null and void. The court explicitly ordered the KRG to hand over all oil production from its territory to the federal government (through the Oil Ministry and its marketing arm, SOMO) and to cease its independent exports.It also instructed the federal Ministry of Oil to take measures to invalidate KRG oil contracts with foreign parties, and called on the Ministry of Finance to ensure that oil revenues from KRG operations are returned to the central treasury.[303] In essence, the ruling declared that all oil activities in the Kurdistan Region must be under federal oversight, directly challenging the entire edifice of the KRG's energy sector. This decision was the culmination of a long-dormant court case (dating back many years) but was likely accelerated by political shifts – it came at a time of tense government formation talks in Baghdad and was seen by Kurdish officials as a pressure tactic by rivals (some suggested Iranian-aligned factions pushed for it). Baghdad, empowered by the verdict, took steps: the Oil Ministry invited KRG-based IOCs to re-register their contracts with SOMO under federal law or face legal action. It also began coordinating with federal courts to summon oil company executives and even reportedly issued arrest warrants for some oil ministry officials in Kurdistan who did not comply. The ruling was a clear legal victory for Baghdad's position that only the federal state has the right to manage Iraq's oil.[304] However, its enforcement was tricky, as the KRG's political leadership and security forces still controlled the territory. The FSC decision stands as a milestone: after February 2022, Erbil's bargaining position weakened legally, and any future political compromise would have to contend with the fact that Iraq's highest court had essentially outlawed the KRG's oil autonomy. (It's notable that in January 2023, the FSC issued another decision invalidating the practice of sending monthly federal cash advances to the KRG without a budget law, further tightening the financial noose on KRG.[305]

Following the 2022 Federal Supreme Court ruling, the Baghdad government intensified efforts to bring Kurdish oil under federal control. Throughout mid-2022, there were reports of the Oil Ministry attempting to execute the court's decision by lodging cases to annul specific KRG contracts and instructing companies to deal only with SOMO. Notably, Iraq's Oil Minister in 2022 met with officials from international firms operating in Kurdistan to urge compliance. However, the KRG continued to export its oil, and direct enforcement within KRG territory proved elusive (short of sending federal forces, which was not

[303] Iraqi Supreme Court Casts Doubt over Legitimacy of Kurdistan's Oil and Gas Sector, Norton Rose Fullbright, March 2022.
[304] Reuters, "Iraq holds Kurdish government responsible for oil smuggling," June 5, 2025, summarizing the 2022 court ruling against KRG oil law and Baghdad's stance.
[305] Wahab, 2023.

politically or militarily feasible at the time). A significant external shock then reset the dynamics: on March 23, 2023, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) arbitration tribunal in Paris finally delivered its judgment in the long-running Iraq-Türkiye pipeline case. The tribunal ruled in favor of the Iraqi federal government, finding that Türkiye had breached the 1973 pipeline agreement by allowing oil exports from KRG without Baghdad's consent.[306] In response to this, Türkiye halted all oil flow **t**hrough the ***Iraq-Türkiye Pipeline*** the very next day. The pipeline closure was a massive blow to the KRG's finances: overnight, its main economic artery was cut off. Türkiye's decision to shut down the pipeline forced both Baghdad and Erbil into a negotiation they had long avoided. International oil companies (especially those in KRG, now unable to evacuate their oil) and the international community also pressed for a resolution. In April 2023, the federal prime minister and the KRG prime minister reached a temporary agreement: the KRG would allow SOMO to market its oil, and revenues from KRG oil sales would be deposited into a single account under federal control, from which the KRG would receive an allocation for its budget. As a result, Baghdad formally requested Türkiye to resume pipeline operations under the new arrangement. However, Türkiye delayed reopening the pipeline, citing technical issues and maintenance (some damage had occurred to the pipeline in the February 2023 Turkey earthquake). Consequently, the pipeline remained off throughout mid and late 2023, despite Iraq being ready to comply with the terms. Negotiations then extended into 2024 and 2025.

By the second half of 2025, signs emerged of a possible breakthrough. In September 2025, Reuters reported that Iraq's federal government, and the international oil companies had given preliminary approval to a plan to resume pipeline exports from KRG.[307] Under this tentative deal, the KRG would commit a significant amount of oil to federal SOMO for export, with an independent trader handling sales from Ceyhan at SOMO's official prices. Full confirmation and sustained exports remain subject to political will and Türkiye's cooperation – Türkiye had been appealing the arbitration ruling and seeking to negotiate aspects like the damages and pipeline tariffs. Both Ankara and Baghdad have reason to restart the flow, so a resolution appears likely, if not already underway by late 2025.

Consequently, since the abortive 2007 oil law, Iraq's oil governance has been defined by a tug-of-war between centralization and regional autonomy. In the absence of clarity, Baghdad and Erbil pursued separate contracts and deals – Baghdad with service contracts aimed at fast boosting output under state control, and Erbil with production-sharing deals to build an economic foundation for Kurdish self-rule. The resulting disputes have been multi-faceted: legally, each side marshaled constitutional arguments; politically, they clashed over visions of federalism; economically, both suffered from inefficiencies, lost revenues, and the specter of national breakup. Key turning points such as the KRG's 2014 pipeline exports and Baghdad's recapture of Kirkuk in 2017 altered facts on the ground but did not resolve the core issue. It took until 2022 for Iraq's judiciary to clearly adjudicate the matter.

[306] U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Country Analysis: Iraq*, updated 2024, on March 2023 arbitration ruling and KRG output drop.
[307] Reuters, "Iraq nears deal to restart pipeline oil exports from KRG," Sept 19, 2025, on tripartite agreement terms.

Yet, as the events of 2023–2025 show, legality alone could not provide a practical solution without political agreement. The shutdown of KRG's oil exports in 2023, while punishing for the Kurds, also deprived Iraq of half a million barrels per day of supply, underscoring that a cooperative approach is ultimately in the national interest. Both sides seem to recognize that a durable settlement – likely through a comprehensive federal oil and gas law – is necessary to move forward. The stakes are high: Iraq's ability to meet ambitious production targets, attract foreign investment, and maintain national unity all depend on healing this rift. After nearly two decades of stalemate, the hope is that recent compromises foreshadow an enduring resolution, aligning Iraq's oil policy with its constitutional principle that oil is for "all the people of Iraq". The journey from 2007's unrealized promise to 2025's fragile progress illustrates that in Iraq, oil is not just a resource but the glue (or solvent) of the federal state – and only careful legal and political craftsmanship will ensure it binds the country together rather than drives it apart.

The KRG's pursuit of independent oil policies was never merely an economic endeavor; it was a strategy for survival protected by physical force. If oil provided the financial lifeblood for Kurdish aspirations of self-rule, the Peshmerga served as the shield that secured the fields, pipelines, and borders required to maintain that autonomy. The relationship is cyclical: oil revenues were intended to fund the military apparatus, while the military ensured Baghdad could not unilaterally seize control of the region's natural resources. This intersection of 'resource sovereignty' and 'armed defense' defines the KRG's status as a state-within-a-state, leading directly into the role of the Kurdish military forces.

4.2 Military Apparatus: Peshmerga

The Peshmerga are the military forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. It historically referred to Kurdish guerrilla fighters, but today it denotes the official security forces of the Kurdish autonomous statehood. Under Iraq's 2005 constitution, the KRG is authorized to maintain its own regional guard forces for internal security. Thus, while the Peshmerga function much like a state's army – defending territory, fighting insurgents, and maintaining order – they occupy a unique legal and political status as a sub-state military force within the federal Republic of Iraq.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Kurdistan Region emerged with its autonomy solidified and the Peshmerga formally recognized as the regional forces of the KRG. The new Iraqi constitution (ratified in 2005) codified the KRG's right to its own internal security forces, effectively legitimizing the Peshmerga as part of Iraq's security architecture while under KRG control. In practice, the Peshmerga took on a task to help secure northern Iraq, as a part of the Coalition in 2003, and cities like Kirkuk and Mosul from Hussein's regime. Following the invasion, Iraq's former national army was disbanded and the Peshmerga filled the power vacuum in Kurdish areas, providing internal sovereignty in a period when much of Iraq fell into insurgency. The Kurdish Regional Government remained relatively stable and institutionally powerful

compared to the rest of Iraq, partly due to the Peshmerga's attempts. However, unlike a unified national army, the Peshmerga command structure was (and remains) divided along political lines. The Kurdish liberation movement had long been split between the two major parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – each of which maintained its own Peshmerga units. After 2003, the KDP and PUK agreed to share power in a unified KRG, but their security forces continued to be run largely in parallel, loyal first to party leaders. The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA) was created to coordinate the regional forces, yet in practice the Peshmerga have been divided between the KDP's and PUK's separate units, often referred to as the KDP's "80 Unit" and the PUK's "70 Unit.[308] Despite efforts since the 1990s to unify these forces under one command, partisanship persisted. Throughout the post-2003 period, Kurdish politics operated a patronage system in which party control over Peshmerga appointments, finances, and units remained strong. For example, the KRG's Peshmerga ministry would distribute salaries to KDP and PUK forces based on lists provided by partisan commanders, reinforcing party influence over the rank-and-file.[309]

Following the 2003 U.S.-led intervention, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) entered a phase of "de facto statehood" where its military wing, the Peshmerga, underwent a transition from a guerrilla insurgency to a legally recognized regional defense force. This process is a classic example of post-conflict military institutionalization, where non-state armed groups are integrated into a formal state architecture.[310] Under the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, the KRG's right to maintain "regional guards" was codified, effectively legitimizing the Peshmerga as a sub-state military actor within the federal republic.[311]

However, the institutionalization of the Peshmerga has been characterized by "institutional layering"—where formal state structures (the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs) are built on top of pre-existing partisan loyalties.[312] While the Peshmerga successfully provided internal sovereignty during the post-2003 insurgency, their professionalization has been hampered by what scholars call "competitive state-building."[313] The command structure remains bifurcated between the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK).

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[308] Myles B. Caggins III, "Peshmerga Reforms: Navigating Challenges, Forging Unity," Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 31, 2023, detailing post-ISIS Peshmerga casualties and reform initiatives

[309] Zmkan A. Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict," LSE Middle East Centre Report, 2020 – discussing KDP/PUK patronage and Peshmerga divisions

[310] Söderberg Kovacs, M. (2007). From Rebellion to Politics: The Transformation of Rebel Groups to Political Parties in Civil War Settlements.

[311] Natali, D. (2010). The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Conflict Iraq.

[312] Stansfield, G. (2003). Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy.

[313] Roessler, P. (2016). Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa. (Applied here to the KRI). (*Roessler's theory of "coup-proofing" explains why leaders keep military units divided to prevent any single commander from seizing power.*)

This division illustrates the "rebel-to-party" patronage trap: military forces often serve as the primary vehicle for political parties to distribute resources and maintain social control.[314] As seen in the KRG, the distribution of salaries and appointments through partisan lists ensures that the "rank-and-file" remain loyal to the party leadership rather than the central KRG bureaucracy. This creates a "hybrid security" model, where the military is robust enough to defend territory against threats like ISIS, yet remains too fragmented to achieve the professional neutrality required for a unified democratic state.[315]

This dualism meant that, unlike a sovereign state's military that answers to a central national command, the Peshmerga effectively had two commanders-in-chief (the leaders of the KDP and PUK). Tensions occasionally flared: even during Iraq's relative calm between 2006 and 2013, episodes of intra-Kurdish standoffs occurred when KDP and PUK units disagreed over territory or authority. Nonetheless, the Peshmerga as a whole managed to maintain its sovereignty in the KRG from non-state actors' rebels. They also cooperated with U.S. forces and the nascent Iraqi Army at times – for instance, joint operations around Kirkuk and Mosul against Sunni insurgents in the mid-2000s.

The rise of the Islamic State (ISIL) in 2014 served as a critical juncture that transformed the Peshmerga from a regional guard into a frontline actor in international security, effectively functioning as a de facto national army.[316] When the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) collapsed in Mosul in June 2014, a "security vacuum" emerged, which the KRG utilized to project power into the disputed internal territories.[317]

By establishing a defensive perimeter spanning over 1,000 kilometers, the Peshmerga moved to secure strategic hubs, most notably the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. Scholars argue that this move represented a shift from "defensive mobilization" to "territorial consolidation," as the KRG sought to create facts on the ground that would favor future claims for independence.[318]

While the August 2014 threat to Erbil necessitated an unprecedented level of military coordination with the U.S.-led Global Coalition, it also exacerbated the dual-sovereignty crisis between Erbil and Baghdad. The Peshmerga's control over Kirkuk was framed by Kurdish leadership as a historical return to ancestral lands, but in the academic literature, it is

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[314] Lyons, T. (2016). The Importance of Winning: Victorious Rebel Parties and Postwar Reconstruction.
[315] Leezenberg, M. (2005). Iraqi Kurdistan: Contradictions and Prospect. (*Discusses the "clientelistic" nature of Kurdish politics and how the Peshmerga function as the ultimate guarantors of party-based patronage.*)
[316] Voller, S. (2014). The Kurdish Liberation Movement: From Hard Power to Soft Power.
[317] O'Driscoll, D. (2017). Autonomy and the State: The Case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. (*This work analyzes the "security vacuum" of 2014 and how the KRG's military expansion was a response to the perceived failure of the Iraqi federal state.*)
[318] Skinner, M. (2015). The Kurdish Peshmerga and the Fight against ISIS. (*Skinner details the 1,000-km front and argues that the fight against ISIS served as a "crucible" for Kurdish national identity and military professionalization.*)

frequently analyzed as a form of securitized state-building, where military necessity provided the legitimacy for the KRG to unilaterally redraw its administrative borders.[319]

During the war against ISIL, the Peshmerga became critical partners in the U.S.-led Global Coalition. Over 150,000 Peshmerga were mobilized on active duty across the north, though many were ill-equipped and initially outgunned by ISIL fighters. Kurdish forces suffered from shortages of heavy weapons, modern gear, and even salaries – a budget dispute with Baghdad meant Peshmerga troops often went unpaid for months in 2014-2015. Despite these challenges, the morale and nationalist fervor among the Peshmerga remained high, as they viewed themselves as defending their homeland and people from an existential threat.[320] With international assistance, the Peshmerga gradually turned the tide. Western countries—notably the United States, Britain, Germany, and France—provided arms and training to the Peshmerga as a distinct force within Iraq's fight against ISIL. Notably, Italy emerged as the second-largest contributor to the coalition in Iraq, playing a leading role in training Kurdish forces through its "Prima Parthica" mission and the Kurdistan Training Coordination Center (KTCC).[321] [322] Coalition airpower blunted ISIL's offensive, allowing Kurdish fighters to regroup and counter-attack. In late 2014, Peshmerga units famously helped break the ISIL siege of Mount Sinjar, rescuing thousands of Yazidi civilians. In subsequent years, they went on the offensive, retaking most Kurdish areas from ISIL. Peshmerga casualties were significant: by the end of the major fighting, over 1,300 Peshmerga had been killed and more than 8,000 wounded in the war against ISIL.[323] These sacrifices earned the Peshmerga a reputation as fearless, reliable fighters and the "tip of the spear" of the anti-ISIL campaign.

The coordination (and sometimes lack thereof) between the Peshmerga and Iraq's federal forces during this war highlighted both cooperation and underlying divisions. In the Mosul offensive (2016–17), Peshmerga brigades joined the Iraqi Army and Shia-led Popular Mobilization Forces in a broad coalition to liberate the city, each force operating in different sectors.[324] The Peshmerga helped encircle Mosul from the north and east, demonstrating that they could fight in parallel with Iraq's army against a common enemy. However, once ISIL was largely defeated by late 2017, longstanding political disputes resurfaced. In September 2017, the KRG's unilateral independence referendum – in which Kurdish voters overwhelmingly chose secession from Iraq – inflamed tensions with Baghdad. Within weeks,

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[319] Gunter, M. M. (2015). The Kurds: A Modern History. (G*unter provides the historical context of the "return" to Kirkuk, framing the 2014 seizure as the culmination of decades of Kurdish aspirations for territorial integrity and economic self-sufficiency.*)

[320] Al Jazeera, 2015.

[321] Crispin Smith, "Independent Without Independence: The Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga in International Law," Harvard International Law Journal 59, no.1 (2018): 221-227, on the Peshmerga's legal status under Iraqi sovereignty.

[322] Giammaruco, G. (2018). Italy's Contribution to the Global Coalition against Daesh. (*Giammaruco details Italy's status as the second-largest troop and training contributor after the U.S., specifically highlighting the deployment of nearly 1,000 personnel and the specialized training of over 20,000 Peshmerga and police forces.*)

[323] Myles B. Caggins, 2023.

[324] Myles B. Caggins, 2023.

a short conflict erupted: Iraqi government forces (backed by Shia militias) moved to reassert federal control over Kirkuk and other disputed areas in October 2017. Many Peshmerga units withdrew rather than fight Iraqi troops, and the defenses of Kirkuk collapsed partly due to a split between PUK and KDP factions.[325]

The events of 2014–2017 galvanized both Kurdish leaders and international partners to address the modernization and reform of the Peshmerga. On one hand, the Peshmerga had proven their valor and strategic value, but on the other, their partisan fragmentation and ad-hoc structure were seen as impediments to long-term effectiveness. Beginning around 2016–2017, the U.S.-led Coalition launched a formal Peshmerga reform initiative in coordination with the KRG. In 2017, the United States, UK, Germany, and the Netherlands helped craft a 35-point reform plan aimed at unifying the Peshmerga and developing a professional, cohesive regional force. This plan envisioned streamlining the command structure under the MoPA, integrating the KDP and PUK units, and building institutional capacities (from logistics to budgeting) more akin to a national defense force. It even included provisions for the Peshmerga to acquire heavier weaponry and an air wing (e.g. helicopters), signaling ambition to become a more robust and professional force capable of defending Iraqi Kurdistan.[326]

A milestone was reached in 2016 when the U.S. The Department of Defense first signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the KRG to fund and support Peshmerga forces in the ISIS fight – an arrangement renewed and expanded in 2022.[327] The September 2022 MOU between the Pentagon and KRG set out a four-year roadmap tying U.S. financial support to specific reforms in the Peshmerga ministry. Key requirements included integrating partisan brigades into the unified command, registering all soldiers biometrically to eliminate ghost personnel, and shifting salary payments to a centralized electronic system (to increase transparency and reduce patronage). Under this program, dozens of Regional Guard Brigades have been reorganized: by 2023, 28 brigades had been unified and two division-level headquarters established to improve command and control. The KRG also committed to a unified Peshmerga budget and force structure of approximately 120,000–125,000 troops, rather than separate party-aligned forces.[328]

Despite this progress, major challenges persist. Political trust between the KDP and PUK remains low, and as of late 2023, some elite units (the KDP's 80s and PUK's 70s brigades) have still not fully come under MoPA control. Implementation of planned additional division commands and a truly joint headquarters is behind schedule due to disputes over how to share power within the integrated structure. Furthermore, the Peshmerga's evolution is

[325] Martin Chulov, "Kurdish forces abandon long-held lands to Iraqi army and Shia fighters," *The Guardian*, October 17, 2017, International Crisis Group, Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk, Middle East Report No. 215 (15 June 2020).
[326] Crispin Smith, Independent Without Independence: The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga in International Law, Volume 59, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 246.
[327] U.S. Department of Defense, "DOD, Kurdish Peshmerga Continue Partnership to Fight ISIS," news release, Sept. 23, 2022 – on the signing of the updated 2022 MOU and conditions for continued support
[328] Myles B. Caggins, 2023.

entangled with Baghdad–Erbil relations. The Iraqi central government is wary of a too-strong Kurdish army that could fuel secession, while the KRG insists on security self-sufficiency. Budgetary agreements between Baghdad and Erbil (for funding Peshmerga salaries) have been inconsistent, sometimes resulting in pay shortages that sap morale. Meanwhile, security threats have not vanished: ISIL, though territorially defeated, continues an insurgency, especially in the plains between federal and Kurdish forces. In these *"*disputed territories,*"* lack of coordination between Peshmerga and the Iraqi Army has left gaps for ISIL cells to exploit. Joint brigades or operations have been proposed to secure these areas, highlighting the need for cooperation despite past conflicts. The presence of Shiite militia forces (Popular Mobilization Units) near KRG borders is another friction point. Additionally, regional powers like Türkiye and Iran exert pressure – Türkiye conducts operations against the PKK on KRG soil, and Iran watches Kurdish armed strength warily – all of which complicate the Peshmerga's strategic environment.

The ongoing reform process reflects a critical recognition that the Peshmerga must transition from a fragmented, patronage-driven guerrilla force into a professionalized military to ensure the KRG's long-term survival.[329] The institutionalization of Kurdish power relies heavily on the ability to centralize command; however, this effort remains a delicate "balancing act" where leaders like President Nechirvan Barzani must reconcile formal state-building requirements with entrenched partisan interests.[330] International partners have increasingly tied future security assistance to these unification milestones, viewing military professionalization as the cornerstone of regional stability.

In many respects, the Peshmerga function as a "de facto state military."[331] They possess the outward architecture of a national army—including formalized rank structures, infantry, special forces, and specialized artillery units—and exercise exclusive control over a defined territory.[332] While the 2005 Constitution formally places them within Iraq's security architecture, Corradi argues that the KRG's military apparatus operates with a high degree of "institutional autonomy," conducting its own defense diplomacy and maintaining a command structure entirely independent of Baghdad.[333] Ultimately, the Peshmerga illustrate the "hybrid" nature of Kurdish sovereignty: they are legally a sub-state force under international law, yet they function as the ultimate guarantor of a Kurdish political entity that increasingly mimics the behavior of a sovereign state.[334]

Iraq's federal government theoretically bears responsibility for Peshmerga actions under state responsibility doctrines. In practice, Baghdad has virtually no control over Peshmerga operations, which creates a paradox of *de facto* independence without *de jure* sovereignty. A

[329] Corradi, E. (2022). The Institutionalisation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
[330] Corradi, E. (2019). State-building and the 'state-within-a-state': The case of Iraqi Kurdistan.
[331] Corradi, E. 2022. Op. cit. (*Corradi argues that the Peshmerga are central to the KRG's "external sovereignty," acting as a national army in all but name.*)
[332] Natali, D., 2010.
[333] Corradi, E. (2020). Between Erbil and Baghdad: The Role of the Peshmerga in the Disputed Territories.
[334] Palani, K., et al. (2019). The De Facto State of Kurdistan in Iraq.

national army typically answers to a single central authority, whereas the Peshmerga answer to the KRG (and historically to separate party leaders).

A hallmark of sovereign militaries is unity of command and an apolitical chain of command. The Peshmerga, by contrast, have been politicized and fragmented. The enduring KDP-PUK split means the force has been half-and-half loyal to different leaderships, something unknown in a normal state army. Even with ongoing reforms, achieving a non-partisan unified command remains challenging. This is akin to having two armies under one flag – a situation at odds with the centralized control expected in a sovereign military. While the Peshmerga are sizable (the KRG lists over 100,000 on its roster), their heavy weaponry and force multipliers are limited compared to national armies. The Peshmerga historically had mostly light arms and guerilla tactics. Only during the ISIL war did they begin acquiring tanks, armored vehicles, and guided weaponry, mostly donated by allies. They still lack an air force (aside from some helicopters promised by coalition support) and indigenous military industry.[335] A sovereign state military like Iraq's or Turkey's has combined arms including air power, more advanced logistics, and procurement channels. The Peshmerga rely heavily on international support for advanced training, equipment, maintenance, and even salaries.[336] This dependency is atypical for an independent nation's army but common for sub-state forces.

The mandate of the Peshmerga is characterized by its regional focus and defensive posture, as formally recognized under Article 121, Clause 5 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which designates them as the "regional guard" responsible for the security of the Kurdish Region.[337] While their primary mission is the defense of the semi-autonomous region's borders and internal stability, their operational scope has historically expanded into the "disputed territories" (such as Kirkuk) during periods of national crisis, most notably during the campaign against ISIS.[338] Despite their integration into the broader Iraqi security architecture on paper, the Peshmerga maintain a distinct command structure, funded primarily through the KRG budget, which distinguishes their regional mandate from that of the centralized Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). While they secure the KRG's internal security and borders, they don't project power beyond Iraq's borders (though small contingents did assist the anti-ISIL fight in Syria, this was done with Baghdad's tacit approval). In contrast, a sovereign military serves national defense and potentially power projection or international peacekeeping roles. The Peshmerga's operations are constrained to Kurdish areas and immediate threats (like ISIL), rather than national or foreign policy objectives. For example, when ISIL was largely defeated, the Peshmerga did not continue west to Syria or south deep

[335] Smith, 2018.
[336] Al Jazeera, "Iraqi Kurds: 'Losing to ISIL is not an option'," September 24, 2015, featuring interviews on Peshmerga challenges during the ISIL war (equipment shortages, casualties).
[337] Visser, R., 2010, A Concise Guide to the 2005 Iraqi Constitution. Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP).
[338] Knights, M. (2021). The Future of Iraq's Armed Forces. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (*Knights provides an empirical review of Peshmerga operations, noting that their "defensive" mandate evolved into a proactive security role in areas like Sinjar and Kirkuk between 2014 and 2017. He argues that the lack of a unified command creates a "security gap" in the disputed territories.*)

into Iraq without coordination – their scope remained tied to Kurdish territories and peoples' security.

State militaries are usually institutionalized with standardized training, depoliticized promotion systems, and formal doctrines. The Peshmerga, coming from a guerrilla legacy, historically lacked those features. Many fighters were peshmerga by patronage – recruited through loyalty to a party, with revolutionary-style experience trumping formal education. This is changing: the past decade saw more systematic training programs (often led by international advisors), the establishment of staff colleges, and efforts to create a merit-based hierarchy. Still, political affiliation can affect an officer's career in ways that would be unusual in a sovereign national army. For instance, Kurdish soldiers have faced demotion or reassignment if they were suspected of disloyalty to their party (such as voting for an opposition party).[339] A professional state army, ideally, is loyal to the nation and constitution above any single faction.

Despite these differences, there are also important similarities between the Peshmerga and sovereign militaries. The Peshmerga have demonstrated a capacity to carry out large coordinated operations as part of Iraq's overall defense – e.g. the Mosul campaign – showing interoperability with other forces. Moreover, the Peshmerga occupy a hybrid space: independent without full independence. They function almost entirely autonomously from Baghdad, yet legally and logistically they are entwined with the Iraqi state and the international community's support. The ongoing reforms aim to make the Peshmerga more like a conventional military in structure and capability, but unless the political rift is healed, they cannot completely mirror a sovereign state's army. Additionally, as long as Kurdistan remains within Iraq, the Peshmerga's status will be that of a regional guard force rather than an independent national army – a fact underscored by every cooperation framework that ties KRG commitments to Iraq's overall security framework.

4.3 KRG's Assertions of State-like Authority and the Its Quest for International Recognition

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq represents one of the most compelling modern cases of contested sovereignty and institutional state-building within the framework of a fragile federal state. Emerging from a "safe haven" created after the 1991 Gulf War, the KRG successfully established a governing structure that has evolved into a functioning political, legal, economic, and administrative body.[340] Scholars frequently conceptualize the KRG as a "parastate" or an "unrecognized or de facto state."[341] This designation

[339] Zmkan A. Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict," LSE Middle East Centre Report, 2020 – discussing KDP/PUK patronage and Peshmerga divisions

[340] An Analysis of Kurdistan Region of Iraq Diplomacy and Foreign Policy objectives 2003-2013, Journal of International Relations, 2016; Dissertation on US Foreign Policy towards the KRG, 2017.

[341] Michael Rossi, "The Durability of Parastates: Declarative Statehood in the Absence of Constitutive Sovereignty," Article, 2020; Academic Article on De Facto States and Sovereignty.

acknowledges its ability to exercise functional sovereignty—governance over a defined territory and population—even while lacking formal constitutive sovereignty recognized under traditional Westphalian principles.

The KRG's current institutional configuration is marked by its own constitution, laws, treasury, and security framework, granting it greater autonomous powers than typical Iraqi provinces.[342] Analyzing the KRG's sovereignty attempts requires isolating the inherent governance capacity demonstrated through its civilian institutions, excluding the widely studied Peshmerga forces and the hydrocarbon sector. This methodological approach focuses on the durability of the KRG's administrative apparatus, including its customs administration, civil service, judicial systems, and diplomatic institutions. The institutionalization of parallel core state organs, such as the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) and the Department of Foreign Relations (DFR), constitutes a deliberate, non-military strategy by the KRG to build declarative statehood.[343] This move is a strategic gamble, seeking external legitimacy while simultaneously testing the limits of constitutional interpretation.

The primary battleground for KRG autonomy has demonstrably shifted from resource control to institutional control over non-oil fiscal mechanisms and core democratic structures. This focus reveals the Federal Government of Iraq's (FGI) increasing reliance on administrative and judicial instruments to pursue centralization,[344] fundamentally altering the nature of the contest over Iraqi federalism.

The KRG's legal foundation for internal institutional power is derived significantly from the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which established the region's legal framework. A cornerstone of the KRG's autonomy argument is the doctrine of residual powers, enshrined in Article 115. This article stipulates that all powers not explicitly enumerated as exclusive federal competences belong to the regions and governorates.[345] Furthermore, in cases where competences are shared and a clash occurs, the regional laws are intended to prevail. This 'residual powers' doctrine provides the KRG with the constitutional justification for legislative and regulatory divergence across numerous non-exclusive sectors, including social policy, regional planning, and non-oil taxation.[346]

The Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA), the region's democratically elected parliament, has actively asserted this legislative independence. A key example is the passage of Law 15 of 2008, which introduced amendments to the Personal Status Law to enhance women's rights and implement restrictions on polygamy. This action demonstrates that the KRG institutions are not merely implementing federal mandates but are capable of charting a distinct and autonomous policy course reflecting regional political and social preferences.

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[342] Chatham House Report on Iraqi Federalism, 2020.
[343] An Analysis of Kurdistan Region of Iraq Diplomacy and Foreign Policy objectives 2003-2013, 2016; Press Release, Kurdistan Regional Government, The Department of Foreign Relations, 2007.
[344] American University Research Initiative, Academic Analysis of Baghdad's Financial Coercion of Kurdistan, 2024.
[345] Academic Commentary on the 2005 Iraqi Constitution and Residual Powers (Article 115).
[346] Legal Analysis of the KRG Oil and Gas Law, 2007.

However, the durability of this legislative autonomy is profoundly challenged by the assertive role of the Federal Supreme Court (FSC) in Baghdad. While the regional judiciary faces allegations of being influenced by the ruling parties,[347] FSC operates as the most potent mechanism of central enforcement. Although the FSC's most high-profile interventions targeted KRG hydrocarbon laws, these rulings have set a dangerous constitutional precedent. The consistent use of judicial power to declare foundational KRG institutional laws unconstitutional systematically undermines all non-exclusive regional competences. This demonstrates that the constitutional guarantees of Article 115 are politically secondary to the judicial will of the FGI. The original compromise that intended regional legislative supremacy is now subject to systematic judicial erosion, confirming that legal pluralism is tenuous when confronted by sustained judicial attack favoring centralization.

The most critical contested non-oil institutional asset is control over international border crossings. KRG institutions assert territorial control over the borders with Türkiye, Syria, and Iran, allowing them to collect substantial customs duties independently, a vital source of non-oil revenue.[348] Baghdad has directly challenged this assertion of territorial and fiscal sovereignty through institutional recapture mechanisms. The establishment of the Al-Safra Customs Office, for instance, was intended specifically to collect duties and taxes on goods originating from the KRG.[349] This institutional measure reasserts federal financial sovereignty over the KRG's trade revenue streams and effectively treats the KRG's international borders as internal administrative lines. Furthermore, Baghdad uses the federal budget process as an instrument of administrative coercion, systematically withholding constitutionally mandated funds. This financial leverage is then translated into administrative control. Baghdad insists that the KRG comply with centralized administrative measures, notably the federal "Tawtin" electronic payment system, as a precondition for salary disbursements.[350] The failure to comply results in the non-payment of KRG civil servants' salaries, which causes significant internal social instability and political friction. The non-oil revenue dispute and the budget withholding are therefore not merely administrative disagreements; they are direct sovereignty tests. By forcing the KRG civil service payroll into federal hands, Baghdad denies the KRG its fundamental institutional function: maintaining the loyalty and stability of its public sector. The ultimate consequence is that the KRG's ability to operate its institutional framework, even its essential non-oil fiscal autonomy, becomes critically dependent on Baghdad's political assent and adherence to central regulatory systems.

Beyond fiscal management, the KRG has made institutional efforts toward robust regulatory governance, engaging in significant administrative and civil service reform initiatives aimed at securing fiscal consolidation and sustainable growth. This proactive approach underscores the KRG's commitment to effective governance and the attraction of

[347] Amnesty International Report, Amendments to the Personal Status Law, 2008
[348] Washington Institute Policy Analysis, Obstacles and Options in Baghdad-Erbil Negotiations, 2020.
[349] Customs Tax and Border Control in Iraq, 2021.
[350] American University Research Initiative, Academic Analysis of Baghdad's Financial Coercion of Kurdistan, 2024.

foreign direct investment (FDI), leveraging its comparatively high political stability and security status within Iraq.[351] The most explicit and destabilizing institutional challenge to KRG self-sovereignty has occurred in the realm of political structure and electoral governance. A series of rulings by the Federal Supreme Court has systematically targeted the core political legitimacy of the region. Crucially, the FSC has dissolved the KRG Parliament and, more recently, stripped the KRG of its historic right to run its own elections (a right exercised since 1992). This authority has been transferred to the federal Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC).[352] This legal maneuver represents a direct institutional rollback. Electoral control is foundational to internal sovereignty; by controlling the mechanism through which the KRG leadership is chosen, Baghdad fundamentally diminishes the KRG's status from an autonomous region enjoying inherent self-rule to an administrative zone under de facto federal oversight. This process, termed the judicialization of internal politics, signifies the FGI's calculated use of legal instruments, rather than costly military force, to achieve political centralization. Since judicial rulings possess the veneer of legality and constitutional compliance, they are significantly more difficult for the KRG to resist without declaring outright separation.

A key pillar of the KRG's external quasi-sovereignty is its independent diplomatic apparatus. The KRG institutionalized its external relationships by establishing the Department of Foreign Relations (DFR), which conducts foreign policy and public relations independent of Baghdad.[353] This institutional structure is a clear assertion of external agency, consistent with the behavior of non-state actors pursuing regional and international legitimacy. The KRG performs functions typically reserved for sovereign states, such as receiving members of foreign governments and hosting U.S. Congressmen, engaging in institutionalized political dialogue independent of the FGI.[354] These engagements solidify the KRG's status as a necessary and relatively stable strategic partner for external actors, including the United States, which has historical and security ties with the Iraqi Kurds. This functional sovereignty, anchored by the DFR, provides the KRG with vital legitimacy and protection. However, the KRG's diplomatic autonomy faces severe geopolitical limitations. Regional powers, including Türkiye, Iran, and Syria, maintain acute concerns about Kurdish autonomy and potential separatism, leading them to exert continuous political and security pressures on the KRG. While Türkiye has engaged in economic and energy ties with the KRG, often against Baghdad's wishes, the limits of sub-state agency are ultimately defined by geopolitical constraints. The KRG's strong DFR is highly visible globally, enabling it to attract Western investment.[355] Yet, this external success does not necessarily translate into effective internal institutional security. When Baghdad utilizes the FSC to dissolve the KRG Parliament or employs financial coercion through budget withholding, the international

[351] Political Stability and FDI in Kurdistan, 2019.
[352] AURI, 2024.
[353] Press Release, Kurdistan Regional Government, The Department of Foreign Relations, 2007; Dr. Basharat Zangana, "KRG and Managing Foreign Relationships," Soran University Paper.
[354] Press Release, Kurdistan Regional Government, The Department of Foreign Relations, 2007; Dissertation on US Foreign Policy towards the KRG, 2017.
[355] AURI, 2024.

community often limits its response to diplomatic calls for negotiation. This demonstrates that while external legitimacy serves as a political shield, it cannot replace or guarantee fundamental internal institutional sovereignty when faced with determined judicial and administrative action by the central state.

The KRG has successfully constructed institutional pillars of internal governance—including a distinct legislative body, attempts at independent fiscal management through non-oil revenue control, and a sophisticated Department of Foreign Relations. These non-military and non-hydrocarbon assertions confirm the KRG's designation as a highly institutionalized parastate within Iraq.However, the analysis of these institutional assertions reveals that the KRG is entrapped in a relentless process of centralization. Its functional autonomy is systematically dismantled through the FGI's weaponization of key federal institutions. The Federal Supreme Court acts as the vanguard of this centralization, using judicial rulings to dismantle core components of KRG political legitimacy, such as electoral control and legislative power.[356] Concurrently, the FGI employs fiscal administrative mechanisms, demanding compliance with centralized payment systems and withholding funds, thereby compromising the stability of the KRG's civil administration.

The final prognosis suggests that the durability of KRG's non-military institutional sovereignty depends less on its independent legislative achievements or external diplomatic network and more on its ability to negotiate a sustainable fiscal and political settlement that structurally halts the legal and financial coercion, ensuring the 2005 constitutional framework remains a basis for genuine federal compromise rather than a legal instrument for centralized control.

4.4 International Public Opinion on KRG

Originating from the "safe haven" and no-fly zone established under UN Security Council Resolution 688 following the 1991 Gulf War,[357] The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has evolved into arguably the most autonomous sub-state entity in the Middle East. This status was formally codified in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which granted the region significant self-governing powers. Central to this evolution has been Erbil's sophisticated exercise of "paradiplomacy"—the conduct of international relations by sub-national governments independent of the sovereign state.[358] By establishing its own

[356] AURI, 2024.

[357] Stansfield, G. (2003). Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy. RoutledgeCurzon. (*Stansfield provides an exhaustive historical analysis of the "de facto" statehood period between 1991 and 2003. He argues that the protection provided by Operation Provide Comfort allowed the KRG to build institutional "muscles"—including its own parliament and ministries—long before the 2003 invasion. This period of isolation from Baghdad was the empirical crucible in which the KRG's independent administrative and diplomatic identity was forged, making its later "federal" status in 2005 more of a recognition of existing reality than a new creation.*)

[358] Zadi, S., & Gürbey, G. (2021). The Paradiplomacy of the Kurdistan Regional Government: Between Autonomy and Sovereignty. In The Kurdish Question Revisited. Oxford University Press.

Department of Foreign Relations (DFR) and hosting over 30 foreign consulates and diplomatic missions, the KRG has effectively bypassed Baghdad to engage directly with global powers on issues of energy, security, and trade.[359]

Paradiplomacy is the set of diplomatic activities conducted by non-sovereign sub-state units (regions, states, cities) in the international arena to pursue their own interests (economic, cultural, political). In the KRG's case, this manifests not only as a quest for economic development but also as a "protodiplomatic" strategy—essentially preparing the infrastructure for potential future independence. Through its Department of Foreign Relations (DFR), the KRG acts almost like a Ministry of Foreign Affairs, managing 14 representative offices worldwide and hosting over 40 foreign consulates in Erbil. This institutional structure is central to the KRG's strategy of positioning itself as a "de facto" state in the eyes of the international community. Scholars explain this strategy through the theory of "institutional isomorphism"; that is, the effort to gain legitimacy by mimicking the institutions of Western states.[360] However, this strategy faces structural limitations against the privileges international law affords to sovereign states.

The KRG's international strategy relies not only on military and security cooperation but also on presenting itself as a "knowledge region" and a cultural hub. Specifically, the "The Other Iraq" image cultivated in Western public opinion aimed to market the Kurdish region as a stable, investment-friendly, and secular oasis, in contrast to the Arab Iraq identified with war and chaos. This aligns with Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power," reflecting the KRG's effort to achieve diplomatic outcomes through attraction.[361] However, the 2017 Referendum process painfully demonstrated how fragile this soft power is in the face of hard geopolitical realities. Despite the rigidity of diplomatic positions, data on international public opinion shows that the perception of the KRG is more nuanced and generally more positive.

Kurds have a positive profile that is distinctly separated from Iraq as a whole. Long-term research by Gallup clearly highlights this divergence. According to 2025 data, 75% of Americans hold an unfavorable view of Iraq, while only 18% hold a favorable view. In contrast, measurements specific to Iraqi Kurdistan paint the opposite picture. According to 2022 data, 79% of adults in Iraqi Kurdistan approve of US leadership. This rate surpasses even that of Israel (67%), the US's traditional ally, making the KRG the most pro-American entity in the Middle East. In the rest of Iraq, this rate is only 28%.[362]

Gallup's analysis titled "How Different Are the Kurds?" revealed differences in values between the Kurdish and Arab populations. 73% of residents in Sulaymaniyah support the separation of religion and state, whereas 65% of Arab Iraqis oppose this principle. A similar gap exists regarding women's rights; 98% of Sulaymaniyah residents argue women should have equal legal rights to men, while among Arab Iraqis, this rate remains at 41%. There is a

[359] Natali, D. (2010). The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Conflict Iraq. Syracuse University Press.
[360] Owtram, 2016.
[361] Joseph Nye, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics, New York Public Affairs, 2004.
[362] "Americans' views of Iraq, total % unfavorable," Gallup Poll, February 2025.

stark divergence in political outlook between the regions; 79% of the Sulaymaniyah sample in Iraqi Kurdistan expressed approval of US leadership in 2022, compared to only 28% in Arab Iraq. This disparity extends to preferences for governance systems, where 94% of respondents in the Kurdish region favor a multiparty democracy, whereas only 30% of those in Arab Iraq share this preference. Social values regarding the role of religion and gender show the widest gaps. Support for the separation of religion and state stands at 73% in Iraqi Kurdistan, significantly higher than the 18% observed in Arab Iraq. Furthermore, support for equal legal rights for women is nearly universal in the Kurdish sample at 98%, compared to a minority of 41% in Arab Iraq. Regarding internal stability, 84% of the Kurdish population perceives their region as a safe haven for minorities, contrasted with 59% in Arab Iraq. These figures suggest that the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) lobbying narrative in Washington—describing the region as the "only true democratic and secular ally in the region"—is statistically supported by the public opinion of its constituents.[363]

In Europe, particularly in France and the UK, public perception of the Kurds is shaped largely around human rights, cultural preservation, and the fight against ISIS. In France, the public feels an emotional and moral commitment to the Kurdish cause, thanks to the legacy of Danielle Mitterrand ("Mother of Kurds") and the decades-long work of the Kurdish Institute of Paris (Institut Kurde de Paris).[364] The Kurdish Institute operates like a "cultural embassy," informing French intellectuals and policymakers about the Kurdish issue, which has facilitated the French state in securing public backing for its diplomatic maneuvers.[365] In the UK, the "All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq" (APPG) is an effective mechanism keeping the Kurdish issue on the parliamentary agenda.[366] APPG reports define the KRG as a "vital entity that deserves support," cultivating the idea in British public opinion that Kurds "must stand on their own feet."[367] In Türkiye, Turkish public opinion regarding the KRG and the Kurdish issue in general is complex and fluctuating. Data from Metropoll and other research firms show an oscillation between security concerns and a desire for peace in Turkish society.[368] In polls conducted during the 2013-2015 Solution Process, 57.7% of the public supported the government's talks, a figure that rose to 81% in Southeastern Anatolia. More recent data (June 2025) indicates that public support for a new peace process possibility has risen to levels around 60%, with this rate being 81% among Kurdish respondents.[369]

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[363] Richard Burkholder, "Gallup Poll of Iraq: How Different Are the Kurds?," Gallup News, June 22, 2004.
[364] "The Kurds Have No Better Friends than France," Kurdistan Chronicle, July 1, 2023; see also Kendal Nezan, "40 Years of the Kurdish Institute in Paris," Kurdistan Chronicle, January 2023.
[365] "Who is the Kurdish Institute?," Institut Kurde de Paris, December 20, 2016; see also "The Kurds Have No Better Friends than France," Kurdistan Chronicle, July 1, 2023.
[366] Gary Kent, "The UK's All Party Parliamentary Group on Kurdistan: An Exploration and Conceptualisation of its Roles," International Journal of Parliamentary Studies 5, no. 2 (2025): 169–197.
[367] "UK parliamentary group says Iraqi Kurds need more support," Shafaq News, 2018.
[368] Pawan Doski, "Voices of Turkey: The People's Opinion on the Peace Process," Eismena, May 14, 2025.
[369] "Survey shows rising support for peace efforts with PKK, but doubts linger," Turkish Minute, June 24, 2025.

Public opinion within the KRG holds a strong consensus on independence, disconnected from diplomatic realities. In a comprehensive survey by the American University of Kurdistan (AUK), 84.3% of participants stated they supported independence. 87% of those living in disputed territories like Kirkuk demanded their regions be annexed to the Kurdistan Region. These data prove that the KRG leadership had strong public backing going into the 2017 referendum, but this support was incompatible with the international conjuncture.

Western media's representation of the Kurds- while often grouped together, they are highly heterogeneous, with framing varying significantly between nations based on their specific geopolitical interests and colonial histories- plays a critical role in shaping international public opinion, yet these representations are frequently constructed through specific stereotypes that simplify complex political realities. A significant aspect of this representation involves the "Good Kurd" versus "Bad Kurd" distinction, where the visibility of Kurdish women fighters—specifically the Peshmerga and YPG/YPJ—peaked during the war against ISIS. Western media rendered these women "hyper-visible," transforming them into secular, liberating symbols positioned against the patriarchal and Islamist structures of the Middle East. However, scholars such as Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser argue that this reflects an "Orientalist gaze," portraying these fighters as "Amazons" or "exotic heroes" while ignoring their specific political ideologies, such as Democratic Confederalism or Kurdish nationalism.[370]

Democratic Confederalism is a transformative political framework that rejects the centralized nation-state in favor of a decentralized system of autonomous local councils and communes. Primarily theorized by Abdullah Öcalan, this paradigm was significantly influenced by the "social ecology" of American theorist Murray Bookchin, which argues that the ecological crisis is a direct byproduct of human social hierarchy.[371] Unlike traditional state-centric models, Democratic Confederalism emphasizes stateless municipalism, ecological sustainability, and a communal economy geared toward satisfying human needs rather than maximizing profit.[372] A foundational pillar of this system is Jineology (the science of women), which posits that social freedom is impossible without radical gender liberation, positioning women's autonomy at the center of all political and self-defense structures.[373] In practice, as seen in the Rojava region of Northern Syria, the model functions through a "bottom-heavy" delegate system where decision-making power resides with local assemblies, theoretically claiming pluralistic society where diverse ethnic and religious groups can coexist without the homogenizing pressures of a national identity.

Viewed through a lens of critical realism, Democratic Confederalism can be understood as a radical departure from the Westphalian state system that faces significant challenges in

[370] Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser, "Gender in the Representation of the Kurdish Conflict," in Methodological Approaches in Kurdish Studies (Lexington Books, 2019).
[371] Bookchin, M. (1982). The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy. Cheshire Books. (*Establishes the link between social hierarchy and ecological destruction*).
[372] Ocalan, A. (2011). Democratic Confederalism. Transmedia Publishing. (*The primary manifesto outlining the rejection of the nation-state and the shift toward autonomous self-administration*).
[373] Dirik, D. (2022). The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice. Pluto Press.

translating its anti-hierarchical theory into stable administrative practice. While it aims to dismantle centralized authority, scholars note that the movement often operates within a "dual power" paradox, where the exigencies of a permanent war economy and survival necessitate a level of centralized military command that can contradict its commitment to bottom-up municipalism.[374] This tension is further complicated by the challenge of institutionalizing Jineology; while the science of women seeks to uproot patriarchal structures, it frequently encounters deep-seated traditional and tribal conservative resistance, leading to a fragmented application of gender equality across different cantons.[375] Furthermore, the rejection of the nation-state model inherently places the region in a state of permanent legal and economic precarity, as it lacks the international recognition required for formal trade, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic protection, often leaving its "communal economy" vulnerable to embargoes and resource scarcity. Ultimately, the system's reliance on the ideological framework, raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the model: whether a "stateless" democracy can survive without the singular ideological cohesion provided by its imprisoned leader, or if the pressures of regional geopolitics will inevitably force a retreat back toward conventional state-like structures.[376]

This depoliticization generates sympathy in Western public opinion but fails to translate into demands for political statehood; furthermore, a hierarchy of victimhood emerged in media narratives where the enslavement of Yazidi women was framed through victimhood while armed Kurdish women were framed through resistance, ultimately reducing both to "tools" serving Western security interests.

International media narratives and Western policy frameworks have frequently institutionalized a dichotomy between Kurdish actors, distinguishing the KRG-affiliated Peshmerga as "state-compliant" partners while labeling PKK-affiliated groups as "destabilizing" entities.[377] This "Good Kurd/Bad Kurd" paradigm emerged prominently during the global campaign against ISIS, where the Peshmerga were framed as a reliable, pro-Western "regional guard" deserving of direct military aid and diplomatic legitimacy. In contrast, groups associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) remain designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S., EU, and Türkiye, despite their shared tactical goals in the fight against extremism.[378] This binary serves a dual function: it preserves the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state and its alliance with Turkey, while simultaneously enabling

[374] Leezenberg, M. (2016). "The Ambiguities of Democratic Confederalism: The PKK between Authoritarianism and Liberty." Southeast European and Black Sea Studies.
[375] Tax, M. (2016). A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State. Bellevue Literary Press. (*Provides a balanced view of the immense cultural hurdles the movement faces when implementing radical feminism in traditional agrarian societies*)
[376] Gunter, M. M. (2014). "The Kurdish Proclivity in Syria: The Rojava Model." Middle East Policy.
[377] Özcan, M. (2019). The Kurds in the Middle East: The 'Good' and the 'Bad'. In The Kurdish Question in the 21st Century. Routledge.
[378] Gunes, C. (2012). The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Resistance to Legitimization. Cambridge University Press. (*Gunes provides a deep dive into the legal mechanisms of the "Bad Kurd" label. He analyzes how the PKK's placement on the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list restricts not only their military movement but also their political paradiplomacy. He contrasts this with the KRG, which uses its "state-compliant" status to open representation offices in the very capitals that ban the PKK.*)

Western powers to outsource regional security to Kurdish proxies without legitimizing Kurdish revolutionary or transnational aspirations. This distinction persisted despite on-the-ground cooperation between these groups during the war against ISIS and the "heroization" of the YPJ in Syria, which subsequently drew reactions from Turkey and caused diplomatic crises among NATO allies. The gap between this international public sympathy and the realpolitik stances of states widened most clearly during the 2017 Independence Referendum process. The United States' policy toward the KRG remains built on a contradiction: it views the Kurds as an indispensable military partner but maintains an unwavering commitment to the central Iraqi government's sovereignty. Prior to the referendum, the US State Department stated it was "strongly opposed" to the vote, arguing it would disrupt the fight against ISIS and increase Iranian influence, a reality the KRG leadership miscalculated.[379]

In the post-referendum period, the US continued to support Peshmerga forces, but this support was made subject to Baghdad's approval. Under the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Congress allocated $415 million to the Peshmerga in 2017 and $290 million in 2019; however, recent reports indicate the Pentagon plans to stop Peshmerga salary payments by 2026, transferring responsibility entirely to Baghdad, which would significantly weaken KRG autonomy.[380] Concurrently, the referendum united historical rivals Turkey and Iran in a containment strategy. While Ankara maintains deep economic integration with the KRG, notably through the Ceyhan oil pipeline, it views Kurdish independence as an existential security threat, leading President Erdogan to coordinate with Iran to cut off the KRG's economic lifeline. Similarly, Tehran characterized KRG independence as a "second Israel" project and utilized Hashd al-Shaabi militias to facilitate the transfer of Kirkuk to Baghdad's control, aiming to keep the KRG weak to maintain Shia influence over Iraq.[381]

Western states, while opposing the referendum, played a leading role in the KRG's political rehabilitation. The United Kingdom, through then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, stated the referendum was contrary to Iraq's integrity but proposed alternative negotiations to protect trade and energy relations.[382] France, under President Macron, broke the KRG's diplomatic isolation by hosting Nechirvan Barzani in Paris, calling for dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil and assuming the role of guarantor for Kurds' constitutional rights. To compensate for its lack of state status and manage these complex diplomatic relationships, the KRG pursues aggressive lobbying and institutional isomorphism in Washington and Brussels. Data from the US Department of Justice's Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) reveals that the KRG pays the firm BGR Government Affairs $20,000 monthly for

[379] US Department of State, "Press Statement on the Kurdistan Regional Government's Referendum," Washington, D.C., September 2017.
[380] National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Pub. L. No. 114-328 (2016); National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Pub. L. No. 115-232 (2018); Office of the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress (Washington, D.C., 2024).
[381] "Erdogan Threatens to Cut off Oil Exports from Iraqi Kurdistan," Reuters, September 25, 2017.
[382] Boris Johnson, "Statement on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Referendum," Foreign & Commonwealth Office, London, September 2017.

“perception management,” including arranging meetings with policymakers and ensuring the continuation of Peshmerga aid.[383]

Despite these external efforts, a critical “crisis of representation” exists due to the widening gap between the KRG’s external image as a democratic ally and its internal reality. Scholars Kamal Chomani and Michiel Leezenberg analyze the KRG’s governance through the lens of clientelism, where the ruling KDP and PUK distribute oil revenues and state positions based on loyalty, rendering the parliament a dysfunctional “cardboard” institution.[384] Chomani argues that Kurdish nationalism (Kurdayeti) is used to legitimize corruption and silence opposition, with ruling elites suspending democratic mechanisms under the guise of external threats. This internal failure extends to the military; the failure to unify the Peshmerga remains a major disappointment for Western allies, as forces remain loyal to party leaders rather than the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. A report by the Clingendael Institute highlights this crisis, noting a collapse in public trust that serves as a warning to Western diplomats.[385] Ultimately, the KRG lives a paradox of “paradiplomacy success” alongside “state-building failure,” where soft power credit does not translate into hard power sovereignty, and the region risks becoming merely a local administration if internal reforms and sustainable economic agreements with Baghdad are not realized.

5. CONCLUSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

5.1 Synthesis of the Study

This thesis has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the Iraqi Kurdish question, situating it at the volatile intersection of ethnic separatism and national security. Through a detailed analysis of historical trajectories, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary geopolitical realities, this study has sought to answer the primary research question: "How does the evolution of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) affect Iraq's national security perception?"

5.1.2 The KRG as a "Rebelocracy": From Militia to Social Order

The study reveals that the KRG is not merely a peripheral administrative unit but a sophisticated "quasi-state"[386] that fundamentally challenges the Westphalian sovereignty of the Iraqi federal state. Applying Ana Arjona’s framework of "rebelocracy,"[387] we see that the

[383] US Department of Justice, "Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) Registration Statement: Kurdistan Regional Government," Registration No. [BGR Contract ID] (Washington, D.C., 2025).
[384] Kamal Chomani, "The Political Economy of Clientelism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," Journal of Middle Eastern Politics (2018); Michiel Leezenberg, "The KRG and the Crisis of Representation," Kurdish Studies (2017).
[385] Clingendael Institute, The Crisis of Representation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (The Hague, Netherlands, 2021).
[386] Natali, D. (2015).
[387] Arjona, A. (2016). Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War. Cambridge University Press.

KRG's authority is rooted in its ability to establish a comprehensive social order—regulating economic life and public services—which effectively replaces the Iraqi state's institutional presence at the local level. A rebelocracy emerges when a non-state armed group possesses a long-term time horizon, signaling an intent to rule indefinitely. In the case of the KRG, this is evidenced by its "interventionist"[388] social order, characterized by the institutionalization of public services, dispute adjudication, and economic regulation. By co-opting or replacing pre-existing local institutions, the KRG has created a social contract with the civilian population that provides stability in exchange for obedience, effectively competing with Baghdad for the monopoly of legitimate governance.

5.1.3 The Paradox of Empirical Statehood

This evolution illustrates a sharp clash between Westphalian sovereignty and "empirical statehood".[389] While the Iraqi federal government holds de jure external recognition, the KRG exercises the functional attributes of a sovereign state. By establishing independent military forces (Peshmerga), pursuing autonomous oil policies, and conducting paradiplomacy, the KRG has created a "dual-sovereignty dilemma" that defines modern Iraq. However, this autonomy remains paradoxical; while the KRG has achieved the internal attributes of statehood, it remains entrapped in a legal limbo, lacking the formal external recognition required to participate in the international system as a peer. This leaves the region in a perpetual state of fragile autonomy, caught between its internal capacity to govern and the external constraints of regional geopolitics.

5.1.4 The Mutation of Iraq's National Security Perception

While the KRG's institutional evolution is central to this study, it functions not as the sole cause, but as a critical intervening variable through which broader systemic pressures are filtered. The transition of the Iraqi security paradigm—from border defense to 'institutional survivalism'—is driven by several external independent variables.

Foremost among these is regional geopolitical competition, specifically the Iranian-Turkish rivalry, which utilizes the KRG's fragmented political landscape as a theater for proxy influence. Furthermore, the transnational threat of non-state actors, such as ISIS and the PKK, forces Baghdad to perceive the KRG's military autonomy not just as a local issue, but as a hole in the national counter-terrorism architecture. Added to these are 'non-traditional' security threats, such as water scarcity and climate change; as Türkiye and Iran restrict water flows into the Tigris and Euphrates, the KRG's control over northern dams transforms a sub-state administrative issue into a survivalist threat for the agricultural south.[390] Finally, global energy market volatility acts as a constant economic shock; the federal center's 'securitization of the budget' is a direct response to the way Kurdish independent oil sales threaten Iraq's compliance with OPEC+ quotas and national fiscal

[388] Arjona, A. (2014). "Wartime Institutions: A Research Agenda." Journal of Conflict Resolution.
[389] Jackson, R. H. (1990). Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World.
[390] Zeinab Shuker, "Climate Change and Water Scarcity Are Turning Iraq into a Land of Turmoil," The Century Foundation, August 30, 2023.

stability. In this model, the KRG 'quasi-state' is the mechanism that amplifies these external shocks, forcing Baghdad to define national security as the total centralization of authority.

5.2 The Theoretical Imperative: Security and Identity

To understand the Kurdish impact on Iraq, one must first revisit the conceptual evolution of national security established in the early chapters. As discussed through the lens of Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, the primary objective of the state is to prevent anarchy by establishing a monopoly on power and securing the safety of its subjects . The Iraqi state, however, has historically struggled to fulfill this "social contract" due to its artificial construction and the "selective appreciation" of threats by its ruling elites .

The thesis utilized Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" to demonstrate that Iraq failed to construct a cohesive national identity that could supersede ethnic and sectarian divisions . Instead, the state-building process in Iraq, from the British Mandate to the Ba'athist era, relied on coercion rather than consensus. The exclusion of the Kurds from the narrative of the "Iraqi nation" inevitably fueled the ethnic mobilization described by theories of internal colonialism and relative deprivation .

This study confirms that national security in Iraq cannot be viewed solely through a realist prism of border defense. Instead, it must be understood as "comprehensive security," encompassing economic stability, societal cohesion, and regime survival. The KRG's evolution strikes at the heart of this comprehensive security: by challenging Baghdad's control over oil (economic security), maintaining separate armed forces (military security), and promoting a distinct Kurdish nationalism (societal security), the KRG has forced Baghdad to view its own north not as a partner, but as a strategic competitor .

5.3 Historical Determinism and the Failure of Integration

The historical analysis provided in this research underscores that the current crisis is path-dependent. The tension between Erbil and Baghdad is not a post-2003 phenomenon but the result of a century of failed integration. The inclusion of the Mosul Vilayet into Iraq in 1925, driven by British oil interests rather than demographic logic, embedded a permanent ethno-territorial fault line within the state .

The thesis highlighted the cyclical nature of "Revolt and Repression" that characterized the 20th century. From Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji's revolts to the rise of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, Kurdish separatism was consistently met with state violence, culminating in the Anfal campaign and the chemical attacks on Halabja . These events created a "trauma-based identity" among the Kurds, making voluntary reintegration into a centralized Iraqi state psychologically and politically impossible. The 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent establishment of the "safe haven" (Operation Provide Comfort) were pivotal, breaking the

psychological bond between the Kurds and the Iraqi state and laying the institutional foundations for the KRG .

Therefore, the 2003 U.S. intervention did not create Kurdish separatism; it merely removed the lid of authoritarian repression that had contained it. The subsequent 2005 Constitution, which formalized Iraq as a federal state, was less a new social contract and more a ceasefire agreement between rival ethno-sectarian factions. It institutionalized the KRG's status but left the critical issues of "disputed territories" and hydrocarbon management deliberately vague, planting the seeds for the conflicts analyzed in Chapter 4.

5.4 The KRG as a Quasi-State: Achievements and Paradoxes

A central finding of this thesis is the classification of the KRG as a "quasi-state"—an entity that possesses internal sovereignty but lacks external recognition . The KRG's state-building project has been remarkably successful in two key domains: the military and the economy.

Regarding the military dimension, the Peshmerga have evolved from guerrilla fighters into a formidable, albeit fragmented, conventional army. As detailed in the study, the Peshmerga functioned as a de facto national army for the Kurds, possessing heavy weaponry, a rank structure, and a ministry of defense . Their role in the war against ISIS (2014-2017) elevated their status to that of an international partner, bypassing Baghdad to receive direct military aid from Western powers . However, this military autonomy poses a severe dilemma for Iraqi national security. A sovereign state implies a single monopoly on the use of force. The existence of the Peshmerga—who answer to Erbil, not Baghdad—creates a "security dilemma" within the borders of the state. Furthermore, the internal division of the Peshmerga into KDP (Unit 80) and PUK (Unit 70) partisan forces undermines the KRG's own claim to statehood, revealing that the region is not a unified polity but a duopoly of party-militias.

When considering the economic dimension, the KRG's independent oil policy, analyzed extensively in Chapter 4, represents its boldest assertion of sovereignty. By passing its own Oil and Gas Law in 2007 and constructing an independent pipeline to Turkey, the KRG successfully broke Baghdad's fiscal stranglehold. The signing of Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs) with major international oil companies like ExxonMobil and Chevron was a strategic masterstroke, effectively "internationalizing" Kurdish security by giving global powers a financial stake in the region's survival . Yet, this economic independence proved fragile. The thesis demonstrates that "oil nationalism" ultimately backfired. The crash in oil prices, budget cuts from Baghdad, and the 2023 arbitration ruling that shut down the Iraq-Turkey pipeline exposed the vulnerabilities of a rentier quasi-state. Without access to the international banking system or sovereign debt markets, the KRG remains fiscally dependent on Baghdad, forcing a reluctant return to federal budget arrangements .

Returning to the research question, the evolution of the KRG affects Iraq's national security perception in three distinct ways. In terms of fragmentation of sovereignty, the

KRG's autonomy has shattered the unitary nature of the Iraqi state. Baghdad can no longer project authority over its northern borders, manage its water resources in the north, or fully control its OPEC production quotas due to Kurdish non-compliance . This fragmentation encourages other provinces (such as Basra) to demand similar federal powers, threatening the "Balkanization" of Iraq. The KRG serves as a precedent that challenges the very viability of the Iraqi nation-state model.

This fragmentation of authority extends beyond traditional state functions into the realm of international institutional engagement. A critical dimension of the KRG's quasi-statehood is its 'humanitarian paradiplomacy,' facilitated by the disproportionate concentration of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) within its borders. As Yanniv Voller argues, the KRG has utilized the presence of these non-state actors to build a 'brand' of stability and Western-alignment that distinguishes it from the rest of federal Iraq.[391] By providing the primary administrative and security framework for global aid operations, the KRG bypasses Baghdad's oversight, effectively internationalizing its governance. Denise Natali highlights that this creates a 'governance disparity'; while Baghdad struggles with service delivery in the south, the KRI's NGO-supported infrastructure reinforces its image as a functional, state-like entity. Consequently, this reliance on external non-state support grants the KRG a form of 'soft sovereignty' that further isolates the northern region from the federal administrative center, complicating Iraq's national security by entrenching a sub-state actor as the sole interlocutor for international humanitarian interests.

Moreover, the KRG's reliance on external patrons has turned northern Iraq into a theater for proxy warfare, undermining Iraq's sovereignty. As discussed in the chapters on regional dynamics, Türkiye maintains a permanent military presence in the KRG to fight the PKK, while Iran uses its influence with the PUK to counter Kurdish independence. The KRG's "paradiplomacy" invites foreign actors to bypass Baghdad, effectively neutralizing the federal government's foreign policy in the north. Iraq's national security is thus compromised not just by internal division, but by the fact that its northern border is managed by a sub-state actor with divergent geopolitical interests.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the "disputed territories"—particularly Kirkuk—as the flashpoint of future conflict. The KRG's attempt to annex these areas in 2014 and the subsequent federal military recapture in 2017 demonstrate that the territorial limits of Kurdistan remain undefined . As long as the status of Kirkuk remains unresolved, it serves as a ticking time bomb for ethnic conflict, perpetuating a security vacuum that groups like ISIS exploit to regroup.

5.6 Future Trajectories: The Limits of Quasi-Statehood

Looking ahead, this study reflects on Pal Kolsto's framework regarding the future of quasi-states. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) currently stands at a critical

[391] Yanniv Voller, The Kurdish Liberation Movement: From Armed Struggle to Electoral Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 112.

juncture, navigating a complex political landscape where the path forward is dictated by four potential trajectories. While the 2017 referendum demonstrated an overwhelming internal desire for *Full Independence*—with 92% of voters in favor—the subsequent blockade by Türkiye and Iran, coupled with rejection from the United States and United Nations, underscored that independence remains a "strategic impossibility." The international system's rigid prioritization of territorial integrity over non-state self-determination suggests that the Kurdish "dream" cannot currently survive the reality of the geopolitical order.

Conversely, a *Full Reabsorption by the Parent State* appears equally improbable. Although Baghdad has successfully utilized "legal warfare" through Federal Supreme Court rulings to erode the KRG's financial sovereignty, the sheer entrenchment of the Peshmerga and the distinctiveness of the Kurdish identity make forced reintegration a recipe for protracted civil war. This is a cost the fragile Iraqi state is fundamentally unable to bear. Similarly, the prospect of *Inclusion into a Patron State* remains stalled by regional paradoxes; while the KRG has deepened its economic ties with Türkiye, this bond is strictly transactional. Because Türkiye views Kurdish statehood as an existential threat linked to its own internal security concerns and the PKK, it will likely never allow the KRG to transition from a trade partner to a formal protectorate.

Ultimately, the most plausible scenario is a refined version of the Status Quo: *Federal Unification.* The KRG is increasingly settling into the role of a "federated quasi-state," maintaining high levels of domestic autonomy while becoming more deeply integrated into Baghdad's fiscal architecture. Recent pragmatic shifts, such as the agreement to market Kurdish oil through the federal State Organization for Marketing of Oil (SOMO), indicate that the era of seeking "independence" is being superseded by a period of "interdependence." In this view, the future of the KRG lies not in a clean break from Iraq, but in a carefully negotiated and permanent settlement within the federal framework.

5.7 Final Thoughts

The year 2003 marked not only the collapse of a regime in Iraqi history but also the dismantling of a state philosophy predicated on Arab nationalism and Ba'athist ideology. However, this historical rupture, rather than delivering the anticipated democratic consolidation, dragged the country into a "muhasasa" (quota) system where ethnic and sectarian identities became tools for political bargaining. As examined throughout this thesis, the new political architecture established post-2003 has paralyzed decision-making mechanisms and caused the definitions of "friend" and "foe" to be constructed based on factional interests rather than national ones. This power-sharing model—ostensibly based on political consensus—has hindered the development of a proactive national security reflex capable of countering threats effectively.

For years, the Iraqi state apparatus has devoted its entire capacity to counter-terrorism, reading security solely as the "elimination of military threats." However, the military defeat of ISIS in December 2017 served as a strategic wake-up call as much as a victory. The

relative decline of the terror threat has exposed the state’s institutional weaknesses and the structural problems previously swept under the rug. At this juncture, Iraq's national security faces a multi-layered spiral of risks that are far more complex than traditional terror threats, deeply intertwined with issues of "state-building" and "sovereignty."

The elements threatening Iraq's internal security are no longer limited to armed groups but include anomalies produced by the system itself. Firstly, despite constitutional objectives, the economy remains undiversified and dependent on oil (rentier state), leaving the state vulnerable to global fluctuations. Secondly, the infiltration of state institutions by organized crime networks and the uncontrolled proliferation of weapons among non-state actors effectively nullify the rule of law and rot the state from within. Thirdly, climate change, drought, and environmental degradation are no longer abstract debates about the future for Iraq; they have transformed into urgent national security matters threatening food security and demographic stability.

Within this matrix of internal threats, the unresolved constitutional impasse between Baghdad and Erbil constitutes a critical risk area for the integrity of the state. Restrictive decisions by the Federal Supreme Court regarding oil exports and budget allocations, combined with the internal political fragmentation within the Kurdistan Regional Government (the KDP-PUK tension), create vulnerabilities in the national defense system. The uncertain status of disputed territories and the lack of integration of Peshmerga forces into the national army leave Iraq’s northern borders open to external interventions and the infiltration of terror elements.

In the context of foreign policy and security, Iraq continues to be a theater for regional reckonings as a result of its geopolitical destiny. The Al-Hol Camp on the Syrian border harbors a new generation of radicalization threats, likened to a "ticking time bomb." Meanwhile, the PKK presence in Sinjar—and the consequent Turkish military operations and Iranian influence struggles—turns Iraqi territory into an arena for proxy wars. Against the dam policies of neighboring countries (Türkiye and Iran), it is evident that Iraqi diplomacy has failed to utilize its commercial leverage (customs duties, trade volume, etc.) as a strategic tool for national security. Additionally, the US military presence has transcended the anti-ISIS mandate, becoming a component of the power struggle between Washington and Tehran, thereby limiting Iraq’s strategic autonomy.

Iraq's national security has entered a bottleneck too deep to be sustained by the temporary crisis management strategies of successive governments. The legacy of the old regime, combined with the structural flaws of the post-2003 system, has rendered threats chronic rather than acute. Consequently, the way out for Iraq lies in establishing a Holistic National Security Doctrine that defines security not merely through military capacity, but encompasses the economy, environment, law, and social consensus. The priority for decision-makers must not be to pass these problems on to the next government, but to implement radical reforms that restore state sovereignty and institutional capacity; otherwise, even if military victories are won on the battlefield, the internal dissolution of the state will remain inevitable.

Within this broader context of state fragility, the evolution of the Kurdish Regional Government represents a fundamental transformation in the security architecture not just of Iraq, but of the Middle East. While the KRG challenges the traditional definition of the nation-state—proving that an entity can possess a standing army and an oil industry without a seat at the United Nations—this thesis concludes that the "Golden Age" of Kurdish unchecked autonomy (2003-2017) has effectively ended. The region is now entering a period of retrenchment, where the "paradiplomacy success" it has enjoyed must be converted into "institutional durability." If the Kurdish leadership continues to rely on clientelism and external patronage while ignoring the necessity of internal reforms—specifically the unification of the Peshmerga and the depoliticization of the economy—the region risks sliding from a "quasi-state" into a "failed quasi-state," mirroring the instability of the parent state it sought to escape.

Therefore, for the Iraqi state, the "Kurdish Question" is no longer about preventing separation, but about managing a complex, asymmetric federalism where the national security of the center is inextricably linked to the stability of the periphery. A collapse of the KRG due to internal infighting or economic bankruptcy would create a vacuum that extremists would fill, endangering Baghdad; conversely, an unchecked KRG moving toward independence risks provoking regional wars that would engulf the entire country. Ultimately, the future of Iraqi national security depends on the realization that Erbil and Baghdad are locked in a relationship of mutual dependence—neither can be secure while the other is unstable. The challenge for the next decade will be to transform this current "hostile dependency" into a "cooperative federalism," creating a robust, constitutionally guaranteed autonomy that aligns the security interests of the region with the stability of the central government.

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