

# IRAQI KURDS AND IRAN: A NEW ERA OF RELATIONS

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**Abstract:** Relations between Iran and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) have gone through a number of stages. Before 1991, Iran supported the Iraqi Kurdish struggle against successive Iraqi regimes. However, following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, ethnic and sectarian politics (especially the rivalry between Iraq's Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish communities) have been the main drivers of Iranian strategy towards the KRI, with Iran anxious to prevent the KRI becoming a threat for the Shi'ite-dominated Iraqi state or part of any regional front against Iran. However, following the US assassination of prominent Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani in Iraq in early 2020, Iran's policy has changed. Iran now views the KRI as a battleground against its rivals in the region, from the US to neighboring countries, such as Arab Gulf countries, Turkey and even Israel.

## **Introduction**

Among Iran's policies towards the various Kurdish communities divided across different Middle Eastern states, Kurds in northern Iraq have held a unique status in Iranian policy with relations between the two evolving through different stages. Iran's ties to the Kurdish liberation movement in Iraq date back to 1962, when Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi poured support into Kurdish opposition against the Iraqi state. In 1975, Iran's annual financial support to Iraqi Kurds reached \$75 million, provided in weapons and ammunition.<sup>1</sup> This policy continued even after the Shah's overthrow with Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979. For instance in 1983, during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, the Kurdistan Democratic Party helped the Iranian army make gains in northern Iraq. In response, the Iraqi regime massacred at least 4,000 innocent camp inhabitants of the Kurdish Barzani tribe.<sup>2</sup> Since the Kurdish civil war started in 1994, Iran involved itself in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and occasionally backed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party dominant in the Sulaymaniyah region bordering Iran against the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), which dominates the KRI's capitol of Erbil. Iran had its foreign relations offices and intelligence agencies in Iraqi Kurdistan even before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and in 2007 it also became the first country to open its consulate general in Iraqi Kurdistan after the US invasion.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it was not the KDP position in the ongoing government formation process against Iranian interests that negatively influenced the relationship. Rather, it was the assassination of Soleimani in January 2020 began a dangerous phase in relations between the two sides. Henceforth, Iran rapidly increased its attacks on Erbil. The US moved forces out of most facilities in Iraq, such as Taji, and concentrated them around the Kurdistan Region's capital (Erbil)<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, Iran now sees Erbil as the headquarters of not only the US presence but also an Israeli one. This expert brief examines Iran's policy towards the KRI in greater detail, especially the current stage of relations.

## ***IRAN NOW SEES ERBIL AS THE HEADQUARTERS OF NOT ONLY THE US PRESENCE BUT ALSO AN ISRAELI ONE***

### **How does Iran view the Kurdistan Region of Iraq?**

Iran's geographical, historical and ethnic proximity to the other Middle Eastern countries with prominent Kurdish minorities, namely, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, makes political, cultural and security interaction between Iran and these nations inevitable. This has led Iran to view the region (Levant and Gulf) somewhat suspiciously and fear that its rivals might use the ethnic proximity in the region against Iran, a situation which often ends in political, military and security intervention. Following the 2003 US invasion, these concerns have manifested clearly in Iran's deep involvement in Iraq.

While the country's religious rhetoric since 1979 has been highly ideological, Iran's foreign policy towards its neighboring countries has a strongly pragmatic dimension with geopolitical factors an important motivator of Iranian policy.<sup>5</sup> The Sunni-majority KRI is not a productive field for Iran's soft power, which it has exercised more effectively among the Shi'ite community of Iraq and its political representatives. Despite Iran's significant economic interests in KRI, Iran's relationship with the KRI is dominated by security and political dimensions, rather than economic and ideological dimensions. As a regional power, Iran has always sought to create a sphere of influence in the KRI. This is driven by the geopolitical location of the KRI, which has a 500 km-long border with Iran, making the "Kurdish question" – the notion of greater autonomy or even independence for Kurds not only in northern Iraq, but also in Iran and elsewhere in the region – of great importance in these relations. However, other factors also affect Iran-KRI relations, especially regional dimensions, including Iran's relations with Iraq, Syria, Turkey and the Gulf states.

Since the establishment of the KRI as a largely autonomous region of Iraq in 1991, Iran's policy towards the KRI has been dominated by security and based on partisan rather than institutional relations. Iran has not dealt with the KRI through branches of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but rather through its elite military branch, the Quds Force, as well as through the leaders of Kurdish political parties, and sometimes tribal and religious groups, which Iran has cultivated as allies over the years<sup>6</sup>. This has meant that institutional and formal relations have been largely sidestepped. On this basis, Iran has had a longstanding good relationship with one of the KRI's dominant parties the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Talabani family. Iran also has strong relations with Ali Bapir, the head of the smaller

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party the Kurdistan Justice Group, and with other Islamic parties.<sup>7</sup> This also applies to Iran and KDP relations and this could be a source of threat to these relations at any time. Iran's desire to have a strong position in the KRI has been pursued through closely monitoring the political situation and interfering in political decision-making, especially during processes of government formation in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> For instance, during Nouri al-Maliki's efforts to win re-election as Iraqi Prime Minister in 2010, Tehran pressured the Kurdish former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to join Maliki's coalition against Ayad Alawi. Iran has played an active role in the internal political issues of the KRI in several other stages, for instance, when al-Maliki's second premiership was rejected by both the Sadrists and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in 2012. Fearful of losing a Shi'a-dominated government in Iraq, Iran forced the Sadrist group and the Kurdish former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani to accept a second term of al-Maliki's premiership by encouraging Talabani to derail a no-confidence vote against al-Maliki in April 2012<sup>9</sup>.

There are three main issues that have always been of interest to Iranian policies in the KRI. The first relates to Iraq's ethno-religious geopolitics. There are strong ties between Kurds on both sides of the Iran-Iraq border. For example, after the war against ISIS, when the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held an independence referendum in September 2017, while Iraqi Kurds went to cast their ballots, thousands of Iranian Kurds took to the streets in support of the vote in a bold act of defiance against Tehran's stance on the issue. The next day, several Kurds who had organized or had simply participated in the rallies were arrested by Iranian police.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in recent decades, the KRI has provided relative security and stability for Iran, including by the KRG's curtailing of the activities of exiled opposition parties from Iranian Kurdistan which have been based in the KRI's territory.

The second is the regional rivalry in which Iran, as a regional power, has always been a major actor. Iran is highly wary of a scenario in which the KRI, which is already highly dependent on the support of Iran's greatest global rival, the US, could become closer to the regional front led by the Gulf Arab states and Israel. Iran has thus continuously applied pressure on the KRG to politically support it, or at least to not join any front against

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Iran. Broadly speaking, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates see the KRI as an opportunity to expand the pro-Arab Sunni Muslim bloc in the Middle East, and enhance the position of Sunni Arabs in other parts of Iraq.<sup>11</sup> The “Conference on Normalizing Ties with Israel” that was held in Erbil (25 September 2021) was one indication of that.

The third is the US military presence in Iraq, which Iran views as a threat – not without cause, as shown in Soleimani’s assassination on Iraqi soil. Iran is thus concerned about US military and political involvement in Iraq in general, and particularly the KRI, given its long border and ethnic ties with populations in Iran.

These three factors together form Iran’s strategic view of the KRI. On this basis, it may be said that the KRI has become the center of Iran’s attention in all three of the abovementioned issues. This is especially the case after Iraq’s 2021 parliamentary elections in which the leading Kurdish parties become one part of the governing tripartite coalition that also comprises Sunni parties and the followers of Shi’ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

**Iran’s new concerns**

Of course, several other regional issues are important concerns for Iran, above all the normalization of ties between Israel and some Gulf Arab states, namely Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have received tacit support from Saudi Arabia.<sup>12</sup> In March 2022, the Negev Summit was held in Israel’s Negev Desert with the participation of the foreign ministers of six countries: Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the UAE and the US.<sup>13</sup> The summit’s main objectives were to establish a security committee to counter regional threats, share logistical, intelligence and technological assistance, and formulate a strategy to counter Iran, in anticipation of the lifting of US sanctions placed on Iran in previous years.

Another issue of concern for Iran is the slow pace of talks on its nuclear program, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Iran expected the US and the West to resume negotiations with Iran, perhaps providing Iran with the opportunity to fill some of the huge energy gap that has been created in Europe by the boycott of Russian oil and gas. However, after three months, the nuclear

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talks are still going poorly and Iran is not optimistic about the outcome. Even if an agreement is successfully reached, Iran realizes it will still be under intense US pressure.<sup>14</sup> This lack of progress could lead Tehran to lash out against the US. Iran's rocket attack on the American consulate in Erbil in the KRI on 13 March could be a sign warning of what is to come.

Another issue of concern for Iran is Turkey's new regional policy. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's tour of the Middle East early this year was part of a wider charm offensive to mend Turkey's strained ties across the region, including with Egypt, Israel and the UAE.<sup>15</sup> This could create a new regional system that may eventually clash with Iran, especially since the US is part of this new front. The new political situation in Iraq could pose another problem for Iran, especially as Turkey and the Gulf Arab states have provided backing for Iraqi Sunnis, Kurds and Shi'ite attempts to distance Iraq from Iran. In this regard, Turkey has acted to allay its own concerns in the Sinjar District in northern Iraq, where it accuses Iranian-backed fighters of the Hashd al-Sha'abi militia (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF) of providing support to groups linked to Turkey's bitter foe, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Elsewhere, Iran also currently faces difficulties in Lebanon, where Hezbollah and its allies – previously a pillar of Iran's engagement not only in Lebanon, but also in Palestine and Syria – recently lost their majority in Lebanon's parliamentary elections.<sup>16</sup> While Iran maintains a variety of extra-legal means in Lebanon that means it will retain influence in the country, the trend is concerning nonetheless.

**The Kurdistan Region as a battlefield**

In Iranian strategy, Iraq is the front line in the conflict with Gulf Arab countries, also serving as a shield against the threats from those countries and the US. Before the assassination of Soleimani, whenever Iran sought to put pressure on the US, it usually did so by using Baghdad and its surroundings as a battleground, especially the southern provinces of Iraq. This kept the KRI largely away from the conflict. Following the US invasion of Iraq, this was a central reason for the KRI's economic recovery and stability compared to other parts of Iraq.

After the killing of Soleimani, however, Iran has turned Erbil and the KRI into another combat zone to send messages to its opponents; once to demand the departure of Americans troops,

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again to put pressure on the KRG not to deviate from the Iranian front, and once more with the excuse of the claimed presence of Israel in the KRI. On 23 May, a group called “the Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance” issued a statement claiming they had “detected suspicious movements from foreign agents’ internal tools whose aim is to spread chaos with clear Zionist fingerprints”; they warned the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that “their efforts to ignite fire will backfire and burn them.”<sup>17</sup> After Iran’s attack on Erbil in March, Tehran claimed it had zeroed in on Israeli targets. Against this backdrop, earlier this month the Iraqi Parliament held a session to discuss a proposal for a law prohibiting normalization with Israel.<sup>18</sup>

Another change in Iran’s policy is Iran’s use of the disputed areas between Iraq and the KRI as a gateway to attack the KRI on the one hand, and to arm the communities in these areas on the other. By pursuing this policy, Iran likely seeks to prevent any agreement between Baghdad and Erbil to resolve the problem of the disputed areas, as addressed in Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, creating a situation analogous to what is taking place in Sinjar. Since 2015, with Iranian backing, the PMF has created militias from among the Yazidis and other communities resident to the area, who have carved out a large zone over which neither the Iraqi state, nor the KRI can exert authority. These militias include the 30th Brigade of Shi’ite Shabakas in Nineveh, the 53rd Brigade for Shi’ite Turkmens in Tal ‘Afar, and the 50th Brigade for Assyrians in Hamdaniyah.<sup>19</sup> Despite the existence of the Sinjar Agreement between the Iraqi government and the KRG, Erbil and Baghdad have so far been unable to push the PMF and PKK-affiliated groups out from Sinjar, or return their control to Sinjar due to the deployment of PMF in these areas. The same strategy is being pursued in Kirkuk. Iran has used these areas to launch attacks on the KRI. Since Soleimani’s assassination, the KRI has suffered several missile attacks, most recently in May.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, a prominent leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, an opposition organization which is based in the KRI and faces frequent attacks from Iran, was recently assassinated in Erbil.<sup>21</sup>

This state of affairs represents a new era and a dangerous stage in Iran-KRI relations, and leaves the KRI with only two options: either surrender to Iranian pressure, which means abandoning opportunities to further its own interests, or to seek foreign support from the US and other neighboring and regional countries, including Turkey, the Arab Gulf countries and even Israel.

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**Conclusion**

It can be argued that the main factors behind Iranian relations with the KRI are political and security factors, rather than the economic or ideological ones that Iran usually utilizes as means for soft power projection in countries with a significant Shi'ite population. This means that Iranian strategy towards the KRI should be understood as largely independent from Iran's larger strategy towards Iraq. This strategy is mainly related to geopolitical and regional issues and is conducted in such a way as to prevent the KRI from becoming a safe haven for Kurdish opposition groups that threaten the Iranian regime. The Kurdish question, whether in Iraq or in other parts of Kurdistan, is at the center of Iranian strategy towards KRI. Indeed, Iraqi Kurds have direct influence and more political and cultural links, including a mutually-intelligible dialect, with Iranian Kurds compared to Kurds in Turkey and Syria that do not enjoy such influence with Iran's Kurdish population. The second factor that is directing Iran-KRI relations is the fact that post-2003 Iraq is the second Shi'ite dominated country that composes a strategic part of the Iranian survival regime. As such, Iran will not let the KRI create threats to Shi'a dominance over the Iraqi central government. The Iranian reaction to the 2017 Kurdish referendum in Iraq can be viewed and assessed in this context.

Iran has always sought to create a sphere of influence in the Kurdistan Region. Iran wants to have a high position in the region by closely monitoring the region and interfering in political decision-making. While Iran-KRI relations were previously always guided by a kind of coordination of common interests, after the killing of Qasem Soleimani, Iran sees Erbil as a battlefield. If Tehran wants to send a message to its opponents, it will do so through Erbil, whether through political pressure or through the use of military tools and proxy forces in Iraq. After October 16 (2017), Iran is using the disputed areas of Sinjar as a card against the Kurdistan Region by forming militia forces from local communities, dismantling them and using them against the Kurdistan Region in an organized manner; To do so, Iran want to prevent any future agreements on these areas.

Iran's policy of treating the KRI as a field of conflict between itself and its opponents has resulted in a very dangerous stage in the history of relations between the two sides. This has not been in Iran's own interests. Iran is losing the symbolic capital it once had in Iraq



among Kurds and Shi'ites. According to polls conducted in late 2020, over 85 per cent of Iraqis, including 82 per cent of Shi'ites, believe that Iran plays a negative role in Iraq.<sup>22</sup> Although the KRI is a weak link in the region and an easy target for Iran's interference, it can also pose a threat to Iran, partly due to its ethnic ties with other Kurdish communities in Iran, Turkey and Syria. In the long run, it is not in the interests of Iran, or other regional countries such as Turkey, to continue to undermine the security of the KRI, as its security forms a pivotal part of the security of Iraq and the larger region.

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