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RESUMPTION OF THE KURDISH CARD IN IRANIAN-IRAQI RELATIONS: COMPLEX INTERPLAY, PRE-REFERENDUM REALITIES[**]

Abstract: The Kurds have been pivotal in Iran's domestic and foreign politics throughout history. In post-Saddam Iraq, helming the delicate balance between Iraq's ethno-confessional groups according to its national security interests posed one of the focuses of Iran's regional policy. The article aims to analyze the peculiarities of Iran's Kurdish policy, the essence of the regional transitions of the Kurdish issue, and their impact on Iran's regional policy. The article argues that the Islamic State's threat and the Syrian crisis strengthened Iran's Kurdish policy to control the Kurdish region of Iraq, including the issue of distribution and transition of energy resources. Tehran vigorously defended the principle of the territorial integrity of Iraq and preserved the Shia force's dominance in the 2017 pre-referendum period. This strategy sought to prevent the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) from evolving into potential foothold operations targeting Iranian assets in the region.
Keywords: Iran, Iraq, KRG, Kurdish card, Shia groups, IS

Introduction

The Kurdish factor has been one of Iran's most essential regional policy components. While containing Kurdish separatism within the country with extreme intolerance, Iran has used the Kurdish card in neighboring countries to its advantage. The core approach of Iran's regional policy is to prevent the formation of Kurdish autonomies in neighboring countries, which could lead to

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manifestations of autonomy in the Kurdish regions of Iran (Gunter 1998; Koohi-Kamali 2003). Until the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Tehran permanently provided political, economic, and military assistance to Kurdish political groups that opposed the regime, with a particular emphasis on supporting the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Jalal Talabani, especially during the Iran-Iraq war. In the early 1990s, Iran supported the PUK fighting against another influential Turkish-backed Kurdish party headed by Massoud Barzani, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (Sinkaya 2017). Nevertheless, Turkey and Iran have, time after time, synchronized their initiatives concerning the Kurdish factor, adjusting their policies concerning the Kurds based on their respective security interests. Historically, the Kurds have functioned as a tactical instrument for both Tehran and Ankara, serving to further their regional objectives. Neither Iran nor Turkey has ever demonstrated a genuine commitment to endorsing political autonomy for the Kurdish populace, even in neighboring nations. As mentioned by Sinkaya "the Iraqi Kurdish parties partially turned into proxies of Turkey and Iran" (2017, 12).

Following the KDP and PUK reconciliation and the progress in establishing autonomy in Kurdistan (Richards 2013)[1] Tehran also endeavored to foster relations with Massoud Barzani. This shift in Iran's approach suggests a pragmatic adaptation to the region's landscape, wherein political dynamics and alliances have transformed. The US invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime were both a challenge and an opportunity for Iran. If, in the past, Iran tried to undermine the power of Hussein via Shiite groups and Kurds, then in post-Saddam Iraq, Iran forged to shape an ideological and security environment according to its regional interests. Along with the Iranian active involvement in Iraq, it became apparent that the dynamics of development surrounding Iraqi Kurdistan would not only impact the potential establishment of a Kurdish state but would also determine the extent of influence of various states in Iraq and over the Kurdish issue in the region.

From the outset of the Syrian conflict, Iran staunchly upheld the principle of territorial integrity for neighboring states, reacting vehemently to the restructuring of borders in the region, including opposing the notion of dividing Iraq and Syria along sectarian lines, such as delineating Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish segments.

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[1] The Kurdish peshmerga collaborated with US forces. Post-invasion, the PUK and KDP held the balance of power in Kurdistan, jointly governing the region through a coalition. This arrangement extended to pivotal roles within Iraqi Kurdistan governance, with the PUK's Talabani as Iraq's president and the KDP's Barzani as the president of Iraqi Kurdistan. (Curses, Romano and Gunter 2020)

Tehran's regional strategy emphasizes the importance of maintaining current borders (Barzegar, 2008).

The analysis is predicated upon examining various sources, encompassing reports, official statements, expert analyses, and media data. The first part of the paper delves into the framework of Iran's interactions with political factions among Iraqi Kurds after the US intervention in Iraq and the differences in Iranian and Turkish approaches to the Kurdish factor.

In the subsequent section, the analysis pivots to a detailed exploration of Iran's involvement in exacerbating sectarian tensions within Iraq, enlightening the nuanced shifts in Iranian policy vis-à-vis the Kurdish factor before the 2017 independence referendum. Additionally, it investigates the complexities of Iran's policy evolution against the backdrop of the Syrian crisis and the emergence of the Islamic State (IS).

Iran's Engagements with Iraqi Kurdish Elites: Balancing Act, Security Concerns

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Shiites and the Kurds established a dominant position within the Iraqi central government system. Between them emerged new mechanisms of interaction. Iraq's new political system marked a significant departure from the model under Saddam Hussein's rule (Wery, 13). Iran was opposed to a pro-American Iraqi government, which would likely align with U.S. interests and go against the objectives of the Islamic Republic. Iran opposed the Bush administration's regional policy, which largely focused on defining Iraq as a counterweight to Iran, building regional alliances against Iran, and establishing enduring military bases near Iran's borders. One key objective for Tehran was to preserve a strong Shia influence in the Iraqi political realm. While Shia factions vary in their views on relations with Iran, all Islamic Shia groups (ISCI, Dawa, the Sadrists) seek collaboration with Iran (Barzegar, 2008).

Since the mid-1990s, Tehran has heightened political and logistical support for the PUK to counter increased Turkish involvement in Iraqi Kurdistan via the KDP and curb the activities of Iranian Kurdish opposition settled in the region (Sinkaya 2017, 13). To manage Kurdish developments and safeguard the territorial integrity of Iraq, Tehran, following the adoption of the new constitution in Iraq in 2005 and the clarification of the status of the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan, initiated the activation of its political and economic relations with the KRG. In 2007, Iran took significant steps, signaling a commitment to strengthening its presence and engagement in Iraqi Kurdish regions. Tehran established two consulates, one in Erbil and another in Sulaymaniyah. The KRG representative office was opened in Tehran (Sinkaya 2015), indicating a mutual interest in

fostering relations. Similarly, the deepening of Iran's relations with Iraqi Kurds was facilitated by the opening of a road for automobile communication between Iran and the KRG and the initiation of direct flights from Urmia to Erbil. Iran established economic dominance in the Suleimani region, under the control of the PUK, thereby emerging as the second-most significant economic partner of the KRG after Turkey. Iran's relationship with the KRG improved. This influence manifested itself through various economic collaborations, trade agreements, and investment initiatives (Berman 2016)[2]. Tehran has also cooperated with the Gorran (Change) party that separated from the PUK (Katzman and Humud 2016, 20). Kurdish entities control some parts of the Iran-Iraq border (1600 km), which for years enabled Iran to navigate and mitigate the impact of international sanctions, ensuring a steady supply route under its influence. Through fostering dialogue between the Shia-Arab and Kurdish political factions within the Iraqi government, Tehran sought to exert influence over separatist sentiments among the Kurds. This strategic approach by Tehran underscores its efforts to promote a balance of power and control the Iraqi political landscape.

In Iraq, Tehran has consistently endeavored to leverage the Kurdish factor to exert influence over Baghdad and simultaneously impede the unification of Kurds (Ingram 2015). From 2003 to 2008, Iraqi Kurds cooperated closely with the central government, particularly under the leadership of the Iranian-backed Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. During this period, Kurdish support was instrumental in al-Maliki's efforts to contradict the influence of the prominent Shiite opposition cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Significant opposition occurred in 2010 following parliamentary elections between the Kurdish leadership and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The critical points of this shift were the disagreements over the expansion of executive powers by al-Maliki, the concentration of military forces under his control, and the issue of the distribution of energy resources. These disputes marked a notable transformation that reflected divergent interests and objectives between the two sides. During the Syrian crisis, Turkey's policy has gone in the opposite direction of Iran's. It distanced itself from Baghdad and openly supported Barzani's efforts to oust Maliki (International Crisis Group, 2015, 14). The Syrian civil war introduced its clarifications into the paradigm of the Kurdish problem in the region. The Syrian crisis and the rise of IS allowed Turkey to target the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Syrian Kurdish forces (Hovsepyan, Manukyan, 2022) and prepare the ground for military incursions into Iraq and Syria, partly countering Tehran's Shiite-centric regional policy.

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[2] In 2000, 100 million, the dollar-denominated trade turnover in Iraq before the IS military operations (2014) was 4 billion dollars per year. 2014 In August, the parties agreed to increase trade turnover and strengthen cooperation in the energy sector.

Cooperation between Iran and the KRG was not mainly hampered by the fact that Iran's three main Kurdish parties—the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), and Komala (Kurdistan Communist Party of Iran) had relatively distant relations with the leadership of the Iraqi Kurds and political entities associated with them (Hummel 2017).

The Syrian civil war and the rise of IS brought significant shifts in the paradigm of the Kurdish issue, involving various regional actors pursuing their strategic interests. It provided Turkey with an opportunity to target the PKK and create conditions for military invasions into Iraq and Syria, which were aimed at countering and undermining Iran's Shiite axis in the broader regional context.

For Tehran, fostering collaboration with the Kurds was crucial to safeguarding its interests and minimizing external influence on the dynamics between Baghdad and Erbil. Tehran seeks to mitigate and counterbalance the influence of the United States and Israel toward Kurds. Both the U.S. and Israel tried to align the Kurds with the Syrian opposition, supported Kurdish separatist movements in Iran, and fostered anti-Iranian sentiments in the region (Wong 2012). The geopolitical circumstances surrounding the Syrian conflict and the rise of IS heightened the significance of Iraq for Iran in facilitating communication coordination and potentially serving as a bridge between various involved stakeholders.

In June 2014, following the capture of Mosul in northern Iraq by IS, and with the Iraqi army retreating, Kurdish Peshmerga forces found themselves on the frontlines against the jihadist insurgency. Hardy Mède To halt the advance of IS militants toward Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG required military support. Ankara was initially hesitant to provide immediate assistance, prompting the KRG to turn to Iran for support in countering the IS threat. Ankara demanded that the KRG stop interacting with the PKK and YPG against IS (Gurbuz 2023). In August 2014, during the Iranian Foreign Minister M. J. Zarif's visit to Iraq, KRG President Masoud Barzani highlighted that Iran was the first country to provide the Kurds with weapons and ammunition to fight IS faster than the US (Collard 2014). In response to the escalating threat posed by the IS in 2014, Iran extended not only military support to Shia forces but also facilitated aid to the Kurds (International Crisis Group, 2015, 14). In the struggle against extremist groups, Iranian authorities-initiated considerations for collaboration with various Kurdish parties, including the PUK, the KDP, the PKK and the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD). This deliberation was framed within the broader context of enhancing Iran's overall regional security claims to address common threats posed by Sunni jihadist elements. As per Crisis Group analyses, the KDP had to pay for Iranian support later. Iranian diplomats indirectly criticized Barzani's push for independence,

advising him to cooperate with the legitimate government in Baghdad to caution against potential losses (International Crisis Group, 2015, 15). Many Iranian Kurds, including members of the KDPI and PJAK, participated alongside Iraqi and Syrian Kurds in countering the IS threat, putting aside their differences. Notably, amid the growing danger posed by IS to Kurdish regions, Tehran's partner, PUK, assumed a mediating role between the military and political forces of Syrian Kurds. Despite the PUK peshmergas' uneasy relationship with Shiite militias, they have been deployed side by side, especially in areas with a mixed population of Kurds and Shiite Turkmen. In PUK strongholds, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)[3] military advisers unified diverse proxies: PUK peshmergas, Shiite militias, PKK, and YPG, under a single command, providing intelligence, assistance, and equipment (International Crisis Group, 2015, 13-14).

In early August 2015, an Iranian delegation visited the KRG. It emphasized that, given the region's instability, the Barzani party needed to remain in power despite the expiration of the term stipulated by the constitution (his current term expired on August 19. This position was reiterated on August 4 by Qasem Soleimani, the head of the particular unit of the IRGC known as Qods[4] (Ingram 2015). It is noteworthy that almost simultaneously, Iraqi Kurdistan destabilized. After President Barzani's term ended, PUK and Gorran, influenced significantly by Iranian authorities, incited protests and violence against the headquarters of the ruling KDP in Sulaymaniyah. Despite arguments from the KDP and KRG to focus on countering IS militants and extending the president's powers through parliamentary decisions, the opposition in Sulaymaniyah remained unsupportive.

By employing economic and soft power policies with the KRG, Iran sought to curtail Turkey's ambitions in Iraq. It also viewed the KRG as an alternative partner in diversifying energy exports.

The escalation of sectarian tensions: Iran's interference

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US government's attempted to achieve intra-Iraqi community solidarity and Sunni-Shia interaction and to resolve disputes between the central government and the KRG have repeatedly failed. It was mainly due to the strengthening of Iran's positions in Iraq as well.

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[3] It should be noted that the responsibility of combating Kurdish separatism, both domestically and internationally, has traditionally been assigned primarily to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

[4] Soleimani is acknowledged as a principal architect of Iranian Middle East policy, including the closest negotiator with the Kurdish elite. He has been killed by a US air strike in Iraq in 2020 January 3. (Azizi 2021)

In Iraq, the Kurdish media referred to him as the "Shadow General" who had significant influence over Kurdish leaders, especially Talabani. (Qureshi 2014)

Internal conflicts started in Iraq in 2014 as the representatives of the Sunni-Arab community appealed the results of the parliamentary elections, as a result of which the country's three ethno-religious groups could not reach an agreement for a long time on the issue of dividing the levers of power among themselves[5]. Only in July was the parliament convened, and Sunni Salim al-Jubburi was elected its speaker. Haidar al-Abbadi, a Shia politician, became prime minister. Nevertheless, he had serious conflicts with the commanders of the Shia military-political groups, which had close ties to the Iranian authorities, operated independently of the official military command chain, and opposed al-Abadi's cooperation with the United States (Katzman and Humud 2016, 25). The PUK president (2005-2014) Talabani, was succeeded as president by Mohammed Fouad Maasum, a politician with moderate views who had a compromise position between Kurdish parties and the Shia and Sunni camps (Katzman and Humud 2016, 20).

The need to unite in the fight against the Islamist forces temporarily hid the Intra-Iraqi ethno-religious contradictions. A conditional partnership that had emerged among Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish forces initially proved efficacious in countering the common threat posed by Islamist forces. Nevertheless, the military successes over the Islamists rekindled pre-existing contradictions among the collaborating factions. The territories recaptured from the IS became arenas not only for an intense power struggle but also for a resurgence of unremitted animosity among the factions, sparking a renewed and ruthless power struggle within the ruling elite of Baghdad. The Kurds of Iraq and Syria primarily concentrated on maintaining neutrality in the internal conflict and are involved in military confrontation mainly to protect Kurdish territories. Hence, the Peshmerga forces led by the Kurdish leadership maintained as much neutrality as possible in the liberation of other Iraqi territories occupied by IS.

A rather complicated relationship developed between the Kurds and the Shiite militia, which were included in the People's Mobilization Forces (Quwwāt al-Ḥashd ash-Shaʿbī), also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). Even though the Shia-dominant PMU reports to the Iraqi National Security Service, Tehran had much more direct influence and control over them than Baghdad did. Iran was the primary supplier of ammunition and military equipment to the PMU. As a result, commanders affiliated with the IRGC Quds Force and several Shiite militia groups aligned with Iran emerged within the PMU hierarchy, assuming leadership roles (Abbas 2017, 4-6). With each military success over IS, the Militia,

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[5]According to the agreement between Iraq's main ethnoreligious groups, the top three seats of the state are divided: the speaker of the parliament is a Sunni Arab, the prime minister is a Shiite Arab, and the president is a Kurdish. (Nazir 2006)

and especially its chiefs, gained more and more influence in Iraq. It makes sense that the PMU mainly served Iranian interests and that Iran's policy towards the Kurds was also basically expressed through the PMU.

Armed clashes between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the PMU became periodic, especially when Kurds recaptured important strategic areas from IS, particularly in Tuz Khurmatu near Kirkuk, which was strategically important for gaining control over Kirkuk and Mosul (Qassim 2018)[6]. Erbil attempted to maintain control over as many regions as possible during that time by demanding from Baghdad its own share of oil revenues, increasing the representation of Kurdish ministers in the central government, and implementing Article 140 of the Constitution, which calls for a referendum to unite Kirkuk with Kurdistan (Katzman and B. Prados 2007, CRS-6)[7]. The prominent crisis revolved around Kirkuk, an oil field governed by the Barzanian Clan and strategically located between Baghdad and the KRG. The incorporation of Kirkuk is expected to contribute to Kurdistan's economic self-sufficiency significantly. During this period, KRG leadership looked at an effective alternative to reducing dependence on Baghdad and Ankara to fuel exports to Persian Gulf ports. Discussions on the construction of an oil pipeline between KRG and Iran gained a more objective nature, expecting the consensus of Iraq's central authority. Kurdish sources testify that Tehran was promoting official Baghdad's policy of blocking the construction of the pipeline in order to include Kirkuk oil exported by the Kurds to Jayhan (Hêvîdar 2016).

The disagreements between the PMU and the KRG were further exacerbated when Turkey, without Baghdad's consent and with the permission of Barzani, dispatched military forces into the parts of Iraq that border Syria (Lucente 2016). The confrontation between Iran's and Turkey's proxies over Kirkuk and Mosul became increasingly militarized. Each of the parties tried to establish its own supremacy in these regions through the instrumentalisation of military groups. It intensified the disputes among Iraq's ethnic groups.

Ankara positioned Zilkan as its deepest base in Iraq following the Islamic State's 2014 seizure of Mosul and the capture of local Turkish consulate personnel. Placed on a high point with an overview of Mosul, the base is located fifty miles

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[6] American intelligence reported about the presence of Qasem Soleimani in Kirkuk. There was a piece of information that Soleimani played a crucial role in orchestrating an agreement between a faction of the Talabani family and Hadi al-Amri, a prominent figure in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and the head of the Badr Organization. The agreement outlined the transfer of control over Kirkuk, including its crucial facilities, to the PMU.

[7] Kirkuk sits on 10% of Iraq's overall oil reserves of about 112 billion barrels.

inside the Kurdistan Region and provocatively within the visual range of the Iraqi militia that is supported by Iran on the Nineveh Plains (al-Nashmi 2022).

Although Tehran faced a challenge from Turkey's potential expansion into northern Iraq, it was also not in its best interest to leave Kirkuk under Erbil's jurisdiction, as Kurdistan would present Erbil with a new energy rival. For this reason, the Shia PMU organized military groups with Turkmens and Sunni Arabs urging them to stop the growing consolidation of Turks and Kurds in Mosul. In the peshmerga conflict with the PMU, the PKK cooperates with the Shiite Militia to limit Turkey's involvement in Northern Iraq (Knights 2022).

In response to a formalized alliance between the PKK and PMU in November 2015[8], Ankara dispatched an armed contingent to Dohuk to enhance the military preparedness of the Peshmerga forces (Lees Weiss 2021). Thus, Turkey's military involvement in Iraq can be considered in the context of the growing influence of Iran over the Kurds and the concurrent erosion of the KDP standing. (International Crisis Group 2014). The Iran-PKK cooperation was also conditioned by the cooperation between the Kurdish PYD and Iran in the Syrian crisis. Turkey's invasion of Syria under the name of fighting against the PKK was assessed by Tehran as a threat to its position and that of Bashar al-Assad. With Tehran's silent agreement in 2012, Assad granted some territorial and military sovereignty to the Kurdish structures in Syria in exchange for his support. The Kurds were able to successfully fight against the IS and other extremist groups, as well as the Syrian opposition forces (International Crisis Group 2014, 4-5).

Notably, during the period spanning from 2014 to 2016, under the auspices of Iran's leadership, a relatively stable regional axis was formed along the Turkish borders, comprising the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the Shiite administration in Baghdad, and distinct Kurdish military and political entities (Dalay 2015). Turkey's aspiration to establish the Kurdish Azaz-Jarablus region in Syria as a buffer or "security zone" was partially due to Tehran's strategic calculus. Tehran supported Kurdish interests temporarily, aimed at constraining Turkey and exploiting the controlled territory for the transportation of energy resources. Consequently, discussions between Erbil and Tehran regarding constructing a new pipeline from the KRG to Iran were intended to weaken Turkey's transit significance (Ekurd.net 2016).

The reinforcement of Russia's military-political engagement and the Turkish military incursion into Syria has introduced a novel emphasis on the power dynamics among regional stakeholders. The converging regional foreign policy

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[8] The agreement did not provide a cessation of hostilities between the IRGC and the Iranian faction of the PKK, the PEJAK (International Crisis Group 2014, 4-5).

objectives of Iran and Russia, particularly in combating radical Islamic organizations and endorsing the incumbent Syrian government, have prompted an activation of military-political collaboration between Tehran and Moscow, as well as concerning Kurdish affairs. Since late September 2015, Russian airstrikes in Syria against IS have facilitated the Kurdish forces (PYD/YPD) strengthening and cutting off the Syrian opposition's supply routes from Turkey via the Azaz Corridor. This corridor extends north of Aleppo, reaching westward to the Turkish border in the Kurdish-populated Kobane region. Analogous to the KDP and the PUK scenario in Iraq during the 1990s, the de facto extension of the PKK and PYD during the governance crisis was used to advance the establishment of Kurdish self-governance entities and their independent military forces, thereby laying the groundwork for a more comprehensive institutional process towards autonomy. However, Tehran acknowledged the challenges to its interests of continued support for the Kurds, as this could impinge upon the territorial integrity of Syria.

In 2016, the accord delineating a ceasefire framework in Syria, brokered between Russia and the United States in February, accompanied by the Kurdish federalization (federalism) process in Syria and introduced specific changes in Iran's Kurdish policy. Alterations in Iran's Kurdish policy were directed at impeding the institutionalization and legitimation of the emergent Kurdish autonomy in Syria by isolating the Kurdish forces from the negotiation process regarding Syrian peacebuilding and Kurdish self-governance efforts.

The possible establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Syria has highlighted the need for the Iranian authorities to cultivate trust among the Kurdish population within the domestic political landscape. The timing of President Hassan Rouhani's inaugural visit to Senaj, the focal point of Iranian Kurdistan, in 2015, immediately following the signing of the nuclear deal in July, is not coincidental. In Tehran, concerted endeavors are underway to preempt the spillover of the Turkish-Kurdish conflicts in the southeastern regions of Turkey into Iran, particularly amidst the unpredictable escalation of the crisis along the Syrian and Iraqi borders. Such a foray, if left unchecked, could incite separatist sentiments among the Kurdish populace in the northern regions of Iran. Once again, making promises about the rights of millions of Kurds in Iran and pledging enhancements to their social conditions and infrastructure development, the president's messages were mainly aimed at emphasizing Tehran's critical engagement with the Kurdish issue beyond Iran's borders. Rouhani emphasized that "it protects Erbil and Baghdad just as it protects Iranian Kurdistan. Without Iran's help, Erbil and Baghdad would be in the hands of terrorist groups right now. Just as we protect Sanandaj, we also protect Sulaimani and Duhok" (Dalay 2015).

The Kurdish Peshmerga took de facto control of Kirkuk in June 2014 during the advance of the IS in northern Iraq and the withdrawal of Iraqi government forces. The seizure of Kirkuk significantly enhanced the Kurds' control over economic resources, contributing to their economic autonomy. Given this increased control, there was a notable assertion by Kurdish President Barzani in early 2016 that the KRG might consider conducting a non-binding referendum on independence by the end of that year. This proposal reflected the Kurds' growing confidence in their ability to exercise self-determination, political aspirations, and regional dynamics in pursuing Kurdish autonomy.The Kurdish Peshmerga took de facto control of Kirkuk in June 2014 during the advance of the IS in northern Iraq and the withdrawal of Iraqi government forces. The seizure of Kirkuk significantly enhanced the Kurds' control over economic resources, contributing to their economic autonomy. Given this increased control, there was a notable assertion by Kurdish President Masoud Barzani in early 2016 that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) might consider conducting a non-binding referendum on independence by the end of that year. This proposal reflected the Kurds' growing confidence in their ability to exercise self-determination, political aspirations, and regional dynamics in pursuing Kurdish autonomy.

While the Kurdish movement in Iran lacks cohesion as a unified social-political force, the Iranian authorities remain concerned about the potential for the country's Kurds to exhibit the level of activity seen in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey amid regional transformations. This concern is particularly pronounced given that Iran's Kurdish regions face heightened social insecurity and underdevelopment. Moreover, the Iranian government persists in implementing discriminatory policies against the Kurdish minority.

Tensions escalated between the KRG's two main political parties, the KDP and PUK, due to disputes over the referendum and Kirkuk. The KDP accused the PUK of betraying the Kurdish cause by allegedly capitulating to Iran and making a deal to withdraw. Kirkuk fell to Iraqi government forces following a contentious referendum in which the Kurdistan region sought independence against Baghdad's objections. This dispute intensified divisions between the KDP and PUK. The PUK, aligned with Iran, accused the KDP of jeopardizing Kurdish interests through the referendum. Qassem Soleimani, Commander of Quds Forces, warned Kurdish leaders before the referendum about the risks and urged withdrawal from Kirkuk after the vote. Soleimani reiterated this message after the funeral of PUK leader Jalal Talabani, advising withdrawal from Kirkuk in exchange for Iranian protection of Kurdish interests. Soleimani's visit to Kirkuk before the Iraqi offensive indicated Iran's decisive role in influencing the PUK's alignment with Baghdad. (Georgy and Rasheed 2017). Before the referendum, the confrontation between Iran and the

KRG had been growing. Iran's officials have many times threatened that the separation of the Kurdistan Region from the territory of Iraq would lead to the termination of all bilateral military and security agreements and the blocking of all border crossings between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan. Soleimani addressed the leaders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: "I have asked the popular forces of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi not to attack Iraqi Kurdistan, but I will not do so again." In response, Barzani said, "We extend the hand of brotherhood to everyone, and those who want to fight with us can try their will." (Rajanews 2016)Following these warnings, the Iraqi army and PMU forces swiftly captured Kirkuk, taking control of government buildings, the airport, military bases, and oil facilities. The Kurdish Peshmerga affiliated with the PUK retreated without resistance. Before the attack, the security authorities of the KRG reported the presence of IRGC forces alongside the Iraqi army and the PUK (Zeitoons.com 2021).The Kurdish referendum of September 2017, marked by an overwhelming mandate for independence, strained relations between the KRG and Baghdad. The united opposition of Tehran and Baghdad to the referendum underscored a shared commitment to preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq.

Conclusion

In the Middle East's shifting geopolitical landscape, Iran is faced with an opportunity to expand its influence within the region and substantiate its status as a dominant force in the Kurdish issue. The possibility of the KRG achieving outright independence from Baghdad, combined with the danger of the formation of Kurdish federal autonomy in Syria, poses significant challenges to Iran. Such a scenario threatens to diminish Iran's influence in the region while posing problems for Iran's domestic Kurdish dynamics. Iran seeks to prevent the ultimate consolidation of Kurdish entities and the establishment of Kurdish autonomy within its territory. Iran had temporarily strengthened its collaboration with Kurdish forces in order to counter extremist Islamist groups. It was a short-term policy aimed at sustaining Baghdad, defeating IS, and preventing Turkish expansion in the region. Strategic issues regarding the distribution and transition of energy resources also highlight Iran's hunger to assert control over the KRG. The Kurds remain a tactical tool for Tehran to tackle both regional and extra-regional competitors effectively and to uphold its security environment.

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