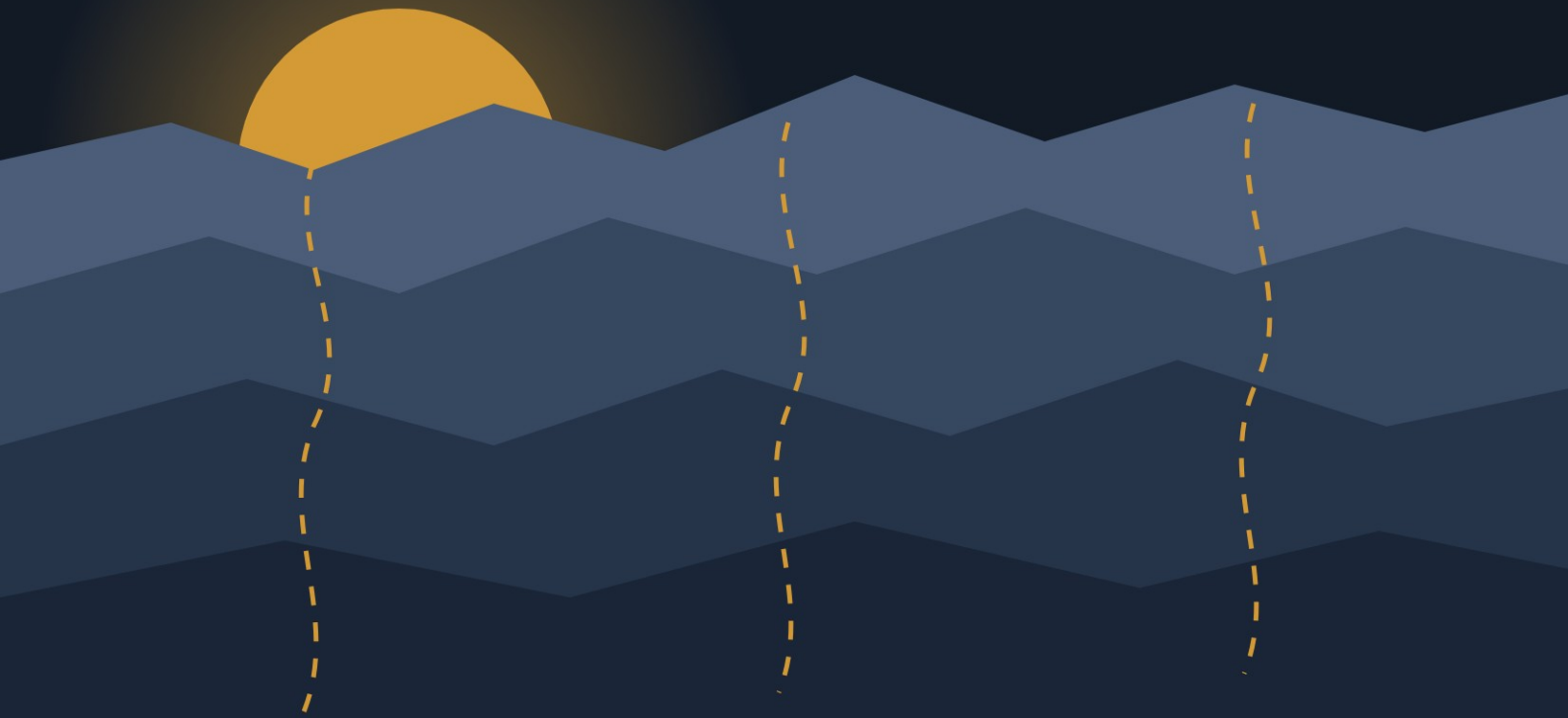
EBRAHIM ROSHANDEL

The Kurds

in the Middle East Power Equation

Families, Parties, and the Geopolitics of Survival

From the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to Iranian Kurdistan and the Test of the New Order (1918–2026)



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Ebrahim Roshandel

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Note on the English edition. This volume is an English translation of the author's Persian work. Transliteration of Persian, Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish names follows common English usage rather than a strict scientific system (e.g., Barzani, Talabani, Sulaymaniyah, Mahabad). Iranian calendar dates are retained where the original cites them and are accompanied by their Gregorian equivalents. Footnotes and the bibliography reproduce the references of the original edition; all maps have been redrawn with English labels from Natural Earth data (public domain).

The analyses in this book are current to the end of September 2026.

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Preface

I first encountered the Kurdish question from behind a diplomat's desk—from a vantage point where the question appears not in the form of people and lands but in the form of files, reports, and security considerations. My work as an expert on Turkey, together with a life spent from birth among the deeply perceptive and cultured Kurdish people, taught me that the Kurdish question should never, in any country, be viewed as a security matter, because it is not a matter internal to a single country. I must acknowledge that, among all the ethnic communities of Iran, I regard the Kurds as among the most progressive—a people who have never been indifferent to the question of political governance in Iran, who have had a very positive influence on the culture of criticism directed at the governance of the late Pahlavi state and of the Islamic Republic, and who have, of course, paid a very high price along the way. Beyond this, the organic connection among these people across all four countries—Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria—remains alive and enduring. What happens in Diyarbakır is echoed in Erbil; what is decided in Erbil is heard in Mahabad and Sanandaj; and what is conceived in Tehran has consequences in all of these cities. This book is the product of an effort to see this very web of connections within a single field of vision.

The motivation for writing this book, however, was not purely scholarly but practical. In 2025 and 2026 the Middle East was transformed at a pace that few had anticipated. After four decades of war, the PKK dissolved itself. The Kurdish forces of Syria, which for a decade had been the West's principal partner, were integrated into the Damascus state within a few months. The Kurdish parties of Iran came together in a single coalition for the first time in four decades, and Iran entered a war that has rendered its future uncertain. At such a moment, the question of the Kurds' place in the region's new order—and especially in the Iran of tomorrow—is no longer a theoretical question; it is a question whose answer can make the difference between a peaceful transition and a repetition of the wars of the past.

This book has been written for three groups of readers. First, for those who play or will play a role in designing Iran's future, from nationwide opposition forces to Kurdish political activists, so that they may understand what lessons the Kurdish question holds from its own history and from the experience of neighboring states, and where the zone of possible agreement lies. Second, for policymakers and analysts in the capitals of the region and the West, so that they may obtain a picture of the internal logic of Kurdish actors that goes beyond the prevailing simplifications. And third, for researchers and students engaged in the study of the Kurdish question, state-building, and political transition in the Middle East.

In writing this book I have tried to avoid falling into two traps: the trap of the security narrative, which sees the Kurds solely as a threat, and the trap of a one-sided nationalist narrative, which ignores the complexities and internal diversity of Kurdish society and its deep ties to Iran, and which produces the false—and profoundly mistaken—perception of "separatism." Each narrative contains a part of the truth, and neither on its own opens a path to the future. My conviction is that Iran's territorial integrity, which I regard as a fundamental value, can endure in the long term only through "the protection of rights within a framework of equal citizenship," democracy, and sustainable decentralization; and this book has sought to show that the mainstream of Kurdish politics in Iran is likewise prepared to accompany this path of national convergence, provided that the legitimate demands of these people, like those of all Iranian citizens, are taken into account.

The analyses in this book have been updated to the end of September 2026. Some events are still unfolding, and some judgments will undoubtedly require revision with the passage of time. Responsibility for any errors and shortcomings rests with the author, who welcomes every criticism and suggestion that may help improve subsequent editions.

Ebrahim Roshandel
Mehr 1405 / September 2026

Introduction

1. Why Now? The Moment of 2026 in the History of the Kurdish Question

The Kurdish question has been present in the Middle East for more than a century, yet it is hard to find a moment that, like the years 2025 and 2026, has witnessed fundamental transformation simultaneously in all four countries where Kurds live. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) announced its dissolution after four decades of armed struggle, and the process of disarming and reintegrating its members began. In Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—for a decade the principal pillar of the American partnership in the war against ISIS—accepted an integration agreement following a military offensive by Damascus and Washington's turn toward the new Syrian government, and were formally dissolved in the summer of 2026. In Iran, the Kurdish parties came together in a single coalition for the first time in four decades and, during the war of the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic, advanced to the threshold of a ground operation—an operation that never began. And in Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, the only state-like Kurdish institution in the world, remained without a new government or a functioning parliament for more than twenty months after parliamentary elections and, at the same moment as the end of the American military presence in Iraq, found itself confronting Baghdad's legal and fiscal recentralization.

This simultaneity is not accidental. The order that took shape in the Middle East after 1991, and especially after 2003—an order in which the great powers employed Kurdish actors as armed security partners against hostile states or extremist groups—is collapsing. The new order taking its place rests on the convergence of the United States with Turkey, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and reconstituted central governments, and on the strategic weakening of the Islamic Republic. The question of this book arises from this very transition: what place will the Kurds occupy in this new order?

2. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on the Kurds is extensive, but it can be grouped into four main currents, each of which answers part of this book's question and leaves part unanswered.

- **The first current: classical historiography.** Works such as David McDowall's comprehensive history, Wadie Jwaideh's study of the origins of the Kurdish national movement, and William Eagleton's study of the 1946 Republic have furnished the foundational historical narrative. Martin van Bruinessen's anthropological-sociological study *Agha, Shaikh and State* analyzed the structure of traditional authority and remains the principal reference for understanding the role of sheikhly families.[1] The strength of this current is its historical depth; its weakness is that it is largely descriptive and offers no tools for predicting the future behavior of actors.
- **The second current: studies of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.** After 1991, and especially after 2003, an extensive literature on the Kurdistan Region took shape: Gareth Stansfield's analysis of the Region's political development and its two-party structure, Denise Natali's

[1]David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (2004); Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement* (2006); William Eagleton Jr., *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (1963); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (1992).

concept of the "Kurdish quasi-state," and the volume edited by Brendan O'Leary and colleagues on the future of the Region within a federal Iraq.[2] This current has analyzed the Region's institutions and political economy well, but most of its works were written before the recentralization of 2022–2026 and have often neglected the internal logic of the families as an independent variable.

- **The third current: studies of the Kurds of Iran.** This current is smaller. Fereshteh Koohi-Kamali's research on the political development of Iran's Kurds, Abbas Vali's analysis of the formation of Kurdish identity in relation to the Iranian state, and Allan Hassaniyan's more recent study of Kurdish politics in Iran are among its notable works.[3] The Persian-language literature on the subject has likewise taken shape largely in two polarized forms: either within the framework of the official security narrative or within the framework of the Kurdish nationalist narrative. Analysis that links the Kurdish question to the design of Iran's political transition without taking the side of either narrative is rare.
- **The fourth current: theoretical literature.** Theories of the de facto state, federalism in multinational societies, proxy war, and ethnic conflict—introduced in the first chapter—have supplied the necessary conceptual tools, but they have rarely been applied systematically to a comparison of the Kurds of Iraq and Iran.

3. The Research Gap and the Contribution of This Book

A review of these four currents reveals three gaps. First, a *comparative gap*: the existing literature has studied the Kurds of Iraq and Iran largely separately, whereas their fates, as this book shows, have become increasingly intertwined. Second, a *temporal gap*: the developments of 2025 and 2026—namely the dissolution of the PKK and the SDF, the Iran war and the coalition of Iran's Kurdish parties, and the recentralization of Iraq—have transformed the regional order and have not yet been analyzed in the academic literature. Third, an *applied gap*: the existing literature has seldom addressed the question of how the Kurdish question should be designed and managed in a political transition, particularly in Iran.

In response to these three gaps, this book makes four specific contributions:

- **First contribution:** a comparative typology of Kurdish power structures in Iraq and Iran, based on the distinction between "families ruling over parties" in Iraq and "program-driven parties" in Iran.
- **Second contribution:** a seven-indicator assessment framework for evaluating the alignment and incompatibility of Kurdish actors with the regional order, tested against the closed cases of the SDF and the PKK.
- **Third contribution:** a scenario analysis of Iran's transition together with a proposed package of constitutional and security arrangements, grounded in comparative lessons from Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.
- **Fourth contribution:** an analysis updated to September 2026, drawing on contemporaneous reporting alongside the academic literature.

[2]Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan* (2003); Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State* (2010); Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih (eds.), *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (2005); Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[3]Fereshteh Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran* (2011); Allan Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran* (2024).

4. Central Research Question and Subsidiary Questions

The central question of this book is as follows: *To what extent are the Kurds predisposed to alignment with, or incompatibility with, the new Middle Eastern order, and are they capable of adapting to emerging governments in post–Islamic Republic Iran and in a recentralizing Iraq?*

To answer this question, the book pursues four subsidiary questions:

- How does the power structure within Kurdish societies—especially the role of the Barzani and Talabani families in Iraq and of the parties in Iran—shape their political behavior toward central governments and external powers?
- What enduring patterns does the historical experience of the Kurds in their relations with external patrons, from 1975 to 2026, reveal?
- Which variables predict the compatibility or incompatibility of Kurdish actors with an emerging state?
- Which constitutional and security arrangements can maximize the likelihood of compatibility in Iran and Iraq?

5. Hypotheses

- **First hypothesis (form of the state):** The compatibility of Kurdish actors with an emerging state is a function not of their ethnic or ideological essence but of the form of the new state. The more decentralized the emerging state and the more credible its legal guarantees, the greater the compatibility and the lower the likelihood of armed conflict.
- **Second hypothesis (family versus party):** In Iraqi Kurdistan, families have captured the parties, and the primary aim of political action is the survival of the family; consequently, these actors will come to terms with any order that guarantees their survival and interests. In Iranian Kurdistan, family power has been broken and the parties are bearers of programmatic discourses; consequently, their compatibility runs through the constitutional path, not through the path of dividing up concessions.
- **Third hypothesis (single patron):** The greater a Kurdish actor's dependence on a single external patron, the greater its vulnerability to shifts in that patron's policy. The experiences of 1975, 2017, 2019, and 2026 all follow this rule.
- **Fourth hypothesis (internal cohesion):** At most turning points in contemporary Kurdish history, intra-Kurdish division has been the decisive factor in failure; therefore, the degree of internal cohesion among Kurdish actors is an important predictor of their bargaining power in any period of transition.

6. Scope of the Study

The temporal scope of the book extends from the end of the First World War (1918) to September 2026, with a principal focus on the period after 1961 in Iraq and after 1979 in Iran. Its spatial scope has two principal foci: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Iranian Kurdistan. The Kurds of Turkey and Syria are examined as comparative cases and as sources of empirical evidence, not as independent subjects. The rationale for this choice is clear: the book's question concerns the future of Iran and Iraq, and the experiences of Turkey and Syria in 2025 and 2026 constitute the most important

natural laboratory for understanding how Kurdish actors respond to powerful central states and to retreating external patrons.

7. Methodology

The book employs three complementary methods:

- **Process tracing:** To analyze historical turning points, the causal chain linking decisions, structures, and outcomes is reconstructed. Rather than merely narrating events, this method makes it possible to ask why, at each turning point, one option was preferred over others.[4]
- **Network analysis of families:** Kinship, marital, economic, and security relations within and among the families of power are mapped in order to clarify where real power resides and through which channels it is transmitted. This method is applied particularly in Chapters 3 through 5.
- **Driver-based scenario building:** In Part Seven, key drivers (the form of the emerging state, the positions of external powers, intra-Kurdish cohesion, and the status of armed forces) are identified, and their plausible combinations are analyzed as distinct scenarios. The aim is not prediction but the identification of warning indicators and leverage points for policymakers.

The book's sources include official documents of governments and parties; political statements and charters; reports by Western and regional research institutions; academic research in English, Persian, Arabic, and Kurdish (Sorani and Kurmanji); and reputable media coverage of current events. For the events of 2025 and 2026, on which an academic literature has not yet formed, the book relies on contemporaneous reporting, and wherever accounts conflict, the conflict is stated explicitly.

8. Terminological Notes

In this book, "the Kurdistan Region" or "the Region" refers to the legal entity recognized in Iraq's 2005 Constitution, while "Iraqi Kurdistan" refers to the broader geographic and cultural expanse, including disputed areas such as Kirkuk. "Iranian Kurdistan" refers to the provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Ilam and to the Kurdish-inhabited parts of West Azerbaijan. Kurdish terms common in Kurdish nationalist literature—namely *Bashur* (South, Iraq), *Rojhelat* (East, Iran), *Bakur* (North, Turkey), and *Rojava* (West, Syria)—are used when conveying the perspectives of Kurdish actors, without their use implying acceptance of the political assumptions embedded in them. Party names are given in their commonly used English forms, and at first use their original name or Latin abbreviation is also provided.

9. Positionality of the Author, Normative Considerations, and Limitations

Research in the social sciences, especially on so contested a subject, cannot be separated from the position of the researcher, and transparency about that position is part of scholarly rigor. The author of this book is Iranian, has a record of service in the diplomatic apparatus—including expert work on Turkey—and in recent years has focused, as a political analyst, on the design of a democratic

[4]Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

transition in Iran. For this reason, the book's two normative positions should be stated explicitly: a commitment to Iran's territorial integrity, and the conviction that this integrity can be preserved in the long term only through democracy, equal citizenship, and decentralization—not through repression.

The book has sought to keep these normative positions separate from its empirical analysis: competing narratives—from the official narrative of the Islamic Republic to the centralist nationalist narrative and the Kurdish nationalist narrative—have been presented with their evidence, and wherever sources conflict, the conflict has been noted. The limitations of the book are also clear: some of the events of 2025 and 2026 are still unfolding and some reports lack independent confirmation; field access to Iranian Kurdistan has not been possible for an independent researcher; and the substantive scoring judgments in Chapter Thirteen, however transparent, remain analytical judgments. The reader is invited to critique these judgments; the book's framework has been designed precisely to make such critique possible.

10. Structure of the Book

The book is organized into eight parts and sixteen chapters. Part One sets out the theoretical framework and the geography of the Kurdish question. Part Two traces the historical formation of Kurdish political identity from the Kurdish emirates to the Mahabad Republic. Part Three addresses the families of power in Iraqi Kurdistan: the Barzanis, the Talabanis, and their peripheral networks and challengers. Part Four revisits the political history of the Region from the September Revolution (in Kurdish, *Şorrişî Eylûl*, led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani in 1961) to the impasse of 2026. Part Five examines Iranian Kurdistan, from its social structure and parties to the events of 2026. Part Six analyzes the geopolitics of the Kurdish question in relation to the United States, Israel, Europe, Turkey, the Islamic Republic, and Syria. Part Seven, the core of the book, draws on the findings of the preceding parts to answer the central question and presents scenarios for the future of the Kurds in Iran and Iraq together with policy recommendations. Part Eight, in a final chapter, reverses the angle of vision and compares the outlook and behavior of the four states—Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq—toward the Kurds. Six maps in the text depict the human and political geography of the Kurdish question.

PART ONE: Foundations

CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1. The Theoretical Framework and the Geography of the Kurdish Question

No single theory can explain the political behavior of the Kurds. The Kurds are simultaneously an ethnic minority in four states, a society with ancient tribal and Sufi-order structures, the bearers of modern nationalist movements, and actors in the rivalry of regional and global powers. For this reason, rather than a single theory, this chapter introduces a toolbox of six theoretical concepts, each of which illuminates one dimension of the question, and then links them together in a three-level synthetic framework. The second part of the chapter maps the human and physical geography of the Kurdish question.

1.1 De Facto States and the Kurdish Quasi-State

Scott Pegg defines the "de facto state" as a political unit that exercises effective control over territory and population, has established institutions of governance, and seeks independence, but has been denied international recognition.[5] Nina Caspersen extended this discussion and showed that such units depend on external patrons for their survival and derive their domestic legitimacy less from democracy than from external threat and a narrative of historical victimhood.[6]

From 1991 to 2003, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was a textbook case of a de facto state. After 2003, however, its situation became more complex: the Region was recognized in the Iraqi Constitution and is therefore no longer "illegal," but at the same time it possesses attributes that exceed those of a federal unit: independent armed forces, foreign representations, and—until 2023—a separate energy policy. Denise Natali has used the term "Kurdish quasi-state" to describe this condition and has shown that its survival rests not on self-reliance but on a set of external dependencies (on Baghdad, Turkey, and the United States).[7]

The relevance of this concept to the book's question is clear: the Kurdish quasi-state in Iraq relies less on its borders than on its network of dependencies. Any change in the regional order that severs one of these dependencies—such as the halt of oil exports through the Turkish pipeline in 2023 or the end of the American military presence in 2026—directly threatens its capacity to survive. The experience of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which was integrated in 2026, demonstrated the fate that befalls a quasi-state with only one patron when that patron changes course.

1.2 Patrimonialism and the Family Party-State

Max Weber regarded patrimonialism (the monopolization of power in the hands of one person) as a form of traditional domination in which the administrative apparatus is an extension of the ruling household and personal loyalty takes the place of impersonal rules. Shmuel Eisenstadt applied the concept of "neopatrimonialism" to describe systems that possess the outward form of modern

[5]Scott Pegg, *International Society and the De Facto State* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

[6]Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

[7]Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

institutions (party, parliament, bureaucracy) but whose internal logic remains one of patronage and personal loyalty.[8]

This concept is the key to understanding the politics of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are modern parties with congresses, politburos, and programs, but in practice each is the core of a family patronage system: security apparatuses (Parastin and Asayish in Erbil and Duhok, Zanyari in Sulaymaniyah), Peshmerga units, economic companies, and networks of state employment are all distributed through loyalty to the family. Gareth Stansfield has shown that even after the formal unification of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 2006, the two partisan "zones of influence" (known as the Yellow Zone and the Green Zone) remained in place in practice.[9]

The theoretical implication of this situation for the book's question is that the external behavior of these parties must be deduced from the logic of family survival. A family that has tied its economic and security interests to a central government or a regional power will align with it, even if that government is incompatible with the Kurdish national ideal. The classic example is the KDP's invitation to Saddam's army to retake Erbil from the PUK in August 1996, which is examined in detail in Chapter Six.

1.3 The Rentier State and the Political Economy of Oil

The theory of the "rentier state," first formulated by Hossein Mahdavy with reference to Iran and later developed by Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, rests on the idea that a state that derives its principal revenue from external rent (chiefly oil) becomes independent of taxation and therefore of accountability to its citizens.[10] In such a state, the relationship between state and society is transformed into one between distributor and recipient.

After 2003 the Kurdistan Region became a dual rentier: the first rent was its share of the federal budget, which came from Baghdad, and the second was revenue from independent oil exports through the Turkish pipeline. These two sources provided the material foundation of the family patronage system and turned a large part of the population into state salary-earners. But dual rent also created dual dependency: when an international arbitration ruling halted independent exports in 2023 and Iraq's Federal Supreme Court consolidated Baghdad's control over salary payments, the Region suddenly discovered that the financial pillar of its autonomy lay in the hands of others. In the terms of rentier theory, whoever controls the rent controls loyalty; and from 2023 onward, this control has gradually reverted to Baghdad.

1.4 The Triadic Relationship of Minority, State, and "Kin-State"

In his analysis of nationalism in post-communist Europe, Rogers Brubaker introduced the concept of the "triadic nexus": the reciprocal relationship among a national minority, the state in which the minority lives (the nationalizing state), and the state that regards itself as the minority's "external national homeland."[11] The Kurds have no external homeland in the sense of a Kurdish nation-state,

[8]S. N. Eisenstadt, *Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1973).

[9]Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

[10]Hossein Mahdavy, "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran," in M. A. Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds.), *The Rentier State* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

[11]Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

but in practice the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has played the role of a "surrogate kin-state" for the Kurds of Iran, Turkey, and Syria: a refuge for exiled parties, a media hub, and a symbolic model of self-government.

This concept is vital for understanding the Region's place in regional politics. The presence of the headquarters of Iranian Kurdish parties in the Region places Erbil in a contradictory position: on the one hand it is a "kin-state," and on the other a neighbor of the Islamic Republic that must ensure its own survival alongside it. The 2023 Iran–Iraq security agreement for the disarmament and relocation of these parties, and the Kurdistan Regional Government's official declaration of 28 February 2026 that it would not permit its territory to be used for operations against its neighbors, show that when the "kin-state" role comes into conflict with the survival logic of the quasi-state, the logic of survival prevails.

1.5 The Patron–Client Relationship and Proxy War

The literature on proxy war shows that the relationship between an external patron and a local force is inherently asymmetric and unstable: the patron uses the local force for its own purposes and abandons it whenever the cost of support exceeds its benefit.[12] Contemporary Kurdish history can be read as a chain of such abandonments:

- **1975:** The Shah of Iran, with American and Israeli backing, supported Mulla Mustafa Barzani's movement, but upon signing the Algiers Agreement with Saddam Hussein he cut off support overnight, and the movement collapsed.
- **1991:** The U.S. president's call for an uprising against Saddam, unaccompanied by initial military support, led to bloody repression and the displacement of millions; only after the catastrophe was a no-fly zone established.
- **2017:** The Region's independence referendum met with explicit American opposition, and Washington did not intervene when Baghdad retook Kirkuk in October of that year.
- **2019 and 2026:** In Syria, the withdrawal of American forces from part of the border in 2019 opened the way to a Turkish operation, and in 2026 the American turn toward the new government in Damascus set the stage for the Syrian government's offensive and the dissolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces.
- **March 2026:** In Iran, reports that Iranian Kurdish parties had been encouraged to undertake a ground operation, followed by the U.S. president's open declaration that he did not wish the Kurds to enter the war, repeated the 1975 pattern in compressed form.

This pattern is the foundation of the book's third hypothesis. But the proxy-war literature makes another point as well: local forces are not merely passive instruments; they also exploit the relationship for their own ends. The Kurds of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 managed to build from their relationship with the United States a durable institution that endured even after support declined. The difference was that they converted the proxy relationship into institutions, a constitution, and an economy—something the Kurds of Syria did not manage to achieve in time.

1.6 Ethnic Outbidding and the Security Dilemma

Two further concepts explain the internal and external dynamics of conflict. The theory of "ethnic outbidding" shows that in multiethnic societies, rival leaders within an ethnic group adopt more

[12] Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

radical positions to win support and thereby eliminate the middle ground.[13] The 2017 referendum can be understood partly within this framework: intra-Kurdish competition over national leadership raised the cost to the KDP leadership of retreating from the referendum.

The concept of the "security dilemma" in ethnic conflict, which Barry Posen transposed from international relations to the level of ethnic groups, explains why, at the moment a central state collapses, each group takes measures to secure itself that other groups perceive as threats.[14] This concept is of central importance for scenarios of post–Islamic Republic Iran: if, in a power vacuum, Kurdish forces arm themselves to protect their areas, the new center and Iranian nationalists will see this as a prelude to partition, and their reaction will confirm the Kurds' fears. The experience of 1979 (1358 in the Iranian calendar) in Iran was precisely such a cycle, and PJAK's call in March 2026 for the formation of "self-defense committees" shows that the logic of this cycle remains active.

1.7 The Book's Synthetic Framework: Three Levels and Seven Indicators

The six concepts above are applied in this book within a three-level framework:

- **Level one, intra-Kurdish (family, party, society):** the power structure within Kurdish society, analyzed through the concepts of patrimonialism (hereditary-personal rule), rentierism, and ethnic outbidding.
- **Level two, national (relations with the central state):** the relationship of Kurdish actors with Baghdad, Tehran, Ankara, and Damascus, analyzed through the concepts of the de facto state, the triadic nexus, and the security dilemma.
- **Level three, regional and global:** relations with external powers, analyzed through the concept of the patron–client relationship.

The linkage among these three levels is embodied in seven indicators, which are used in Chapter Thirteen to assess the alignment and incompatibility of each Kurdish actor: ceiling of demands, source of legitimacy, ideology, economic base, degree of dependence on an external patron, armed capacity, and intra-Kurdish cohesion. The following table shows from which theoretical concept each indicator is derived:

Table 1.1. The seven indicators and their theoretical foundations

Indicator	Supporting theoretical concept	Level of analysis	Direction of effect on compatibility
Ceiling of demands	De facto state; ethnic outbidding	National	The lower the demands, the greater the compatibility
Source of legitimacy	Neopatrimonialism	Intra-Kurdish	Family legitimacy is more negotiable than ideological legitimacy
Ideology	Ethnic outbidding	Intra-Kurdish	The weakening of all-encompassing ideologies reduces revolutionary incompatibility
Economic base	Rentier state	National and intra-Kurdish	Rent increases alignment with whoever controls the rent
Dependence on a patron	Patron–client relationship	Regional	Dependence on a single patron increases vulnerability

[13]Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability* (Columbus: Merrill, 1972).

[14]Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 27–47.

Indicator	Supporting theoretical concept	Level of analysis	Direction of effect on compatibility
Armed capacity	Security dilemma	National	Both a bargaining lever and an obstacle to integration
Internal cohesion	Neopatrimonialism; ethnic outbidding	Intra-Kurdish	Greater cohesion, greater bargaining power

1.8 The Human Geography of the Kurdish Question

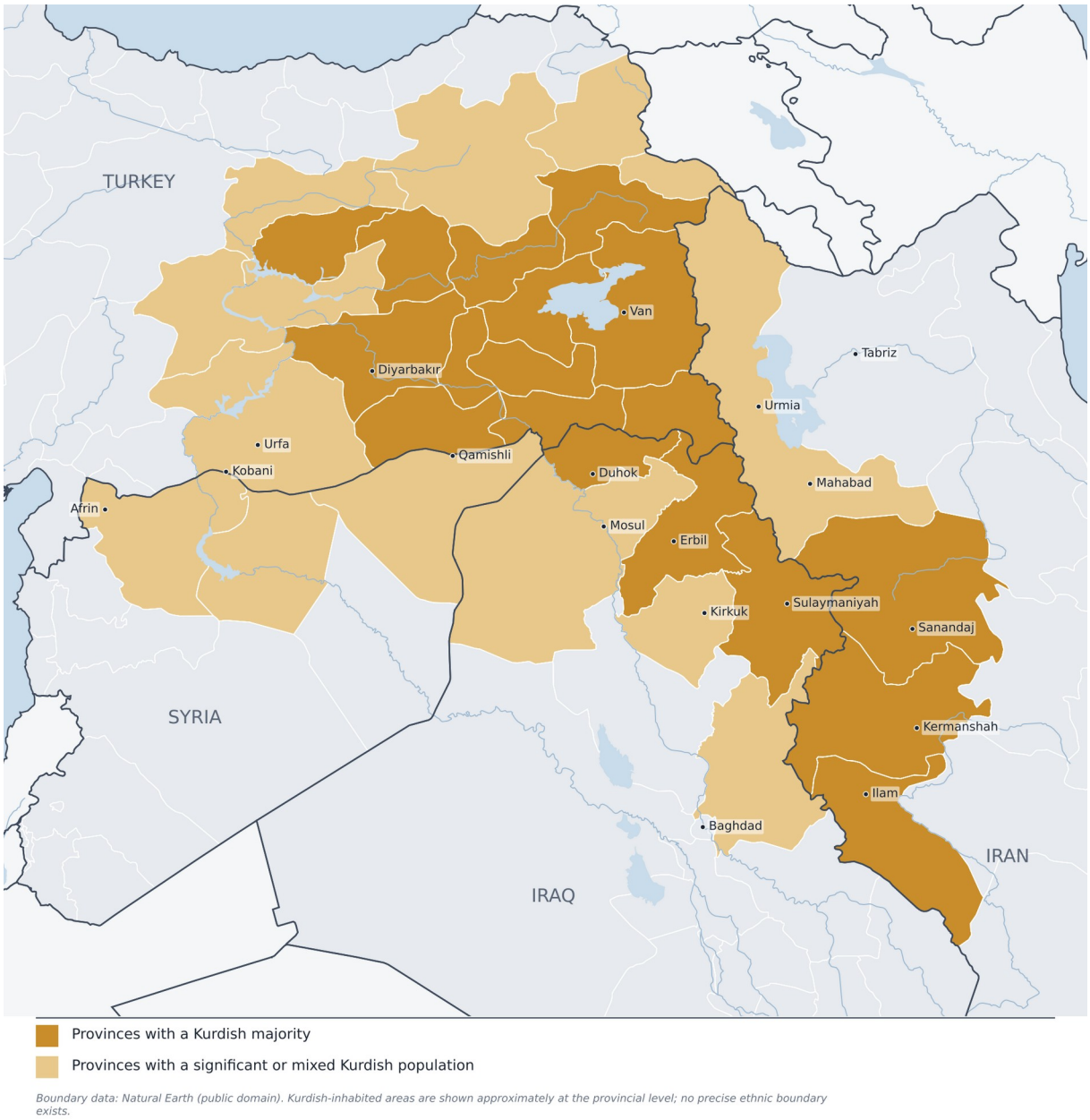
Population

No reliable official statistics on the Kurdish population exist, because the states in which Kurds live either do not conduct ethnic censuses or do not publish their results, and existing estimates are often shaped by political considerations. With this caveat, the estimates common in the scholarly literature place the total Kurdish population at roughly 30 to 45 million.[15] The following table presents approximate estimates and should be read solely as an indication of scale:

Table 1.2. Approximate Kurdish population by country

Country	Approximate Kurdish population	Approximate share of national population	Principal areas
Turkey	14–20 million	About one-fifth	Southeastern Anatolia; Istanbul
Iran	8–10 million	About one-tenth	Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, West Azerbaijan; northern Khorasan
Iraq	6–8 million	About one-fifth	Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja, Kirkuk, and the disputed areas
Syria	2–3 million	About one-tenth	Jazira (Hasakah), Kobani, Afrin, Aleppo

[15]See David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), for a discussion of the problems of Kurdish demography; all figures here are indicative ranges only.



Map 1. Kurdish-inhabited areas in four countries (approximate, at the provincial level)

The important analytical point is that the largest Kurdish population is in Turkey, but the most institutionalized Kurdish power is in Iraq. This mismatch between demographic weight and institutional weight is one of the roots of the latent rivalry among Kurdish currents: the PKK claimed to represent the largest population, while the Barzani family was the owner of the only state-like institution.

Language

Kurdish is not a unified language with a single standard variety but rather a cluster of related dialects and languages: Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) in Turkey, Syria, Duhok, and northern West Azerbaijan; Sorani (Central Kurdish) in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Iranian Kurdistan; and Southern Kurdish (including Kalhori, Feyli, and related varieties) in Kermanshah, Ilam, and Khanaqin. Gorani and Hawrami in the Hawraman region, and Zazaki in Turkey, are linguistically regarded as a

separate branch, although many of their speakers consider themselves Kurds. Even the script is not uniform: Kurmanji is written mainly in the Latin alphabet and Sorani in the Perso-Arabic alphabet. This linguistic dispersion has two political consequences: first, it has made the production of a "single national culture" difficult; second, dialect boundaries have coincided with partisan boundaries, so that the Kurmanji-speaking Badinan area is the base of the KDP and the Sorani-speaking Sulaymaniyah area the base of the PUK.

Religion

The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school, and this very jurisprudential distinction sets them apart both from the Hanafi Turks and from the Shi'i Persians and Arabs. But the religious diversity of the Kurds is far greater than this: Shi'i Kurds in Kermanshah, Ilam, and among the Feylis of Iraq; Alevi Kurds in Turkey; followers of the Yarsan faith (Ahl-e Haqq) in the Guran region and Kermanshah; and Yazidis in Sinjar and Shaykhan. Sufi orders, especially the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya, have played a foundational role in Kurdish social history; indeed, both the Barzani and Talabani families are rooted in sheikhly families of Sufi orders, and their initial legitimacy arose from this religious capital. Martin van Bruinessen has shown that the sheikh of the Sufi order, alongside the tribal agha, was one of the two pillars of the structure of traditional authority in Kurdish society.

This religious diversity has a direct bearing on the book's question. In Iran, the divide between the Sunni Kurds of the north (Kurdistan and Mukriyan) and the Shi'i Kurds of the south (Kermanshah and Ilam) traditionally meant that Kurdish nationalist movements were rooted mainly in the north, while the southern Kurds were more integrated into the central state. However, reports of the protests of Dey 1404 (January 2026) indicate that Abdanan and Malekshahi in Ilam province were among the principal centers of protest and that security forces abandoned their positions in some areas.[16] If this development proves durable, one of the oldest instruments for containing the Kurdish question in Iran—namely, the exploitation of the sectarian divide among the Kurds—is eroding.

Traditional Social Structure

Van Bruinessen's classic study, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, remains the best starting point for understanding traditional Kurdish social structure. As he shows, Kurdish society rested on three pillars: the tribe led by the agha, the Sufi order led by the sheikh, and the relations of both with imperial states that sometimes repressed them and sometimes enlisted them in their service.[17]

The fate of this structure differed in Iraq and Iran, and this difference is the basis of the book's second hypothesis. In Iraq, the central state was never able to break the tribal–Sufi structure completely; the Kurdish national movement itself emerged from within this structure, and the sheikhly families of the Barzanis and Talabanis took over the leadership of the national movement and then converted it into party and state institutions. In Iran, Reza Shah's state-building, the policy of tribal sedentarization, and especially the land reforms of the 1960s (1340s in the Iranian calendar) destroyed the economic foundation of the aghas' power; after 1946 the Kurdish national movement in Iran was led mainly by urban intellectuals and modern parties, from the Democratic Party to Komala. For this reason one cannot speak of "families of power" in Iran today in the Iraqi sense; what exists is party leadership, religious networks, and the symbolic capital of historical families.

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[16]On the January 2026 events in Ilam province, see reporting summarized in *The National* (10 January 2026) and *France 24* (24 January 2026).

[17]Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

1.9 Physical Geography and the Geopolitics of the Mountains

The Kurdish-inhabited lands extend along the axis of the Zagros and Taurus mountain ranges. This geography has had two contradictory effects. On the one hand, the mountains have been a natural refuge for protest movements and have enabled Kurdish movements to hold out against regular armies; the well-known Kurdish proverb "The Kurds have no friends but the mountains" expresses this very experience. On the other hand, these same mountains have divided Kurdish society into valleys and local units cut off from one another and have made the formation of a single political center difficult. In other words, the geography that made the survival of the Kurds possible made their unity impossible.

Three further geographic features are of geopolitical significance. First, the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates and their major tributaries—namely the Great Zab, the Little Zab, and the Diyala—lie in Kurdish-inhabited lands, and control of water has become one of the dimensions of regional rivalry. Second, oil and gas reserves, especially in Kirkuk and the Region's fields, have linked the Kurdish question to regional and global energy security. Third, the location of the Kurdish lands at the junction of four states has made them an unavoidable energy-transit route (the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline) and a buffer zone between Turkey, Iran, and the Arab world. This buffer position makes the Kurds at once valuable and vulnerable: valuable to powers seeking influence in the region, and vulnerable to any accommodation among those same powers.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that the political behavior of the Kurds cannot be explained by a single variable. The Kurds of Iraq have built a rentier quasi-state with a neopatrimonial family structure whose survival depends on a network of external dependencies. The Kurds of Iran have a party-based, program-driven movement whose traditional family structure was broken by modern state-building. Both have been exposed to the recurring pattern of abandonment by external patrons, and both are subject to the pressure of the security-dilemma cycle at the moment of central-state collapse. Mountainous geography, linguistic and religious diversity, and a buffer position have intensified these dynamics.

From this analysis a theoretical prediction emerges, which the rest of the book tests: in the new Middle Eastern order—founded on the return of central states and the declining willingness of great powers to support non-state forces—those Kurdish actors will be more successful who are able to convert dependence on a patron into institutions, law, and economy. The next chapter traces the historical roots of this equation from the Kurdish emirates to the Mahabad Republic.

PART TWO: Historical Formation

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2. From the Kurdish Emirates to the Mahabad Republic (1514–1947)

The modern political history of the Kurds is usually dated from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, yet many of the patterns repeated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—including family rivalry, dependence on great powers, and central states' use of one segment of the Kurds to contain another—are rooted in the four centuries that preceded it. This chapter traces this formation in four steps: the system of Kurdish emirates between two empires; the collapse of the emirates and the rise of the Sufi sheikhs; the partition of Kurdistan after the First World War; and the Mahabad Republic as the first experience of modern Kurdish state-building and the common birthplace of the two Democratic Parties of Iran and Iraq.

2.1 The Kurdish Emirates Between Two Empires

The Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, between the Ottoman Sultan Selim and the Safavid Shah Ismail, determined the fate of Kurdistan for four centuries. After this battle, Idris Bidlisi, a Kurdish scholar and administrator in Ottoman service, persuaded a large number of Kurdish emirs to join the Sunni Ottoman sultan. In return for this loyalty, the Kurdish emirates enjoyed extensive autonomy: hereditary rule by local families, relative exemption from direct taxation, and an obligation to supply military manpower in times of war.[18]

The Treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-e Shirin) of 1639, which roughly fixed the Ottoman–Safavid frontier, was the first durable partition of the Kurdish lands. Thereafter the western and northern emirates fell within the Ottoman orbit, and the eastern emirates—especially Ardalan—within the Iranian orbit. Sharaf Khan Bidlisi's *Sharafnama* (1597), the first comprehensive history of the Kurds, written in Persian, offers a picture of this world of emirates: dozens of ruling families, sometimes allied and often rivals, each maneuvering between the two empires to preserve its domain.[19]

The most important emirates that played a role in subsequent political history were the following:

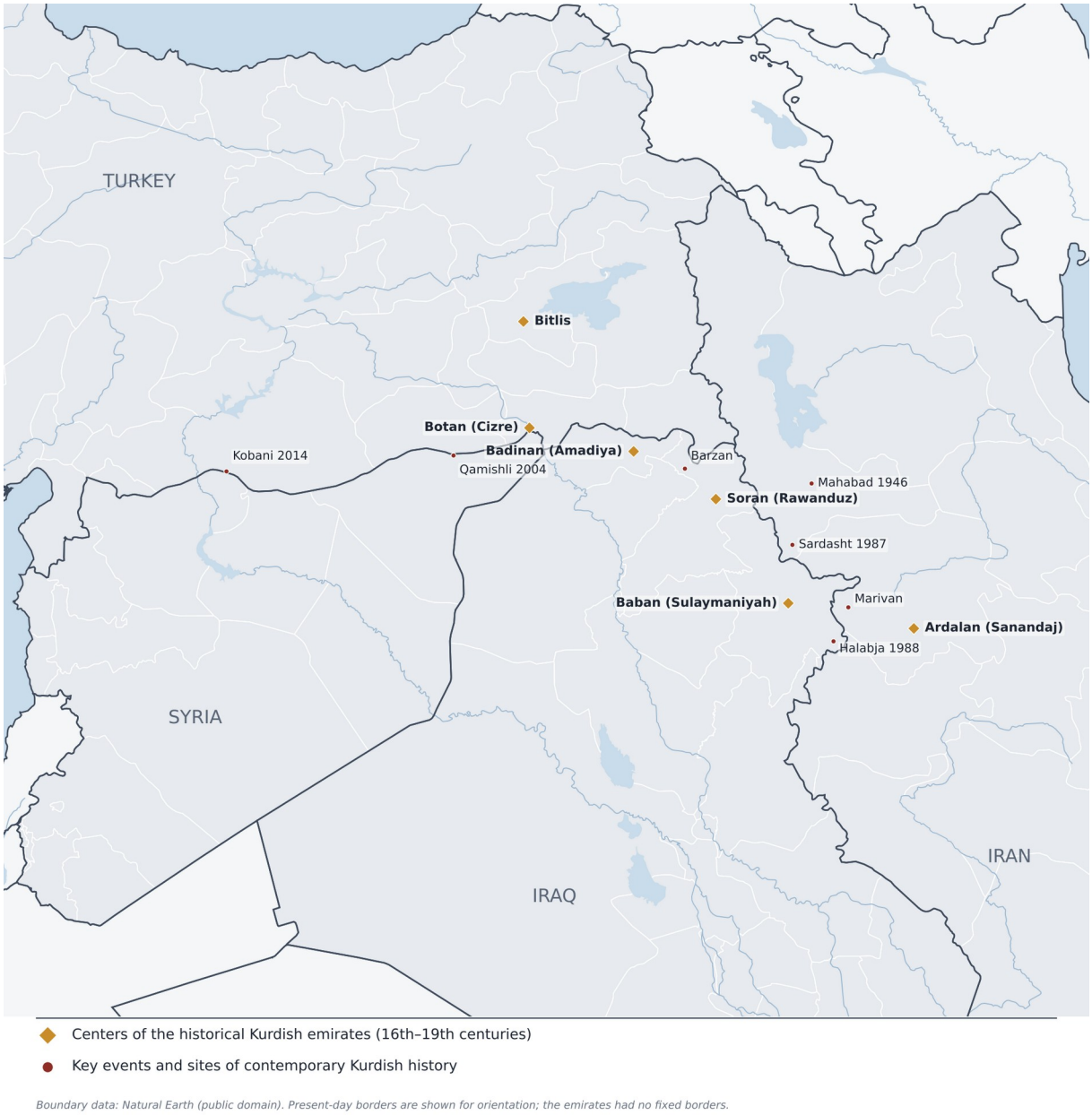
Table 2.1. The principal Kurdish emirates

Emirate	Center	Imperial orbit	End	Political legacy
Ardalan	Sanandaj	Iran	Abolished under Naser al-Din Shah (1860s)	Symbolic capital in Iranian Kurdistan
Baban	Qalachwalan, then Sulaymaniyah (founded 1784)	Ottoman (with Iranian influence)	1850	Core of Sulaymaniyah's urban identity; the Sorani sphere
Soran	Rawanduz	Ottoman	1836 (fall of Mir Muhammad)	The first attempt at centralized Kurdish power

[18]On the post-Chaldiran settlement, see Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), ch. 2; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), ch. 2.

[19]Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, *Sharafnama* (1597). The work was written in Persian, which itself illustrates the cultural orientation of the Kurdish emirate elite.

Emirate	Center	Imperial orbit	End	Political legacy
Botan	Jazira (Cizre)	Ottoman	1847 (defeat of Bedirkhan Beg)	The Bedirkhan family, pioneers of the nationalist intelligentsia
Badinan	Amadiya	Ottoman	1842	Later the base of the Barzanis; the Kurmanji sphere



Map 2. Centers of the historical Kurdish emirates and key sites of contemporary history

The logic of this system matters for the book's question: Kurdish emirs received internal autonomy in return for loyalty to an empire, and whenever the balance shifted, they shifted their loyalty. This pattern of "autonomy in exchange for loyalty" is the very logic that was reproduced four centuries later in the Kurdistan Region's relations with Baghdad, Ankara, and Washington.

2.2 The Collapse of the Emirates and the Rise of the Sheikhs

The Ottoman centralizing reforms (the *Tanzimat*) dismantled the emirate system from the 1830s onward. In less than two decades, the emirates of Soran, Badinan, Botan, and Baban fell one after another to the Ottoman army. In Iran, too, the Ardalan emirate was abolished under Naser al-Din Shah and replaced by direct rule.

The collapse of the emirates, however, did not produce a stable order. The central states lacked the capacity to replace local authority fully, and into the resulting vacuum stepped a new force: the sheikhs of the Sufi orders, especially the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya. Martin van Bruinessen has shown that the sheikh, as a supra-tribal authority, was the only figure able to mediate among rival tribes and mobilize them for a common purpose.[20] This development is key to understanding today's families: both the Barzanis (Naqshbandi) and the Talabanis (Qadiri) were originally sheikhly families that converted religious authority into political authority.

Sheikh Ubaydullah of Nehri and the First National Demand (1880)

The first movement to speak openly of a "Kurdish nation" was the revolt of Sheikh Ubaydullah of Nehri, the Naqshbandi sheikh of the Shamdinan region, in 1880. He crossed the Ottoman frontier with tribal forces and advanced to the vicinity of Urmia and Mahabad. In a letter to the British representative, he described the Kurds as a separate nation that should have charge of its own affairs.[21] The revolt was suppressed through Iranian–Ottoman cooperation, but it established two enduring patterns: the Kurdish movement under sheikhly leadership, and cooperation between two neighboring states to suppress a cross-border Kurdish movement.

The Hamidiye Cavalry: The Pattern of Co-optation

In 1891 Sultan Abdülhamid II formed the "Hamidiye" cavalry units from Kurdish tribes. These units gave loyal tribal chiefs privileges, weapons, and immunity, and in return turned them into instruments of the state for suppressing Armenians and rebellious tribes. The Hamidiye is the earliest instance of a pattern the region's states have repeated many times: the *jash* ("donkey foals," a pejorative term) in Ba'thist Iraq, the "village guards" in Turkey, and the "Muslim Kurdish Peshmerga" in the Islamic Republic, which were revived in the 2026 war. This pattern shows that central states have always aligned a segment of Kurdish society with themselves, and therefore the question "Will the Kurds come to terms with the state?" must always be accompanied by the question "Which Kurds?"

Intellectuals and Urban Nationalism

At the same time, a new generation of Kurdish intellectuals, drawn mainly from former emirate families such as the Bedirkhans, turned to modern nationalism. The first Kurdish periodical, *Kurdistan*, was published in Cairo in 1898 by Miqdad Midhat Bedirkhan, and after the Ottoman constitutional revolution of 1908 Kurdish cultural and political associations took shape in Istanbul.[22] But the gap between these Istanbul-based urban elites and the tribal–Sufi society of Kurdistan, which persisted until the mid-twentieth century, was one of the reasons for the Kurds' failure at the decisive moment after the First World War.

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[20]Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), ch. 4.

[21]On Shaikh Ubaydullah's revolt, see Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, ch. 5; McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, ch. 3.

[22]Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918–1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992).

2.3 The Partition of Kurdistan: From Sèvres to Lausanne (1918–1926)

The end of the First World War was the moment when the Kurds came closest to statehood in the twentieth century, and the receding of that moment determined their fate for a century. The Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920) between the Allies and the Ottoman government provided, in Articles 62 to 64, for local autonomy for the Kurdish-inhabited areas of eastern Anatolia and allowed that if the inhabitants of these areas sought independence within one year and the League of Nations judged them worthy of it, they could become independent.[23]

But Sèvres was never implemented. The military victory of the Turkish national movement under Mustafa Kemal, which many Kurds had also supported in the name of "Islamic brotherhood," redrew the map. The Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923), which replaced Sèvres, made no mention of the Kurds. The fate of the Vilayet of Mosul, which comprised a large part of southern Kurdistan, was left to subsequent negotiation between Britain and Turkey. In 1925 a League of Nations commission awarded Mosul to Iraq under British mandate, but on condition that guarantees be provided to the Kurds regarding administration by Kurdish officials and the use of the Kurdish language; and the Anglo-Turkish treaty of 1926 made this partition final.[24]

The reasons for the Kurds' failure at this moment, despite the opening of a historic window, are instructive for the book's question: first, the absence of a unified leadership and a representative institution capable of speaking at international conferences; second, the gap between urban elites and tribal leaders; third, the priority of great-power interests, especially Britain's oil interests in Mosul and its need for a viable Iraq; and fourth, the military and political strength of the emerging Turkish state. In other words, the new regional order after 1918, like the new order after 2024, rewarded powerful central states, not dispersed actors.

Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, "King of Kurdistan"

In southern Kurdistan, Britain in 1918 appointed Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, leader of the Qadiri sheikhly family of Sulaymaniyah, as local governor in order to administer the region through him. But Sheikh Mahmud sought real power and rebelled in 1919; after his defeat at the Bazian Pass he was exiled to India. In 1922 Britain brought him back to counter Turkish influence, and he proclaimed himself "King of Kurdistan." The Royal Air Force suppressed his subsequent revolts with aerial bombardment, and by 1924 his project had come to an end.[25]

The experience of Sheikh Mahmud is the first complete instance of the patron–client pattern in modern Kurdish history: a great power employs a Kurdish leader for its own purposes and discards him when he oversteps the assigned framework. It also shows that Sulaymaniyah was, from the very beginning, a center of urban and sheikhly nationalism—a center that half a century later became the base of the PUK.

Turkey: Three Revolts and the Policy of Denial

In the nascent Republic of Turkey, the abolition of the caliphate in 1924 and the policy of Turkish nation-building provoked three major Kurdish revolts: the revolt of Sheikh Said of Piran (1925), the

[23]Treaty of Sèvres (10 August 1920), Part III, Section III, Articles 62–64.

[24]League of Nations, *Question of the Frontier between Turkey and Iraq: Report submitted to the Council by the Commission instituted by the Council Resolution of September 30th, 1924* (Geneva, 1925).

[25]On Shaikh Mahmud, see McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, ch. 8; Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement*, ch. 11.

Ararat revolt (1927–1930), and the Dersim revolt (1937–1938). All three were violently suppressed, and for decades the Turkish state denied the existence of the Kurds as a people.[26]

Iraq: The First Barzan Revolts

In mandatory Iraq, the Barzan region became a center of revolt. Sheikh Abd al-Salam Barzani, one of the first Kurdish leaders with explicit political demands, had been executed by the Ottoman authorities in Mosul in 1914. His brother, Sheikh Ahmad Barzani, rebelled against the Iraqi government in 1931 and 1932 and was defeated by British aerial bombardment. The younger brother, Mulla Mustafa, launched a new revolt in 1943 and, after its defeat in 1945, took refuge in Iranian Kurdistan with several thousand fighters and their families—a decision that brought him directly onto the stage of the Mahabad Republic. The continuity among the three brothers, examined in detail in Chapter Three, shows that the leadership of the Barzani family from the outset fused sheikhly religious legitimacy, tribal military command, and national political demands.

Iran: Simko and Reza Shah's State-Building

In Iran, amid the turmoil following the First World War, Ismail Agha Simko, chief of the Shakak tribe, dominated a large part of the area west of Lake Urmia from 1918 to 1922. His movement was a combination of tribal ambition and early signs of nationalism; it was finally defeated in 1922 by Reza Khan's newly founded army, and Simko himself was killed in Oshnavieh in 1930.[27]

Reza Shah's state-building was a turning point for Iranian Kurdistan that differed from Iraq: the disarmament of the tribes, the policy of *takhteh-qapu* (forced sedentarization), the exile and imprisonment of tribal chiefs, the law on uniform dress, and the prohibition of education in Kurdish. These policies carried heavy human and cultural costs, but they also left a lasting structural consequence: the independent power of the tribal families in Iran was broken. This very difference, completed by the land reforms of the 1960s, explains why in Iranian Kurdistan, unlike Iraq, political leadership passed to parties and urban intellectuals.

2.4 The Mahabad Republic (1946): The Shared Moment

Background: Power Vacuum and the Soviet Patron

The occupation of Iran by Britain and the Soviet Union in Shahrivar 1320 (August 1941) and the collapse of central-government authority in the northwest created a power vacuum in which the Mukriyan region, centered on Mahabad, was effectively left between the Soviet occupation zone in the north and the British sphere of influence in the south. In this vacuum, a group of young urban residents of Mahabad founded in 1942 the "Society for the Revival of Kurdistan" (*Komeley Jiyanewey Kurd*, known as J.K.), a clandestine organization with a romantic nationalist orientation and links to the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey.

In 1945, with Soviet encouragement—and especially after Kurdish leaders met Jafar Baghirov, the leader of Soviet Azerbaijan, in Baku—the J.K. was transformed into the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iran), and Qazi Muhammad, a religious judge and one of the most respected notables of Mahabad, assumed its leadership.[28] This development marked a qualitative change: a movement that

[26]Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

[27]Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

[28]William Eagleton Jr., *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), remains the classic account.

had arisen among urban youth entrusted its leadership to a religious notable who could rally both town-dwellers and tribes.

Proclamation of the Republic and Its Structure

The Republic of Kurdistan was proclaimed on 2 Bahman 1324 (22 January 1946) in Mahabad's Chwarchira Square, and Qazi Muhammad was chosen as its president. Its territory was limited: Mahabad and surrounding towns such as Bukan, Oshnavieh, Naqadeh, and Sardasht; it never encompassed Sanandaj, Kermanshah, or the southern Kurds. The Republic established a small state with ministries, an army, a newspaper, and Kurdish-language schools; and for the first time in modern history Kurdish became the official language of administration and education.

The arrival of Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his fighters, who had taken refuge from Iraq, made them the military backbone of the Republic. Barzani received the rank of general, and his forces were the Republic's most disciplined military force. At the same time, on 16 August 1946, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq) was founded in Baghdad, and Barzani, who was in Mahabad, was elected its president. Mahabad is thus the common birthplace of two parties that eight decades later remain the axis of Kurdish politics in Iran and Iraq.

Collapse

The Republic lasted less than a year. After Prime Minister Qavam al-Saltaneh's agreement with the Soviet Union in the spring of 1946, Soviet forces left Iran, and the Mahabad Republic, like the Azerbaijan National Government in Tabriz, lost its principal patron. The Iranian army entered Tabriz in December 1946 and then Mahabad. Qazi Muhammad decided not to leave the city in order to prevent bloodshed. He, his brother Sadr Qazi, and his cousin Seyf Qazi were executed on 10 Farvardin 1326 (31 March 1947) in that same Chwarchira Square. Barzani and his men, after several months of fighting, made a famous march across the borders of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey in the spring of 1947, crossed the Aras River, took refuge in the Soviet Union, and remained in exile until 1958.

Why Did the Republic Fall?

- **Dependence on a single patron:** The Republic was militarily, economically, and diplomatically dependent on the Soviet Union, and with the Soviet withdrawal it had no other external support. This is the first and clearest instance of the book's third hypothesis.
- **Internal division:** Some of the Mukriyan tribes, suspicious of the power of the town-dwellers and of the influence of the "foreign" Barzanis, came to terms with the central government at the moment of crisis. This is the very pattern of the fourth hypothesis.
- **Limited territory:** The Republic was never able to attract the southern and Shi'i Kurds, or even Sanandaj; that is, geographically and religiously it did not represent all the Kurds of Iran.
- **Rivalry with Azerbaijan:** Disputes over mixed Kurdish and Turkic areas, especially Urmia, turned two potential allies into rivals.
- **The return of the central state:** The Iranian government, backed by the United States at the onset of the Cold War, had the will to restore sovereignty; and the new international order, as in 1923, preferred the central state to the local actor.

The Legacy of Mahabad

Despite its short life, Mahabad is the most important symbol of Kurdish nationalism in Iran and one of the shared symbols of all Kurds. Its flag is today the flag of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and the

anthem *Ey Reqîb*, which gained currency in that same period, is the Region's official anthem. For the question of this book, the political legacy of Mahabad is twofold. On the one hand, Mahabad showed that the Kurds of Iran, given the right conditions, have the capacity for modern state-building and the management of civil institutions. On the other hand, the fate of Mahabad taught Kurdish collective memory that external patrons do not stay and that the Iranian central state, whatever its regime, regards territorial integrity as a red line. Both lessons remain present in the calculations of Iran's Kurdish parties, as we shall see in Chapter Nine regarding their decisions in March 2026.

2.5 Chapter Chronology

Table 2.2. Chronology, 1514–1947

Year	Event	Significance for the book's question
1514	Battle of Chaldiran; Kurdish emirs join the Ottomans	Origin of the pattern of autonomy in exchange for loyalty
1639	Treaty of Zuhab	The first durable partition of Kurdistan
1836–1850	Fall of the emirates of Soran, Badinan, Botan, and Baban	Rise of the sheikhs; roots of today's families
1880	Revolt of Sheikh Ubaydullah of Nehri	The first national demand; Iranian–Ottoman cooperation against the Kurds
1891	Formation of the Hamidiye cavalry	Origin of the pattern of co-opting Kurds against Kurds
1920	Treaty of Sèvres	The historic window of independence
1918–1924	Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji's government and revolts	The first complete patron–client pattern
1918–1922	Simko's movement	The end of the era of tribal leadership in Iran
1923 and 1926	Treaty of Lausanne; annexation of Mosul to Iraq	Consolidation of the fourfold partition
1931–1945	Revolts of Sheikh Ahmad and Mulla Mustafa Barzani	Formation of the Barzani family's leadership
1946	Mahabad Republic; founding of the KDP of Iraq	A unique shared moment; the lesson of dependence on a patron
1947	Execution of Qazi Muhammad; Barzani's march to the Soviet Union	The beginning of exile; a shared national symbol

Chapter Summary

The four centuries of history before 1947 produced patterns with which this entire book is concerned. First, the pattern of autonomy in exchange for loyalty, which runs from the emirates of the sixteenth century to today's Kurdistan Region. Second, the conversion of the sheikhs' religious authority into political authority, of which the Barzani and Talabani families are the product. Third, the pattern by which central states co-opt one segment of the Kurds to contain another, from the Hamidiye to the Muslim Peshmerga. Fourth, the pattern of abandonment by external patrons, from Britain in Sulaymaniyah to the Soviet Union in Mahabad. And fifth, the divergence of the paths of the Kurds of Iraq and Iran: in Iraq the sheikhly family structure survived and took over the

leadership of the national movement; in Iran modern state-building shattered it and handed leadership to parties and intellectuals.

This chapter's answer to the book's central question is clear: historically, the Kurds have been neither inherently incompatible with states nor inherently aligned with them. They have come to terms with any order that guaranteed autonomy and the survival of their leaders, and have rebelled against any order that denied these two things. Part Three of the book shows how this logic took institutional form in the two families of the Barzanis and the Talabanis.

PART THREE: The Families of Power in Iraqi Kurdistan

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3. The Barzani Family: From Sheikh Abd al-Salam to Masoud, Nechirvan, and Masrour

No family in contemporary Kurdish history has become as closely identified with the fate of the Kurdish national movement as the Barzanis. In Kurdish political memory, the name "Barzani" is simultaneously a symbol of armed resistance, of state-building, and of the family monopolization of power. This chapter follows the family across four generations: the generation of the sheikhs (Abd al-Salam and Ahmad), the generation of Mulla Mustafa, the generation of Masoud and Idris, and the current generation (Nechirvan and Masrour). The guiding question is: what is the survival logic of this family, and what does this logic tell us about its predisposition to align with the new regional order?

3.1 Barzan: Origins and Sources of Legitimacy

Barzan is a mountain village in the north of Erbil province, near the Great Zab River and the Turkish border. The family's authority was originally not tribal but derived from a Sufi order: from the nineteenth century the sheikhs of Barzan were recognized as spiritual guides (*murshids*) of the Naqshbandi order, and a cluster of small tribes had gathered around the Barzan *takiya* (Sufi lodge). These tribes, known in the sources as "the Barzanis," gave their loyalty not to a tribal agha but to the sheikh.[29]

This feature of the family's origins had two lasting consequences. First, the Barzanis enjoyed from the outset a symbolic superiority over neighboring tribes—especially the Zebari, Surchi, and Baradost—and this very local rivalry enabled central governments to mobilize these tribes against Barzan. Second, the family's legitimacy came to rest on a combination of three elements that endures to this day: spiritual-religious authority, military command over loyal fighters, and the claim to national leadership. In the theoretical terms of Chapter One, the Barzanis are a clear case of the transformation of the "sheikh" into a "national leader" and then into a "neopatrimonial ruling family."

3.2 The Generation of the Sheikhs: Abd al-Salam and Ahmad

Sheikh Abd al-Salam Barzani, who in the years before the First World War raised demands such as the use of Kurdish in administration and education and the appointment of Kurdish officials, was executed by the Ottoman authorities in Mosul in 1914. His execution gave the family a "founding martyr," an element that occupies a special place in the KDP's official narrative.

His brother, Sheikh Ahmad Barzani, assumed the family's leadership. Sheikh Ahmad was a religious and enigmatic figure whose unconventional religious conduct was controversial even among the Kurds; but his authority over the Barzan tribes was absolute. His revolt of 1931–1932 against the Iraqi government, which coincided with the end of the British mandate, was crushed by ground operations of the Iraqi army and British aerial bombardment, and Sheikh Ahmad spent years

[29]Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (London: Zed Books, 1992), discusses the Barzan shaikhs as a case of shaikhly authority transforming into political leadership.

in exile and confinement. The significance of this period lies in the fact that it made Barzan—a region over which the central state never established full control—into a symbol of resistance.

3.3 Mulla Mustafa Barzani (1903–1979): From Warrior to National Symbol

From Barzan to Mahabad and the Soviet Union

Mulla Mustafa, the younger brother, was—unlike his brothers—more a military commander than a sheikh. After the revolt of 1943–1945 and his flight to Iran, as we saw in Chapter Two, he became the military backbone of the Mahabad Republic and was elected in absentia as president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq). Eleven years of exile in the Soviet Union (1947–1958) made him a legendary figure, but at the same time the party founded in his name in Baghdad was run without him by urban intellectuals. This gap between "the legendary tribal leader" and "the urban intellectual politburo" is the root of the 1964 split and, ultimately, of the birth of the PUK.

The September Revolution (1961–1975)

After Abd al-Karim Qasim's coup of 1958, Barzani returned to Iraq to an official welcome, and Iraq's interim constitution described Kurds and Arabs as "partners" in the homeland. But the honeymoon was short; disputes over autonomy and competition for power in the north led to the outbreak of war in September 1961—a war that came to be called the "September Revolution" (*Eylul*) in Kurdish literature and that continued, with interruptions, until 1975.

Two key developments occurred during this period. The first was the split of 1964: the party's politburo, led by Ibrahim Ahmad and his son-in-law Jalal Talabani, opposed Barzani's unilateral ceasefire with Baghdad; Barzani drove them by force into Iran, and this faction later cooperated for a time with the Baghdad government against Barzani. This "Jalali–Mullayi war" was the first act of the rivalry examined in the next chapter. The second was the agreement of 11 March 1970 with the Ba'th government, which—signed by Saddam Hussein as vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council—accepted the principle of Kurdish autonomy and made Kurdish an official language in Kurdish-inhabited areas.[30]

But the implementation of the agreement reached an impasse over Kirkuk. Baghdad was not prepared to place the oil city within the autonomous territory, and Barzani was not prepared to consider the agreement complete without it. At the same time, the 1971 assassination attempt on Barzani, attributed to the Ba'th government, destroyed trust. In 1974 Baghdad unilaterally proclaimed an autonomy law without Kirkuk, and the war resumed.

1975: The Greatest Strategic Error

The war of 1974–1975 was fought with extensive Iranian support and covert American and Israeli backing. Later U.S. congressional documents, especially the Pike Committee report, showed that the patrons' aim was not Kurdish victory but the attrition of Iraq.[31] Barzani, contrary to the lesson of Mahabad, once again put all his eggs in one patron's basket—this time the Shah of Iran. With the signing of the Algiers Agreement between the Shah and Saddam on 6 March 1975, Iran cut off support overnight and closed the border. A movement with tens of thousands of fighters collapsed

[30]On the 1970 March Agreement and its collapse, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), ch. 15.

[31]U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on Intelligence (Pike Committee), *Final Report* (1976), the relevant section of which was leaked and published in *The Village Voice*, February 1976.

within a few weeks; tens of thousands of people fled to Iran, and Barzani, ill and defeated, settled first in Iran and then in the United States, where he died in Washington in March 1979.

The analysis of 1975 is central to the question of this book, because it shows that the danger of dependence on a single patron was recognizable, yet unavoidable, even for the most experienced Kurdish leader—one who had himself lived through Mahabad. The reason is structural: a movement surrounded by four hostile states has limited options for diversifying its patrons. Part of the lesson the Barzani family drew from 1975 is evident in Masoud Barzani's policy in the following decades: never rely on a single patron, and always keep a channel open to your enemy.

3.4 The Second Generation: Masoud and Idris (1975–2003)

Rebuilding the Party and the Alliance with Iran

After 1975, Mulla Mustafa's two sons, Idris and Masoud, took over the party's leadership in the form of a "provisional leadership," and at the 1979 congress Masoud Barzani became president of the party—a position he has retained to this day. Idris, known as the party's strategist and negotiator, died in 1987, but his role passed to the next generation through his son Nechirvan.

During the Iran–Iraq War, the KDP allied itself with the Islamic Republic and took part in joint operations, including the Haj Omran operation of 1983. This tactical alliance reflects the same logic of survival: a party that eight years earlier had been the victim of abandonment by Iran was now cooperating with Iran's new government against a common enemy. At the same time, this alliance placed the party in a contradictory position vis-à-vis the Kurds of Iran, who were at war with the Islamic Republic.

1983: The Massacre of the Barzanis

Saddam Hussein answered the party's cooperation with Iran with one of the most brutal acts of his rule: in the summer of 1983 Iraqi forces detained thousands of men and boys of the Barzani tribes from forced-resettlement camps in the Qushtapa area, and they never returned. The number of victims is estimated at about eight thousand, and the remains of some were discovered years later in mass graves in southern Iraq.[32] This massacre, a prelude to the Anfal campaign of 1988, consolidated the Barzani family's place in the national narrative as a "victim family," and part of its emotional legitimacy among supporters derives from this very experience.

From Bipolarity to Civil War

After the uprising of 1991 and the establishment of the no-fly zone, the 1992 elections produced a near-even result between the KDP and the PUK and led to a fifty-fifty division of power—a formula that in practice housed two administrations within a single shell. Competition over customs revenue from the Ibrahim Khalil crossing with Turkey, which lay within KDP territory, was one of the principal causes of the civil war of 1994–1998. In August 1996, Masoud Barzani sought the help of Saddam Hussein's army to retake Erbil from the PUK, which enjoyed Iranian support—a decision that condenses the entire logic of this book into a single event: a family whose men Saddam had killed by the thousands invited that same Saddam's army into the capital of Kurdistan in order to survive an intra-Kurdish rivalry. The Washington Agreement of 1998, brokered by the United States, ended the war but left the two administrations in place until 2006.

[32]Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993), discusses the 1983 disappearance of Barzani men as a precursor to Anfal.

3.5 The Zenith of Power: From 2003 to the 2017 Referendum

The fall of Saddam in 2003 marked the zenith of the Barzani family's power. Masoud Barzani became President of the Kurdistan Region in 2005, Nechirvan Barzani took the post of prime minister, and Hoshyar Zebari, Masoud's maternal uncle, became Iraq's foreign minister. The family thus governed in Erbil while holding the most important diplomatic post in Baghdad.

Two developments in this period transformed the family's power structure. The first was the strategic bond with Turkey: a family that for decades had regarded Turkey as its principal enemy became, from the late 2000s, Ankara's closest economic partner. Energy agreements with Turkey and the construction of the Region's independent pipeline to the port of Ceyhan tied Erbil financially to Ankara. The meeting between Masoud Barzani and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Diyarbakır in November 2013 symbolized this alliance. The second was the formation of a family economic empire: telecommunications, construction, oil, and security companies linked to family members and their inner circle, which provided the material foundation of the patronage system and which critics regard as the core of the Region's structural corruption.

The war against ISIS from 2014 raised the international standing of the Peshmerga and of the family to its peak, while at the same time control of Kirkuk passed to Kurdish forces after the flight of the Iraqi army. These two factors, together with the repeated extension of Masoud Barzani's presidency after the expiry of its legal term in 2013 and 2015, set the stage for the decision to hold an independence referendum.

The 2017 Referendum: A Gamble over Legacy

The referendum of 25 September 2017 was held despite the open opposition of the United States, Turkey, Iran, and Baghdad, and more than 90 percent of voters voted for independence. Baghdad's response was swift: on 16 October, Iraqi forces and the Popular Mobilization Forces (*Hashd al-Sha'bi*) retook Kirkuk without serious fighting, following the withdrawal of some PUK forces on the basis of an understanding reportedly brokered by Iranian commanders. Within a few days the Region lost about half the territory under its control and its most important oil resource. Masoud Barzani stepped down from the Region's presidency in November 2017 but retained the presidency of the party and remained the family's final decision-making authority.

The interpretation of 2017 within the framework of this book is as follows: the referendum is the only case in the family's history in which a symbolic logic of legacy (securing Masoud's name as the leader of independence) prevailed over the logic of survival and patron diversification—and its outcome was a decisive confirmation of that very logic of survival. From 2017 onward, the family's behavior has clearly reverted to its earlier cautious pattern.

3.6 The Third Generation: Nechirvan and Masrour

After 2017 the family's executive power was divided between two cousins, and in 2019 the current configuration took shape: Nechirvan Barzani, son of Idris, as President of the Region; and Masrour Barzani, Masoud's eldest son, as Prime Minister. This division of labor reflects two styles and two networks:

Table 3.1. Nechirvan and Masrour Barzani compared

Feature	Nechirvan Barzani	Masrour Barzani
Position in the family	Son of Idris; heir to the diplomatic, negotiating line	Eldest son of Masoud; direct heir of the party president
Current post	President of the Kurdistan Region (since 2019)	Prime Minister (since 2019; in a caretaker government after the 2024 elections)
Background	Prime minister in earlier terms; face of economic relations	Head of the Region's Security Council and security apparatus before becoming prime minister
Style	Conciliatory; flexible toward Baghdad, the PUK, and Tehran	Security-minded, centralized, harder-line toward rivals and Tehran
External network	Broad ties with regional capitals, including Tehran	Close ties with Washington and Ankara
Strength	Acceptability among rivals and mediators	Control of security instruments and the loyalty of the party apparatus

Analysts had recorded signs of rivalry between the two cousins as early as 2019.[33] This rivalry rarely surfaces, because the presence of Masoud Barzani as final arbiter contains it. The key question for the family's future—and therefore for the Region's future—is how this arbitration will continue after Masoud Barzani, who turned eighty in 2026.

The Family's Peripheral Circles

The family's power is not confined to the two cousins. Other family members hold command of special Peshmerga units and parts of the security apparatus or have a prominent presence in the Region's economy—for example, Sirwan Barzani, a Peshmerga commander whose name is linked to the Korek telecommunications company, and other family members commanding special forces. Marital ties with the Zebari family, through Hoshyar Zebari, and the current Iraqi foreign minister Fuad Hussein, a senior party figure, form the family's Baghdad network. In the party politburo, figures such as Fazil Mirani, head of the politburo, constitute non-family organizational pillars whose loyalty to the family guarantees the party's continuity.

A Concise Political Genealogy

Table 3.2. The Barzani family: a concise political genealogy

Generation	Figure	Historical role
First	Sheikh Abd al-Salam Barzani (executed 1914)	Naqshbandi sheikh; "founding martyr"
First	Sheikh Ahmad Barzani	Leader of the 1931–1932 revolt
First	Mulla Mustafa Barzani (1903–1979)	General of Mahabad; leader of the September Revolution; founder of the party
Second	Idris Barzani (d. 1987)	Strategist and negotiator of the party
Second	Masoud Barzani (b. 1946)	Party president since 1979; President of the Region 2005–2017
Third	Nechirvan Barzani (son of Idris)	President of the Region since 2019
Third	Masrour Barzani (son of Masoud)	Prime Minister since 2019

[33]The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Iraqi Kurdistan's New Government," 11 July 2019.

Generation	Figure	Historical role
By marriage	Hoshyar Zebari (Masoud's maternal uncle)	Iraqi foreign minister after 2003

3.7 The Barzani Family in the Crises of 2023–2026

From 2023 the family faced a series of shocks, none of which could be answered with military means. The 2023 international arbitration ruling halted independent oil exports through the Turkish pipeline and cut one of the family's two financial pillars. Rulings of Iraq's Federal Supreme Court—including on the Region's electoral system and on the payment of public employees' salaries—increased Baghdad's control over the Region's financial resources and political rules. And missile and drone attacks by the Islamic Republic on Erbil, on the pretext of the presence of "Israeli headquarters" or the headquarters of Iranian Kurdish parties, showed that the family's capital was vulnerable to Tehran.

In the Kurdistan parliamentary elections of October 2024, the KDP became the largest party with 39 seats but could not form a government without the PUK.[34] The impasse that followed, which lasted until September 2026, kept Masrour Barzani in the position of prime minister of a caretaker government. At the federal level, the KDP boycotted the vote for the presidency of Iraq in April 2026 and declared the election of Nizar Amedi of the PUK illegitimate, yet retained the foreign ministry for Fuad Hussein in Ali al-Zaidi's cabinet.[35] This combination—boycott in one arena and presence in another—is a classic example of the family's behavior: never burn any bridge completely.

The Test of March 2026

The war of the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic, which began on 28 February 2026, confronted the family with its most difficult strategic choice since 2017. According to reports, the U.S. president telephoned Masoud Barzani and Bafel Talabani in the first days of the war and told the Kurdish leaders that they had to choose between America and Israel on the one hand and Iran on the other.[36] The Region's practical response—its interior ministry announcing on that same 28 February that it would not permit the Region's territory to be used for operations against its neighbors—was precisely the response that the family's survival logic predicts. Tehran threatened to target all of the Region's facilities if Kurdish forces entered Iran, and Erbil was struck by dozens of missiles and drones in the first days of the war. At the decisive moment, the Barzani family—historic patron of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran and strategic ally of the United States—gave priority neither to ethnic solidarity nor to partnership with Washington, but to the survival of Erbil.

This behavior should not be interpreted merely as caution or fear. From the family's perspective, the lessons of 1975 and 2017 were clear: American support for a Kurdish operation can be withdrawn overnight, but proximity to Iran is permanent. Washington's open retreat from the plan for a Kurdish operation on 7 and 8 March confirmed this calculation in practice.

[34]Kurdistan24, "KDP and PUK Close to Finalizing Kurdistan's Cabinet Program for the Next Four Years" (on the 2024 results).

[35]House of Commons Library, "A new president and prime minister for Iraq: What challenges face the country in 2026?" (CBP-10829), September 2026; FDD's *Long War Journal*, 15 May 2026.

[36]*Axios*, 2 March 2026; *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2026, as summarized in reporting on the 2026 Kurdish–Iranian crisis.

3.8 The Survival Logic of the Family and Its Future

Five Behavioral Rules

From four generations of Barzani family history, five behavioral rules can be extracted that make it possible to predict its future behavior:

- **Rule one, the priority of survival over ideals:** In every conflict between the family's survival and the national ideal, survival has taken precedence—from inviting Saddam's army in 1996 to refusing to take part in operations in Iran in 2026. The only exception, the 2017 referendum, ended in failure and reinforced the rule.
- **Rule two, diversification of patrons:** Since 1975 the family has never relied on a single patron; it has simultaneously kept channels open to the United States, Turkey, the Persian Gulf states, and, to a limited degree, Tehran and Baghdad.
- **Rule three, alliance with Turkey as the economic pillar:** Since the 2000s Turkey has been the vital route for exports, trade, and investment, and in Turkey's conflict with the PKK the family has in practice stood with Ankara.
- **Rule four, control of the instruments of security:** The security apparatuses and special Peshmerga units are in the hands of family members or their direct loyalists; for this reason, the unification of the Peshmerga under a single ministry—which the United States has for years made a condition of its assistance—has progressed slowly.
- **Rule five, selective boycott rather than complete rupture:** In conflict with rivals, the family boycotts one arena while preserving another, so that the cost of returning to negotiation remains low.

Three Succession Scenarios

- **Coordinated succession:** Before leaving the scene, Masoud Barzani institutionalizes the division of labor between Nechirvan (presidency and diplomacy) and Masrour (party and government). This scenario guarantees continuity of current policy and is the most likely, provided there is sufficient time for the transition.
- **Concentration in Masoud's branch:** Masrour Barzani, relying on the security and party apparatus, centralizes power, and Nechirvan is pushed into a ceremonial role. This scenario increases the likelihood of confrontation with the PUK and Tehran and reduces the family's diplomatic flexibility.
- **Open rivalry:** In the absence of Masoud's arbitration, the two branches enter into open rivalry, and external rivals (the PUK, Baghdad, Tehran) exploit it. The experience of the bloody split in the Talabani family, examined in the next chapter, shows that this scenario is not far-fetched in Kurdish family politics, although the internal discipline of the Barzani family has so far been much greater.

Chapter Summary: The Barzanis and the New Order

In terms of its predisposition to align with the new Middle Eastern order, the Barzani family is the most aligned Kurdish actor. The three pillars of the new order—the United States, Turkey, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf—are all partners of the family. The family has stood with Turkey in its conflict with the PKK, kept the Region from being drawn into the 2026 war, and maintained its presence in Baghdad even at the height of tension. The two principal dangers to this position come

not from outside but from within: the erosion of domestic legitimacy owing to corruption and the monopolization of power, which has alienated a large part of the younger Kurdish generation from the family; and the question of succession.

Regarding post–Islamic Republic Iran, the family's behavior is predicted by rule one: the Barzanis will support any new government in Tehran that guarantees border stability and the Region's economic interests, even if that government does not fully satisfy the demands of Iran's Kurds. At the same time, the historical bond with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran gives the family a potential mediating role: Erbil can serve as an intermediary between Iran's Kurdish parties and a transitional government, provided that government sees Erbil as a partner rather than a threat. This mediating role is one of the levers to which we shall return in Chapter Fourteen in designing the transition in Iran.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4. The Talabani Family: From Jalal Talabani to Bafel and Qubad, and the Lahur Sheikh Jangi Schism

If the Barzani family is the symbol of continuity, the Talabani family is the symbol of flexibility. Over six decades, Jalal Talabani both fought and negotiated with nearly every actor in the region—from the Shah and Saddam to the Islamic Republic, Assad's Syria, Turkey, and the United States—and it was this very flexibility that carried him from the leadership of a splinter faction to the position of Iraq's first Kurdish president. But a family that rested on the personal skill of one man faced, after him, a crisis the Barzani family had never experienced: an armed succession war within the family. This chapter examines both faces: the logic of flexibility, and the cost of lacking a rule of succession.

4.1 Origins: The Qadiri Sheikhs and the Sulaymaniyah Center

The Talabani family, like the Barzanis, is a sheikhly family, but of the Qadiri order. The family's *khanaqahs* (Sufi lodges) in Kirkuk and Koya were centers of religious and social influence from the nineteenth century, and the celebrated Kurdish poet Sheikh Reza Talabani came from this family. Jalal Talabani was born in 1933 into a family of these sheikhs in the Koya area.[37]

The fundamental difference from the Barzanis, however, lies in the social environment. The Talabanis' political domain—Sulaymaniyah, Koya, and Garmiyan—was a Sorani-speaking region, more urban and more literate: the legacy of the Baban emirate and the center of Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji. In this environment, the Kurdish national movement had from the outset an intellectual and leftist coloring. Talabani therefore entered the scene not as a sheikh or tribal commander but as a party intellectual and lawyer. This difference in origins turned the rivalry of the two families from the start into a rivalry of two political cultures: Kurmanji-speaking, tribal, conservative Badinan versus Sorani-speaking, urban, leftist Sulaymaniyah.

4.2 Jalal Talabani and the Politburo Faction (1947–1975)

Talabani joined the Kurdistan Democratic Party as a teenager and, during the 1950s, while studying law in Baghdad, became one of the party's young leaders. His political—and later familial—bond with Ibrahim Ahmad, the party's secretary-general and a distinguished writer, whose daughter Hero Talabani married, formed the core of the politburo's intellectual faction.

As we saw in the previous chapter, this faction's rivalry with Mulla Mustafa Barzani led to the split of 1964. In the years that followed, the faction of Ibrahim Ahmad and Talabani cooperated for a time with the Baghdad government against Barzani—a fact that the rival narrative uses to this day to call into question the Talabanis' national legitimacy, and which the Talabani narrative regards as a necessity born of Barzani's repression. After the 1970 agreement, the faction formally returned to the party, but the rift was never healed.

This period was the first manifestation of a pattern that was later repeated many times: both families, when placed in a position of weakness in intra-Kurdish rivalry, sought help from the central

[37]On the Talabani family's Qadiri background and the social geography of Sulaymaniyah and Koya, see Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

government or a neighboring power—the Talabanis from Baghdad in the 1960s, the Barzanis from Saddam in 1996, and the Talabanis from Iran in 1996. In Kurdish politics, "betrayal" has been less the exception than the rule of the game.

4.3 The Founding of the Patriotic Union and the Years of War (1975–1991)

The collapse of the Barzani movement in March 1975 was a historic opportunity for Talabani. On 1 June 1975 in Damascus, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan announced its existence—not as a single party but as a coalition of three currents: the Marxist-Leninist "Komala" led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, the "Socialist Movement of Kurdistan" led by Ali Askari, and the "General Line," which comprised Talabani's personal loyalists.[38] The choice of Damascus as the place of founding, and the support of Ba'thist Syria—Baghdad's rival—reflected the same logic of diversifying patrons that the Union has maintained to this day.

The coalitional character of the Union, which from the beginning had semi-autonomous armed factions, became both a source of its strength and a source of its fragility. Talabani was not an absolute commander but an arbiter among the factions; and this arbitrating role, which derived solely from his personality, explains why the organization fell into crisis after him.

Intra-Kurdish Bloodshed: Hakkari, 1978

The rivalry between the two parties quickly turned bloody. In 1978 a column of PUK forces moving toward the Turkish border areas clashed with KDP forces in the Hakkari region, and a number of the Union's senior commanders, including Ali Askari, were killed. In the Union's memory, this event occupies a place similar to that of the 1983 massacre in the memory of the Barzanis: a foundational wound that renders every subsequent coalition fragile.

Between Tehran and Baghdad

In the Iran–Iraq War, the Union initially fought alongside Iran, but in 1983 and 1984 it conducted lengthy negotiations with Saddam Hussein for a ceasefire and autonomy that came to nothing. After the talks failed, the Union again drew closer to Iran and in 1987 formed the "Kurdistan Front" with the KDP and smaller parties. Saddam's response was the Anfal campaign of 1988, a large share of whose victims were in areas under the Union's influence, especially Garmiyan; and the chemical bombardment of Halabja in March 1988 took place after the town was captured by Iranian forces and PUK Peshmerga.[39] The Union's relationship with the Islamic Republic, which took root in these years, became one of the constants of Kurdish regional politics.

4.4 Mam Jalal: From Civil War to the Presidential Palace (1991–2017)

Talabani's flexibility reached its peak in the years after 1991. After the uprising and its suppression, he was among the first leaders to go to Baghdad to negotiate, and images of his cordial meeting with Saddam Hussein in 1991 remained in collective memory. In the civil war of 1994–1998 the Union enjoyed Iranian support; after KDP forces, with the help of the Iraqi army, took Erbil and then Sulaymaniyah in August 1996, the Union, with Iranian backing, retook Sulaymaniyah in October of that year. From then until 2006, Sulaymaniyah was the capital of the Union's separate administration.

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[38]David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), ch. 16.

[39]Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993).

The fall of Saddam in 2003 and Iraq's new power structure brought Talabani to a position previously unimaginable for any Kurd. From 2005 to 2014 he was President of Iraq. The unwritten division of labor between the two parties—under which the KDP holds the presidency of the Region and the PUK the federal presidency—took shape at this time. In Baghdad Talabani played the role of a "bridge": between Shi'a and Sunnis, between Tehran and Washington, and between Baghdad and Erbil. This role, bound up with his personality, created a capital for the Union that could hardly be reproduced after him.

The Gorran Split: A Fracture from Within

Yet in the very years when Talabani shone in Baghdad, the Union's social base in Sulaymaniyah was eroding. In 2009 Nawshirwan Mustafa, deputy secretary-general and one of the Union's founders, launched the "Gorran" (Change) movement with the slogan of fighting corruption and the two-party monopoly, and in that year's elections took a large share of Sulaymaniyah's votes from the Union. For several years Gorran became the Region's second force and showed that Sulaymaniyah's urban, educated base—unlike the Barzanis' tribal base—has no family loyalty and is prepared to punish its own leadership. This base, which after Nawshirwan Mustafa's death in 2017 and Gorran's decline shifted to "New Generation," remains to this day both the most important threat to and the most important potential ally of the Talabanis.

Talabani's stroke in December 2012 effectively removed him from the scene, and his death in Berlin on 3 October 2017—only a week after the independence referendum—coincided with the greatest crisis in the Region's history. At that moment the family had neither a leader nor a clear rule of succession.

4.5 The Succession War (2012–2025)

The Actors

Table 4.1. The principal actors in the Talabani succession

Figure	Relation to Jalal	Power base	Fate as of 2026
Hero Ibrahim Ahmad (Hero Khan)	Widow; daughter of Ibrahim Ahmad	Influence in the politburo; family network	Behind-the-scenes arbiter in the family; her house became a symbol of the 2025 conflict
Bafel Talabani	Eldest son	Special forces and counterterrorism apparatus	PUK president; has concentrated power since 2021
Qubad Talabani	Younger son	KRG representative in the U.S. (2006–2012); diplomacy and government	Deputy Prime Minister of the Region since 2014; Bafel's ally
Lahur Sheikh Jangi	Nephew	Counter-Terrorism Group and Zanyari (intelligence)	Co-president 2020; expelled 2021; detained 2025; on trial
Polad Sheikh Jangi	Nephew	Linked to Lahur's network	Detained and on trial together with Lahur
Kosrat Rasul Ali	Non-family; historic commander	Military and regional influence	Senior figure; role diminished
Barham Salih	Non-family; technocrat	International relations	President of Iraq 2018–2022; outside the core of family power

Kirkuk, 16 October 2017

The first test of the new generation was the Kirkuk crisis. When Iraqi forces and the Popular Mobilization Forces advanced to retake Kirkuk, some of the Peshmerga forces affiliated with the Union withdrew without serious fighting, on the basis of an understanding that reports indicate was brokered by Iranian commanders. The KDP called this event "the betrayal of 16 October" and attributed it to Bafel's branch and the Talabani family; the Talabani faction regarded it as a realistic measure to prevent bloodshed in the face of a referendum it had opposed. Whatever one's judgment of it, Kirkuk showed that at the moment of crisis the two families have two different patrons: Erbil relied on Ankara and Washington, and part of Sulaymaniyah on Tehran.

From Co-Presidency to Purge

At the Union's congress, held after years of delay, Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi were elected co-presidents in February 2020—a formula that was less a solution than a ceasefire between the two branches of the family. Lahur, who had been educated in Britain and headed the Zanyari intelligence organization and the Counter-Terrorism Group, possessed a powerful security instrument. On 8 July 2021 Bafel expelled him, his brother, and his associates from the party leadership and took control of the security apparatus.[40] Lahur later formed the "People's Front," which won two seats in the 2024 elections.

Lalazar, August 2025

The purge reached a bloody end point in August 2025. On 22 August, forces affiliated with the Union surrounded Lahur Sheikh Jangi's residence in the Lalazar district of Sulaymaniyah, and after hours of fighting with casualties on both sides, Lahur, his brother Polad, and dozens of his supporters were arrested.[41] The principal charge is a plot to kill Bafel and Qubad Talabani; three days after the clash, media affiliated with the Union released an audio file claimed to reveal the details of this plot. At the same time, Shaswar Abdulwahid, leader of the New Generation movement, was also arrested in Sulaymaniyah that same month; observers assessed these two arrests as part of a strategy to fully consolidate Bafel and Qubad's power in Sulaymaniyah.

Lahur's trial continues as of September 2026. At the session of 17 September he testified for the first time, rejected the charge of a murder plot, and described his actions as defensive; one of his co-defendants said he had been ordered to protect the house of Mam Jalal and Hero Khan because Lahur believed a coup against that house was under way.[42] Defense lawyers and Lahur's allies call the trial political; at one of the September sessions, six defendants retracted their earlier statements, saying they had been obtained under torture and pressure; the Union denies the charge of coercion. As of the end of September 2026, no verdict has been issued. The case also has a political consequence: according to an official of Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, under the parties law the leader of a party who is convicted must be replaced—meaning that a court verdict could lead to Lahur's removal from the leadership of the People's Front. Regardless of the court's final verdict, what matters for the analysis is that the Talabani family, unlike the Barzanis, settled its internal rivalry with weapons and courts.

[40]Kurdistan24, "Sulaimani Court Sends Lahur Sheikh Jangi Case to Erbil Court of Cassation," January 2026.

[41]Shafaq News, "Al-Sulaymaniyah court postpones Lahur Sheikh Jangi trial indefinitely," 14 May 2026.

[42]964media, "Lahur Sheikh Jangi denies Bafel Talabani murder plot as Lalazar trial adjourned again," 17 September 2026; *The New Region*, 17 September 2026.

4.6 The Patriotic Union in 2026: Realignment

After consolidating his power in Sulaymaniyah, Bafel Talabani undertook three strategic moves in 2026 that transformed the Union's position in the new equations:

- **Capturing the presidency of Iraq:** Nizar Amedi, the Union's candidate, was elected President of Iraq by a vote of the Iraqi parliament on 11 April 2026, while the KDP boycotted the vote. The U.S. president's open support for Amedi and his White House visit in July signaled that the Union—long accused of closeness to Tehran—now has a direct channel to Washington.[43]
- **Co-opting the opposition:** A formal coalition with the New Generation movement on 2 July 2026, after Shaswar Abdulwahid's release on bail in January, created a 38-seat bloc in the Kurdistan parliament that is nearly equal in weight to the KDP (39 seats). According to a KDP official in August 2026, New Generation had earlier, in September 2025, proposed to the KDP the formation of a relative-majority government without the Union, and the KDP had rejected it. Critics, including some former members of New Generation, regard the coalition as a deal linked to Abdulwahid's judicial cases; and analysts have assessed it not as reform of the system but as another example of the pattern of "co-opting opponents" within the two-party bipolar order.[44]
- **Hosting the PKK peace process:** The symbolic ceremony of burning PKK weapons in July 2025 was held in Sulaymaniyah province. The Union—which Turkey had for years accused of cooperating with the PKK and the Syrian Democratic Forces, and whose airport Turkey had closed its airspace to in 2023 for flights from Sulaymaniyah—has now, as a facilitator of the peace process, found a path to normalizing relations with Ankara.

At the same time, Sulaymaniyah continues to host the headquarters of the Komala organizations of Iranian Kurdistan, which were targeted by Iranian drones in the 2026 war. Like Erbil, the Union refused in March 2026 to involve the Region in a ground operation in Iran; Bafel Talabani was also among the leaders whom, according to reports, the U.S. president telephoned in the first days of the war.

4.7 Comparing the Two Families

Table 4.2. The Barzani and Talabani families compared

Indicator	Barzani	Talabani
Religious origin	Naqshbandi	Qadiri
Social base	Tribal, Kurmanji-speaking (Badinan, Erbil)	Urban, Sorani-speaking (Sulaymaniyah, Koya, Garmiyan)
Political culture	Conservative; traditional nationalism	Historically leftist; pragmatic
Party structure	Centralized and hierarchical	Multi-faction coalition
Succession rule	Clearer; arbitration by the family head	Ambiguous; conflict resolved by force
Principal patrons	Turkey, United States, Persian Gulf	Historically Iran; since 2026 a direct channel to the United States

[43]House of Commons Library, CBP-10829, September 2026.

[44]Amwaj.media, "A new alliance in Iraqi Kurdistan exposes the limits of Kurdish politics," 24 July 2026; Kurdistan24, 3 and 9 July 2026.

Indicator	Barzani	Talabani
Position in Baghdad (2026)	Foreign ministry	Presidency of the Republic
Relationship with the PKK	Hostile; aligned with Turkey	Accommodating; facilitator of the peace process
Relationship with Iran's Kurds	Historic patron of the KDPI	Host of the Komala organizations
Principal threat	Erosion of legitimacy; succession	Dependence on Tehran; authoritarianism within Sulaymaniyah

4.8 Behavioral Logic and the Family's Future

Four Behavioral Rules

- **Flexibility as strategy:** The Talabanis have had no permanent enemy or friend; negotiation with Saddam in 1983 and 1991, alliance with Iran, and the 2026 turn to Washington all follow a single logic.
- **Exploiting great-power rivalry:** The Union has always positioned itself as every great power's second option: when Erbil was with Turkey, Sulaymaniyah was with Iran and Syria; when Erbil held the presidency of the Region, Sulaymaniyah held the presidency of Iraq.
- **Power in Baghdad to compensate for weakness in the Region:** As the second party in the Region, the Union compensates for its position through an active presence in Baghdad; it has a greater interest in a strong federal government than does the KDP.
- **Internal centralization rather than institution-building:** After Mam Jalal, the party's coalitional structure has been unified not through institutional rules but through the elimination of rivals.

The Future

Bafel Talabani today is more powerful than ever: his intra-family rival is in prison, the principal opposition is his ally, the presidency of Iraq is in his party's hands, and a direct channel to Washington is open. But this power rests on a fragile foundation. Sulaymaniyah's urban base, which once preferred Gorran and New Generation to the Union, is sensitive to repression and monopoly; and the coalition with New Generation may, rather than absorbing the protest vote, empty the space for lawful opposition and push discontent into the streets.

Chapter Summary: The Talabanis and the New Order

The Talabani family's predisposition to align with the new Middle Eastern order is moderate but rising. The most important historical obstacle—its close ties with the Islamic Republic—has, under conditions in which Tehran is at war and in strategic attrition, turned from an asset into a liability; and the Union, by capturing the presidency of Iraq with American support and playing a role in Turkey's peace process, is redefining its position. The family's historical flexibility allows it to execute this turn faster than any other Kurdish actor.

For post–Islamic Republic Iran, the Talabanis have two important characteristics. First, more than the Barzanis, they are familiar with and connected to power structures in Iran, including the security institutions; in a transition period this connection can be both a useful channel of communication and a source of suspicion for the new government. Second, Sulaymaniyah hosts the Komala organizations and part of Iran's Kurdish civil activists. Any transitional government in Tehran will

therefore need the cooperation of both Kurdish capitals of Iraq to manage the Kurdish question: Erbil for the Democratic Party and Sulaymaniyah for the Komalas. The rivalry between Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, rooted over a century, will thus directly affect Iran's transition as well—a point that Chapter Five completes by examining the peripheral networks and the challengers of the bipolar order.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5. Peripheral Networks and the Challengers of the Bipolar Order

The politics of Iraqi Kurdistan is usually reduced to the rivalry of two families, but the two families do not govern in a vacuum. Around them lies a network of tribes, sheikhs, families linked by marriage, and local elites whose loyalty to each family forms the basis of its power; and opposite them, forces have emerged that have challenged the entire bipolar order: a secular movement, Islamists, and the young urban generation. This chapter examines both groups and answers one question: why has the bipolar order remained so durable despite corruption, inefficiency, and widespread discontent? The answer matters for the book because it shows which actors truly determine the external behavior of Iraqi Kurdistan.

5.1 The Tribes: From Rivals of Barzan to Pillars of the Two Parties

The tribal structure in Iraqi Kurdistan, unlike in Iran, was never broken. In the decades of war between the Kurdish movement and Baghdad, the tribes became swing actors: some fought alongside the national movement, while others—especially tribes with long-standing rivalries with Barzan—joined the state's paramilitary forces. The Ba'th regime organized these forces as *Fursan* ("knights"), and the Kurds called them *jash* ("donkey foals"). The leaders of these units, known as *mustashar* ("advisers"), commanded tens of thousands of armed men in the 1980s.[45]

The decisive moment was the uprising of March 1991. Many of the *mustashars* switched sides in the first days of the uprising and placed their forces at the disposal of the movement; without this switch, the cities would not have fallen so quickly. In return, the two main parties pardoned them and incorporated them into their patronage networks. This "bargain of 1991" is the social foundation of the bipolar order: tribal leaders who once served Baghdad now serve Erbil or Sulaymaniyah, according to the same logic—loyalty in exchange for privileges, weapons, and immunity. It is the same pattern as the Hamidiye and the *jash*, except that this time the patron is a Kurdish family rather than the central state.

Examples

- **Zebari:** The Zebari tribe, Barzan's neighbor north of the Great Zab, was in earlier decades a rival of the Barzanis, and parts of it sided with the government. The marital tie between the two families, established by Mulla Mustafa's marriage to a woman of the Zebari family, turned rivalry into alliance; Hoshyar Zebari, Masoud Barzani's maternal uncle, is the product of this bond. The Zebaris are a perfect example of the transformation of a rival tribe into a pillar of the family.
- **Surchi:** The Surchi tribe in the Erbil and Aqra area, another historical rival of Barzan, still exemplifies the tension between tribes and the KDP; sporadic armed clashes between party forces and members of this tribe in the years after 2003 show that the integration of rival tribes is not always complete.

[45]On the *jash* and *mustashar* system, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), chs. 16–17; Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq* (1993).

- **Harki, Baradost, Doski, and Mizuri:** Tribes of the Badinan and Erbil areas that have been largely integrated into the KDP network and receive political representation, command of local Peshmerga units, and a share of resources in return for loyalty.
- **Jaf:** The largest Kurdish tribal confederation, with a geographic range extending from Garmiyan and Halabja to Javanrud and Paveh in Iran. The Jaf *begzadas* played a distinguished role in the political history of southern Kurdistan; Adela Khanum, the woman ruler of Halabja in the early twentieth century, came from this family. The Jaf today lie mainly within the sphere of the PUK, and their cross-border ties with the Jaf of Iran make Sulaymaniyah one of the natural channels of communication with Iranian Kurdistan.
- **Hamawand and Pishdar:** Tribes of the Sulaymaniyah and Qaladiza areas that have been incorporated into the Union's network and deliver the tribe's bloc vote to the party in elections.

The analytical significance of the tribes for the book's question lies in the fact that they are true "swing actors." Their loyalty is not ideological but transactional. If the ruling family loses the resources needed to pay the price of loyalty—as has intensified with the Region's financial crisis since 2014 and especially since 2023—or if another actor, such as Baghdad or a neighboring power, pays a higher price, this loyalty is transferable. Baghdad's recentralization, which has turned the direct payment of salaries into an instrument of influence, targets precisely this foundation.

5.2 Sheikhs and Sufi Orders: Religious Capital without Independent Power

If the tribes are the military and electoral foundation of the bipolar order, the sheikhs of the Sufi orders are the foundation of its religious legitimacy. The two ruling families themselves arose from sheikhly families, and other sheikhly families still wield social influence:

- **The Barzinji sheikhs:** The family of Sheikh Mahmud, "King of Kurdistan" in the 1920s, which holds symbolic national and religious capital in and around Sulaymaniyah. The family today has no independent political power, but its name occupies a distinguished place in Sulaymaniyah's nationalist narrative, and its members have found positions in the networks of both parties.
- **The Kasnazani family:** Leaders of the Kasnazani branch of the Qadiri order, with an extensive network of *khanaqahs* in Kurdistan and throughout Iraq. The distinctive feature of this family is its historically close relationship with Baghdad governments, including during the Ba'th period—an example of a Kurdish religious network that aligned with the central state rather than with the national movement.
- **Naqshbandi networks:** Khalidi Naqshbandi *khanaqahs* in Badinan and the border areas, which have historical ties with the Barzani family and play a role of social mediation at the local level.

Van Bruinessen has shown that the political role of the sheikhs declined with the modernization of Kurdish society but did not disappear; rather, it changed form from direct leadership to legitimation and mediation.[46] In today's Kurdistan, the Sufi orders have no independent power to challenge the two parties, but they have two important functions: first, they channel the votes and loyalty of religious conservatives toward the two parties; and second, they are a bulwark against Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood political Islam, the ideological rival of traditional Sufi Islam.

[46]Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State* (London: Zed Books, 1992), ch. 4 and conclusion.

5.3 The First Secular Challenge: Gorran (2009–2024)

The Gorran (Change) movement, founded by Nawshirwan Mustafa in 2009 after his departure from the PUK, was the first serious challenge to the bipolar order. With the slogan of fighting corruption, separating party from state, and unifying the Peshmerga and security apparatus under state institutions, Gorran won about a quarter of the seats in the Kurdistan parliament in the 2009 elections and took a large part of the Union's urban base in Sulaymaniyah. In the 2013 elections it retained second place and pulled ahead of the Union.

But Gorran's trajectory revealed a pattern that was later repeated. In 2014 Gorran entered the coalition government and received ministries. In 2015, when it opposed the extension of Masoud Barzani's presidency, the speaker of parliament, from Gorran, was barred from entering Erbil and its ministers were expelled from the cabinet; parliament was effectively shut down until 2017. After Nawshirwan Mustafa's death in May 2017, Gorran lost its charismatic leadership, rejoined Masrour Barzani's government in 2019, and thus, in the eyes of its social base, became part of the very system against which it had risen. In the 2024 elections Gorran was effectively marginalized.

The lesson of Gorran for structural analysis is clear: a protest movement that has a voter base but lacks independent security instruments and financial resources has two options in the bipolar order —either it is eliminated from outside the system, or it is co-opted and worn down by joining the government. Gorran experienced both.

5.4 The Populist Challenge: New Generation (2018–2026)

The New Generation movement was founded in Sulaymaniyah by Shaswar Abdulwahid, a businessman and owner of the NRT media group, after his campaign against the 2017 referendum under the slogan "No, not now." New Generation differed from Gorran in three respects: first, its leadership came not from within the Union but from the private sector and the media; second, its discourse was populist and anti-elite and directly targeted "the ruling families"; and third, private media gave it a mobilizing instrument that Gorran had not possessed to the same degree.

New Generation won eight seats in the Kurdistan parliament in the 2018 elections, became a significant force in Baghdad in Iraq's 2021 parliamentary elections, and with 15 seats became the Region's third force in the October 2024 elections.[47] This was the peak of New Generation's power— and precisely at this point Gorran's trajectory was repeated, this time with greater speed and violence.

In August 2025, Shaswar Abdulwahid was arrested in Sulaymaniyah by forces affiliated with the Union on a court order, on charges including threats and, according to his critics, in financial cases; the New Generation movement called the arrest a political kidnapping and held Bafel and Qubad Talabani responsible for his life. He remained in detention for about five months and was released on bail in January 2026. A few months later, on 2 July 2026, Bafel Talabani and Shaswar Abdulwahid announced a formal coalition of the two parties.[48] At the same time, Sarwa Abdulwahid, the movement leader's sister, became Minister of Environment in the Iraqi federal government in May 2026.

[47]Shafaq News, "Kurdistan's 10th cabinet: Interlocking alliances and persistent political differences," 9 June 2026; on the 2021 federal results, see The Washington Institute, "New Generation and the New Opposition in Iraq's Parliament."

[48]*The New Region*, "Head of New Generation Movement arrested in Sulaimani," 12 August 2025; Amwaj.media, 24 July 2026; Channel 8, 30 June 2026.

The coalition with the Union created a rift within New Generation. The former head of the movement's Erbil office published a document that he claimed was a secret agreement between the two leaders, concluded during Abdulwahid's detention and including reciprocal political, legal, and commercial commitments; the authenticity of this document is disputed.[49] Regardless of the details, the overall trajectory is clear: a movement that grew with the slogan of breaking the family monopoly became, less than a year after its leader's arrest, a junior partner of one of those very families.

5.5 Islamists: A Contained Ideological Challenge

Political Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan has had three waves:

- **The first wave, armed movement (1980s and 1990s):** The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, formed in the late 1980s under the leadership of Sheikh Uthman Abd al-Aziz in Halabja and the border areas, fought armed clashes with the PUK in the 1990s and at times enjoyed Iranian support.
- **The second wave, jihadist (2001–2003):** Ansar al-Islam, which emerged from splits in the Islamic Movement and had links to al-Qaeda networks, seized control of a small area in Hawraman near the Iranian border in 2001. U.S. special forces and PUK Peshmerga crushed this area in March 2003. Later, some Kurdish jihadists joined ISIS, and Halabja and its surroundings were among the areas from which ISIS recruited.
- **The third wave, parliamentary parties:** Two main Islamist parties are active in the parliamentary system today: the Kurdistan Islamic Union (*Yekgirtû*), founded in 1994 and close to the Muslim Brotherhood current, and the Kurdistan Justice Group (*Komal*), which split from the Islamic Movement under Ali Bapir. In the 2024 elections the Islamic Union won 7 seats and the Justice Group 3.

Three factors have kept the Islamists in the position of a contained challenger: the competition of traditional Sufi Islam, which supports the two ruling parties; the secular nationalism dominant in Kurdish political culture, which privileges Kurdish identity over identity as part of the *umma*; and the experience of Ansar al-Islam and ISIS, which discredited radical Islamism in Kurdish public opinion. Nevertheless, the Islamists have three characteristics that make them important in future scenarios: deep-rooted charitable and educational networks in poor areas; cross-border ties with Sunni Kurdish Islamist networks in Iran; and the capacity to exploit economic discontent in the event of the Region's financial collapse.

5.6 The Unrepresented: Youth, Protesters, and Emigrants

The greatest challenger of the bipolar order may be no party at all. Since 2011 Iraqi Kurdistan has experienced several waves of street protest: the February 2011 protests in Sulaymaniyah, coinciding with the Arab Spring; the 2015 and 2020 protests over delays in salary payments; and subsequent sporadic protests. Each wave was contained by a combination of repression and promises, and the arrest of journalists and activists, particularly in the Badinan area, drew criticism from human rights organizations.

The response of a large part of the youth to the political impasse has been not protest but exit. In recent years Iraqi Kurds have constituted a significant share of irregular migrants to Europe, from

[49]Kurdistan24, "Leaked Document Purports to Detail Secret PUK–New Generation Pact," 9 July 2026.

the Belarus–Poland border crisis of 2021 to crossings of the English Channel. From the perspective of the bipolar order, this emigration has a dual function: it reduces domestic pressure, but at the same time it shows that the young generation accords no legitimacy to the existing system. From the perspective of this book, this unrepresented generation is the most important unknown variable in the Region's future: as long as it remains outside politics, the bipolar order is stable; if it one day returns to politics—especially at a moment of financial crisis or a succession vacuum—it can change the entire equation.

5.7 The Co-optation Pattern: Why Is the Bipolar Order Durable?

A comparison of the challengers' trajectories reveals a recurring cycle:

Table 5.1. The co-optation cycle: Gorran and New Generation compared

Stage	Gorran	New Generation
Emergence	2009; split from the PUK	2018; from the media and the private sector
Electoral peak	2009 and 2013; second force	2024; third force with 15 seats
Pressure	2015; speaker of parliament barred from Erbil; ministers expelled	2025; arrest of the leader
Co-optation	2019; rejoins the government	2026; coalition with the PUK
Erosion	2024; marginalization	Ongoing; internal rift and allegations of a deal

This cycle, which analysts have described as "the durability of two-party bipolarity through the periodic co-optation of opponents," rests on three structural mechanisms:

- **Monopoly of the means of coercion:** The security apparatuses and Peshmerga units belong to the two parties, not to the state; no challenger without armed instruments can remain immune from pressure.
- **Monopoly of resources:** State employment, contracts, and economic licenses pass through the two parties; even a victorious challenger must join the government in order to deliver services to its base.
- **Divided geography:** Each challenger in practice operates within the domain of one of the two families (Gorran and New Generation both in Sulaymaniyah), so the other family has no incentive to support it against its rival except to weaken that rival; and the rival family can restore the balance in its own favor by co-opting the challenger, as the Union did in 2026 by absorbing New Generation and raising its bloc to 38 seats, nearly equal in weight to the KDP.

Chapter Summary

The implication of this chapter for the book's central question is clear. The external behavior of Iraqi Kurdistan—its alignment with or incompatibility with the regional order and neighboring states—is determined by the two families, not by the challengers. The tribes and sheikhs are loyal pillars of the bipolar order, and the secular and Islamist challengers have been either eliminated or co-opted. In the medium term, therefore, analyzing the Region's behavior toward post–Islamic Republic Iran or a recentralized Iraq is essentially a matter of analyzing the behavior of the two families presented in Chapters Three and Four.

But two structural warnings should not be ignored. First, the loyalty of the tribes and peripheral networks is transactional and depends on the families' financial capacity; Baghdad's fiscal recentralization can gradually shift this loyalty toward the center, and this is the most important mechanism through which federal Iraq can contain the Region without war. Second, the unrepresented young generation—which either emigrates or withdraws from politics—is a variable that at a moment of crisis can upend the bipolar order. These two warnings are used as warning indicators in Chapter Fifteen in analyzing scenarios for the Region's future. With this map of power in hand, the next part of the book turns to the political history of the Region from the September Revolution to the impasse of 2026.

PART FOUR: The Region from the Ba'th to Recentralization

CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6. From the September Revolution to the Fall of Saddam (1961–2003)

Chapters Three through Five examined Kurdish politics from within—from the perspective of the families and their rivals. This chapter revisits the same period from without: from the perspective of the Kurds' relationship with the Iraqi state and with regional and global powers. The four decades examined here are among the most violent in Kurdish history: successive wars, forced displacement, the Anfal campaign, and the chemical bombardment of Halabja. Yet this same period, out of catastrophe, produced the first durable state-like Kurdish institution. The question of this chapter is how the central state's maximal repression, rather than destroying the Kurdish movement, led to its self-government; and what lesson this experience holds for understanding moments of state collapse, including in the Iran of the future.

6.1 The Republic of Iraq and the Outbreak of War (1958–1968)

The coup of 14 July 1958, led by Abd al-Karim Qasim, overthrew the Hashemite monarchy and at first gave the Kurds new hope. The interim constitution described Arabs and Kurds as "partners" in the homeland, and Mulla Mustafa Barzani returned from Soviet exile. But Qasim, who needed allies against the Nasserists and Ba'thists, gradually came to see Barzani as a rival and armed the tribes hostile to Barzan against him. In September 1961, clashes between the army and Kurdish forces escalated into full-scale war.

In the following decade, four successive governments in Baghdad—from Qasim to the Ba'thists of 1963 and the Arif brothers—all repeated a single pattern: each new government negotiated or concluded a ceasefire with the Kurds in order to consolidate its power, and once consolidated, resumed the war. The military turning point of this period was the Battle of Mount Handrin in May 1966, in which Barzani's forces inflicted a heavy defeat on the Iraqi army. In its wake, Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz, Iraq's civilian prime minister, announced in June 1966 a twelve-point program that recognized the national rights of the Kurds, the Kurdish language, and a form of decentralization. The Bazzaz program was not implemented, because the military sidelined him; but its content became the template for all subsequent agreements.

This decade reveals the chapter's first empirical rule: a weak and unstable central state negotiates with the Kurds, while a strong and consolidated central state fights them. This rule, which recurs throughout this book, bears directly on the question of post–Islamic Republic Iran: the moment of transition, when the new state is weak, is the moment of greatest opportunity for an agreement and, at the same time, of the greatest risk of that agreement's failure in the future.

6.2 The Ba'th and the March 1970 Agreement

The Ba'th, which returned to power in July 1968, initially followed the same logic. The agreement of 11 March 1970 between the Ba'th regime and Barzani—whose chief negotiator was Saddam Hussein as vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council—was the most comprehensive agreement the Iraqi state had signed with the Kurds up to that time. The agreement recognized the existence of the Kurdish nation in the constitution, made Kurdish official in Kurdish-inhabited

areas, provided for a Kurdish vice-president, and promised that autonomy would be implemented within four years in areas with a Kurdish majority—areas whose boundaries were to be determined by a census.[50]

But this very census condition became the heart of the agreement's failure. Kirkuk, with its oil wealth, was the key to the equation; and in the following years Baghdad, through the policy of "Arabization"—displacing Kurds and Turkmen and settling Arabs—sought to alter the city's demographic composition before the census. At the same time, the Feyli Kurds—Shi'i Kurds of Baghdad and the eastern border areas—were expelled from Iraq on a large scale in 1971 and again in 1980 as being "of Iranian origin" and stripped of their citizenship: a catastrophe often overlooked in prevailing narratives of the Kurdish question.

The International Dimension: The Link to the Cold War

The year 1972 brought together two international developments that sealed the fate of the agreement. In April 1972 Iraq signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union, and in June of that year it nationalized the Iraq Petroleum Company. A month earlier, in May 1972, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had met the Shah in Tehran, and in the wake of that meeting the United States began a program of covert aid to the Kurds of Iraq through Iran.[51] From this moment the Kurdish question in Iraq was transformed from a domestic conflict into a subsidiary front of the Cold War: the Soviet Union behind Baghdad, and the United States, Iran, and Israel behind the Kurds. The Pike Committee report later showed that the patrons' aim was the "attrition" of Iraq, not Kurdish victory.

In March 1974 Baghdad unilaterally proclaimed the autonomy law: an autonomous region comprising Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok, with a legislative council and an executive council in Erbil—but without Kirkuk. Barzani rejected it, and the war resumed. Despite the merely formal character of its institutions under the Ba'th, the 1974 law had lasting significance: those same three provinces became the de facto boundaries of the region that seventeen years later became a de facto state and thirty years later a federal region.

6.3 Algiers and Its Aftermath (1975–1980)

The Algiers Agreement of 6 March 1975 was a simple bargain: Iraq accepted the Shatt al-Arab border along the thalweg line—Iran's long-standing demand—and in return Iran cut off its support for the Kurds. The collapse of the movement, examined in Chapter Three, marked the beginning of a period that Baghdad used for a "final solution" to the Kurdish question. Between 1975 and 1978, the Iraqi government created a security belt along the borders with Iran and Turkey, destroyed hundreds of border villages, and moved their inhabitants into *mujamma'at*—forced-resettlement complexes under army control. The Arabization of Kirkuk and the mixed areas accelerated.

From the theoretical perspective of Chapter One, these policies were an attempt to destroy the social base of the Kurdish movement: the mountain village, which was both a refuge for the Peshmerga and the base of the tribal structure. But the outcome was paradoxical. Forced displacement made Kurdish society more urban and more politicized, and the young generation that grew up in the

[50]For the text and analysis of the March 1970 Agreement, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), ch. 15.

[51]U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on Intelligence (Pike Committee), *Final Report* (1976); the Kurdish section was published in *The Village Voice*, 16 February 1976.

mujamma'at became the base of new parties—especially the PUK, which was founded in that very year, 1975.

6.4 The Iran–Iraq War, Anfal, and Halabja (1980–1988)

From 1980 the Iran–Iraq War internationalized the Kurdish question once again, but this time with a reshuffling of patrons: the KDP allied with the Islamic Republic; the PUK was at first with Iran, then negotiated with Saddam in 1983 and 1984, and after the failure of those talks again drew closer to Iran. At the same time, the Iraqi government supported Iran's Kurdish parties against the Islamic Republic, and the Islamic Republic supported Iraq's Kurdish parties against Saddam. This "cross-proxy war" was a perfect example of the triadic nexus of Chapter One: each state made the other state's Kurds an instrument of its war.

Anfal

In March 1987 Saddam Hussein appointed his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid as head of the Ba'th Party's "Northern Bureau," with full authority over all military, security, and administrative institutions in Kurdistan. From February to September 1988, the Anfal campaign—named after the eighth sura of the Qur'an—was carried out in eight stages. Iraqi forces cleared the rural areas of Kurdistan, which had been declared "prohibited zones," through ground attacks, bombardment, and chemical weapons; men and boys of military age were separated and sent to mass graves in southern and western Iraq.[52] Human Rights Watch has estimated the number killed at between 50,000 and possibly 100,000, and Kurdish sources cite much higher figures; thousands of villages were destroyed. On the basis of Ba'th regime documents obtained after 1991, that organization judged Anfal to be a case of genocide.

Halabja

On 16 March 1988, after Iranian forces and PUK Peshmerga had captured the town of Halabja, Iraqi aircraft bombarded the town with chemical weapons. About five thousand civilians were killed in the first hours. Owing to the images published by Iranian and foreign journalists, Halabja became a global symbol of Kurdish suffering.

The international reaction to Anfal and Halabja is vital to understanding Kurdish political memory. In 1988 the United States and most Western countries leaned toward Iraq in the Iran–Iraq War, and their reaction to the use of chemical weapons remained limited; some officials at first even held Iran partly responsible. This silence was, after the abandonment of 1975, the Kurds' second bitter experience of the Western powers within a single generation. Justice came only after 2003: the Iraqi High Tribunal sentenced Ali Hassan al-Majid to death in the Anfal case, and the sentence was carried out in 2010.

The lesson of Anfal for this book's question is twofold. On the one hand, Anfal showed how far a powerful central state, free of international oversight, can go in suppressing the Kurdish question. On the other hand, Anfal failed to destroy the Kurdish movement; rather, it transformed Kurdish national identity in Iraq from a political identity into one grounded in the collective memory of genocide, and this very transformation supplied the emotional legitimacy of self-government after 1991. Any state that in the future seeks to contain the Kurds by force will confront this memory.

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[52] Human Rights Watch/Middle East, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993). HRW's estimate of the number killed is 50,000 to possibly 100,000; Kurdish sources give considerably higher figures.

6.5 1991: From Uprising to Safe Haven

Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War in February 1991, and the U.S. president's call on the Iraqi people to remove Saddam, led to simultaneous uprisings by the Shi'a in the south and the Kurds in the north. The Kurdistan uprising (*Raperîn*) began in Ranya in early March, and in less than two weeks—with the *jash* and *mustashars* joining it—nearly all the cities of Kurdistan, and for a brief period Kirkuk, fell into Kurdish hands.

But the United States, concerned about the collapse of Iraq and the expansion of Iranian influence in the south, did not intervene and allowed the Iraqi army to use combat helicopters. The Republican Guard's counteroffensive at the end of March revived the fear of a repetition of Anfal and Halabja and led to one of the largest mass exoduses of the twentieth century: more than a million Kurds fled in the cold of early spring toward the Iranian and Turkish borders. Iran opened its border and received hundreds of thousands of refugees; Turkey at first kept its border closed, and the refugees were trapped in the border mountains.

The images of this catastrophe shook Western public opinion. On 5 April 1991 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 688, which declared the repression of civilians a threat to international peace and security and called for access for humanitarian organizations.[53] On the basis of this resolution, the United States, Britain, and France launched "Operation Provide Comfort," created a safe haven in northern Iraq, and established a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel. After the failed negotiations of the Kurdish leaders with Saddam in the spring and summer of 1991, the Iraqi government in October of that year withdrew its administration from the three provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok and imposed an internal economic blockade on them.

This decision by Saddam, aimed at economically strangling the Kurds, inadvertently gave birth to the Kurdish de facto state. The administrative vacuum he left forced the Kurds to build their own institutions. 1991 is therefore the moment of the Region's birth, and it established a model to which the Kurds of Iran explicitly referred in March 2026: Iranian Kurdish leaders, responding to an American offer of support for a ground operation, said they could not move without a "no-fly zone" similar to that of 1991.

6.6 The De Facto State and the Civil War (1992–1998)

The elections of May 1992, the first free elections in the history of Iraqi Kurdistan, founded the Region's parliament and government. But the near-even result between the two main parties led to a fifty-fifty formula for dividing all posts: every minister had a deputy from the other party, and every Peshmerga unit belonged to one of the two parties. In theoretical terms, this government was not a single state but two family patronage systems within a shared institutional shell.

The fledgling state's economy was under a double blockade: UN sanctions against all of Iraq, and Baghdad's blockade against Kurdistan. Under these conditions, the main revenue came from customs at the Ibrahim Khalil crossing with Turkey and from fuel smuggling—revenue that lay in KDP territory and that the party refused to share with the PUK. The UN "Oil-for-Food" program, which from 1996 allocated a share of Iraq's oil revenue to the three Kurdish provinces, later improved the economic situation, but only after the civil war had begun.

[53]United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 (5 April 1991).

The Fratricidal War

The civil war began in May 1994 with a land dispute in Qaladiza and quickly escalated into full-scale war between the two parties that lasted until 1998 and left thousands dead. Three factors prolonged it: the dispute over customs revenue, the family and personal rivalry of the two leaders, and the intervention of neighboring powers. Iran supported the PUK; Turkey, which in those same years conducted several large-scale operations against the PKK in northern Iraq, was close to the KDP; the PKK itself at times entered the war against the KDP; and the Islamic Republic in these years also targeted the headquarters of Iranian Kurdish parties in the Region.

The climax of the war was the event of 31 August 1996, examined in Chapter Three: the entry of Saddam's army into Erbil at the invitation of the KDP. A side consequence was the collapse of the CIA's operation and of the Iraqi opposition based in Erbil, and the execution of a number of its members by Iraqi forces—an event that deepened Washington's distrust of the Kurds for several years. Finally, the Washington Agreement of September 1998, brokered by the U.S. Secretary of State, consolidated the ceasefire and emphasized revenue-sharing, normalization, and the holding of joint elections. In practice, however, two separate administrations—one in Erbil and the other in Sulaymaniyah, each with its own cabinet—remained in place until 2006.

The civil war is the most important evidence for the book's fourth hypothesis. In 1992 the Kurds of Iraq were in the best position in their history: international support, liberated territory, and elected institutions. Yet in less than two years their internal rivalry turned this position into a war in which each side sought help from the Kurds' historical enemies. This experience is a direct warning for any scenario of Kurdish self-government in Iran: without an agreed mechanism for sharing power and revenue among Kurdish parties, self-government at the moment of victory leads to civil war.

6.7 The Eve of 2003: From the Margins to the Northern Front

The years 1998 to 2003 were a period of relative calm and economic growth. The two parties, having drawn a lesson from the civil war, confined their rivalry to the political and administrative arena and cooperated with the United States and the Iraqi opposition in preparing for Saddam's fall. The opposition conferences in London (December 2002) and Salahaddin in the Region (February 2003) consolidated the position of the Kurds as one of the pillars of post-Saddam Iraq.

An unexpected event made the role of the Kurds in the 2003 war even more prominent: on 1 March 2003 the Turkish parliament rejected permission for U.S. ground forces to cross Turkish territory to open a northern front. As a result, the United States opened the northern front with special forces and Kurdish Peshmerga. Before the main war began, U.S. forces and PUK Peshmerga crushed Ansar al-Islam's positions in Hawraman. In April 2003 the Peshmerga entered Kirkuk and Mosul together with U.S. forces. The Kurds, who had been abandoned in 1991, were victorious partners in 2003; and this partnership became the basis of the position examined in the next chapter.

6.8 Chronology and Summary

Table 6.1. Chronology and empirical rules, 1961–2003

Year	Event	Empirical rule
1961	Outbreak of the September Revolution	A consolidated state fights the Kurds
1966	Handrin and the Bazzaz program	Military defeat of the state leads to negotiation

Year	Event	Empirical rule
1970	The 11 March agreement	An agreement without resolving Kirkuk is unstable
1972	Iraq–Soviet treaty; covert U.S. aid begins	The Kurdish conflict becomes a subsidiary front of great-power rivalry
1974	Unilateral autonomy law	Three provinces become the future borders of the Region
1975	Algiers; collapse of the movement	In a state-to-state bargain, the external patron sacrifices the Kurds
1980–1988	Cross-proxy war between Iran and Iraq	Each state uses the other state's Kurds as an instrument
1988	Anfal and Halabja	Maximal repression does not destroy identity; it consolidates it
1991	Uprising, mass exodus, Resolution 688, no-fly zone	The de facto state is born out of humanitarian catastrophe
1994–1998	Civil war; 1996 Erbil; Washington Agreement	Internal division destroys a superior position
2003	The northern front and the fall of Saddam	Those abandoned in 1991 become partners in 2003

The four decades examined in this chapter yield five empirical rules for answering the book's central question. First, a weak central state negotiates with the Kurds and a strong one fights them; an agreement signed at a moment of central weakness is therefore durable only if it is institutionalized and backed by external guarantees. Second, no agreement endures without resolving the question of disputed territories, which in Iraq is called Kirkuk. Third, maximal repression, from forced displacement to Anfal, did not destroy the Kurdish movement but made it more urban, more politicized, and more determined. Fourth, the Kurdish de facto state was born not of military victory but of a combination of humanitarian catastrophe, international attention, and an administrative vacuum. And fifth, the greatest threat to Kurdish achievements was their internal division.

For the Iran of the future, these rules carry a clear message: a transitional state that wishes to avoid repeating the Iraqi cycle must conclude an institutionalized agreement with the Kurds at the very moment of its initial weakness, resolve the question of mixed areas through a clear mechanism, and recognize that the option of repression fails in the long run. And Iran's Kurdish parties, if they wish to avoid a repetition of 1994, must have put the rules for sharing power among themselves in writing before any victory. The coalition of February 2026, examined in Chapter Nine, is the first serious step on this path.

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7. From Federalism to Recentralization (2003–2026)

If the previous chapter told the story of the Kurdish quasi-state's birth out of catastrophe, this chapter tells the story of two decades in which that quasi-state reached the height of its power and then, without military defeat, gradually lost its powers. The Region's trajectory from 2003 to 2026 can be summarized in three stages: institutionalization (2003–2013), peak and gamble (2014–2017), and legal and fiscal recentralization (2017–2026). The question of this chapter is how Baghdad—which showed in 2017 that it could retake territory by force—thereafter reclaimed the Region's powers not with the army but with courts, budgets, and pipelines; and what this experience tells us about the future of federalism in Iraq and its possibility in Iran.

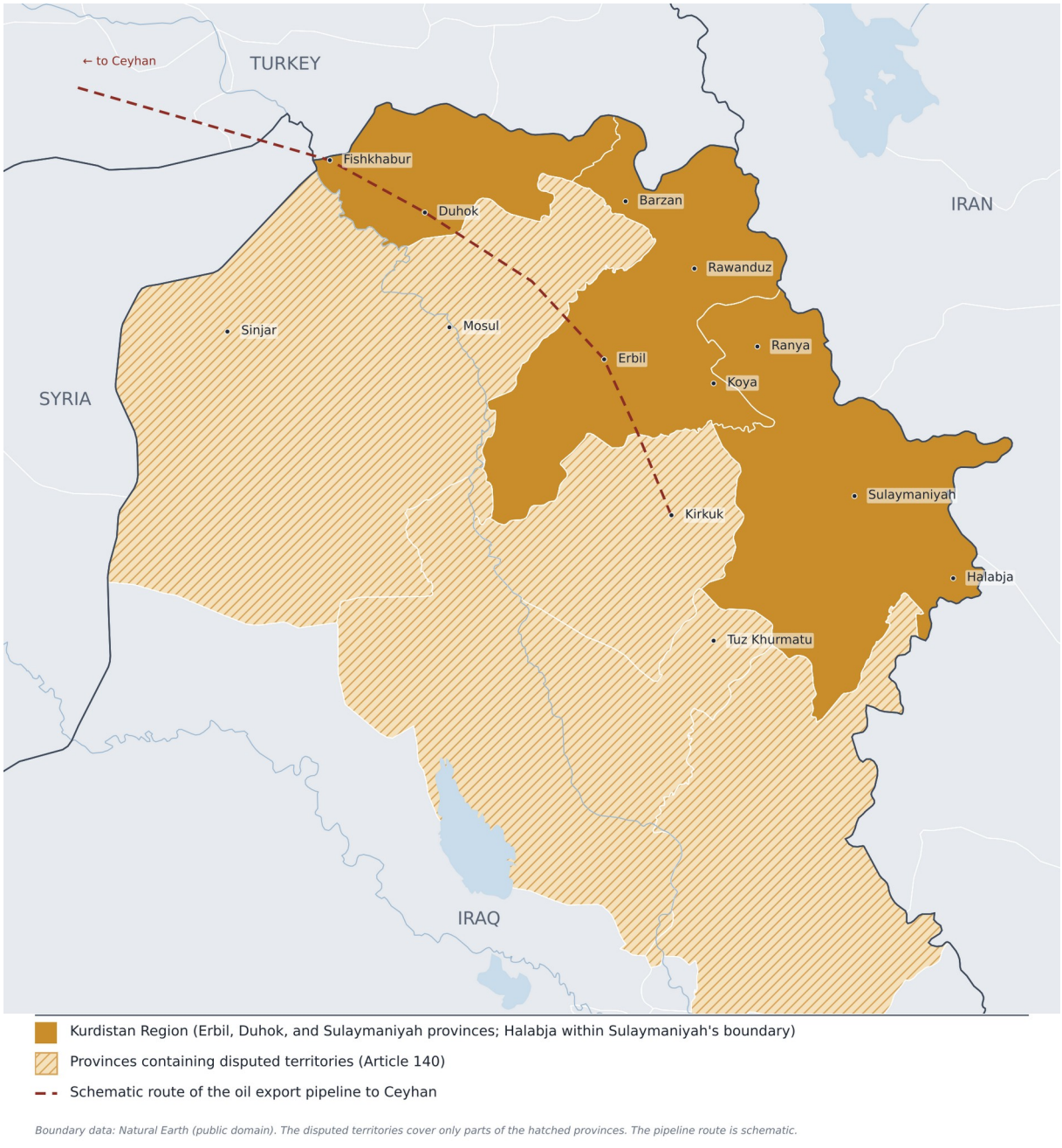
7.1 Institutionalization: The 2005 Constitution

In 2003 the Kurds were in the strongest bargaining position in their history: a victorious ally of the United States, with an organized armed force and twelve years of experience of self-government, facing a central state that had collapsed. They used this position to write their status into the constitution. The Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (March 2004), and then the permanent constitution adopted by referendum on 15 October 2005, entrenched several foundational principles:

- **Recognition of the Region:** The Kurdistan Region and its existing institutions were recognized as a federal region.
- **Residual powers:** Powers not explicitly granted to the federal government belong to the regions, and in the event of conflict between regional and federal law in non-exclusive matters, regional law prevails.
- **The Region's security forces:** The Region has the right to organize its own internal security forces, including "regional guards"—the legal basis of the Peshmerga.
- **Language:** Kurdish became an official language of Iraq alongside Arabic.
- **Article 140:** A three-stage process was provided for resolving the question of Kirkuk and the other "disputed territories": normalization (reversing the effects of Arabization), a census, and a referendum on joining the Region—all by the end of 2007.
- **Oil and gas:** Oil and gas were declared "the property of all the people of Iraq," and the management of "present fields" was entrusted jointly to the federal government and the regions; but regarding new fields, contracts, and exports, the text remained ambiguous.

Two weaknesses of this architecture determined the fate of the following two decades. First, Article 140 was never implemented; the 2007 deadline passed, and the question of Kirkuk remained open. Second, the deliberate ambiguity of the oil provisions, which opened the way to agreement in 2005, became the most important source of conflict. In the terms of the literature on constitution-making in divided societies, the Kurds in 2005 chose "constructive ambiguity" in order to obtain in a time of

strength what the text did not explicitly grant them; but at a moment of weakness, ambiguity is interpreted in favor of the party that controls the court.[54]



Map 3. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the disputed territories, and the pipeline route

Incomplete Unification

In 2006 the two separate administrations of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah were merged into a single cabinet headed by Nechirvan Barzani. But the merger was largely superficial: sensitive ministries—especially Peshmerga, Finance, and Interior—remained dual for years, and even after the formal merger a large part of the Peshmerga units, in the form of the "70 forces" affiliated with the PUK and

[54]On the 2005 constitution and the Kurdish negotiating strategy, see Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih (eds.), *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

the "80 forces" affiliated with the KDP, remained outside the command of the Ministry of Peshmerga. The unification of the Peshmerga, which the United States and the international coalition for years made a condition of their assistance, remains incomplete as of 2026.

7.2 Independent Oil Policy and the Bond with Turkey

In August 2007 the Region adopted its own oil and gas law and on that basis signed dozens of production-sharing contracts with international oil companies. Baghdad declared these contracts illegal, but the entry of major companies—including ExxonMobil, Chevron, and Total in 2011 and 2012—gave the Region new political and economic weight. The decisive step was the 2013 energy agreement with Turkey and the construction of the Region's independent pipeline, which from 2014 carried the Region's oil exports to the port of Ceyhan without passing through the federal network.

Within the theoretical framework of Chapter One, this development turned the Region into an independent rentier: a state that derived its principal revenue not from Baghdad but directly from the world market. But Baghdad's response was equally immediate: from early 2014 the Region's share of the federal budget was cut off. Having moved from one rent to another, the Region in practice shifted its dependence from Baghdad to Ankara—the very "dependent quasi-state" that Natali had described, but with a new patron.

7.3 The Peak: ISIS and Kirkuk (2014–2017)

The fall of Mosul to ISIS on 10 June 2014 and the collapse of the Iraqi army in the north were both the greatest threat and the greatest opportunity for the Region. In the following days, the Peshmerga took control of Kirkuk and a large part of the disputed territories abandoned by the Iraqi army; that is, what Article 140 had failed to give the Kurds in ten years was obtained in a few days. But in August 2014 ISIS attacked Sinjar and, following the withdrawal of Peshmerga forces, the genocide of the Yazidis took place; and ISIS's advance to the vicinity of Erbil prompted the United States to begin airstrikes on 8 August.

Three years of war against ISIS made the Region the principal partner of the international coalition. The Peshmerga received weapons, training, and international legitimacy, and Erbil became the center of Western diplomatic and military activity in Iraq. At the same time, however, the collapse of oil prices in 2014–2016, the cutoff of the federal budget, the cost of the war, and the reception of some two million displaced persons plunged the Region into a deep financial crisis: employees' salaries were paid months late or with deductions, and the Region's debts to oil companies and merchants grew. In theoretical terms, at the peak of its military and international prestige the Region was at the lowest point of its capacity to distribute rent; and the resulting domestic discontent was one of the background factors in the decision to hold the referendum.

The Referendum and Its Institutional Consequences

Chapter Three examined the decision to hold the referendum of 25 September 2017 from the perspective of the Barzani family's logic. What matters here are its institutional consequences, which marked the beginning of the recentralization phase. First, on 16 October Baghdad retook Kirkuk and most of the disputed territories, and the Region returned to its pre-2014 boundaries. Second, Baghdad suspended international flights at Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports for several months and demanded control of the border crossings. Third, in November 2017 the Federal Supreme Court ruled that the constitution does not permit the secession of any part of Iraq and

declared the referendum unconstitutional. And fourth, the Region's share in subsequent federal budgets was reduced. From this moment, the Federal Supreme Court became Baghdad's principal instrument for redefining its relationship with the Region.

7.4 Legal Recentralization: The Federal Supreme Court

Between 2022 and 2024, Iraq's Federal Supreme Court issued a series of rulings that in practice curtailed a large part of the Region's autonomy without the need for constitutional amendment:[55]

Table 7.1. Key rulings of the Federal Supreme Court, 2022–2024

Date	Ruling	Consequence
February 2022	The Region's Oil and Gas Law (2007) is unconstitutional	The legal basis of independent oil policy collapsed
May 2023	Extension of the Kurdistan parliament's term is unconstitutional	Parliament dissolved; caretaker government until elections
February 2024	Direct payment of the Region's employees' salaries by Baghdad; elections to be conducted by the federal commission; abolition of minority quota seats; division of the Region into electoral districts	Baghdad gained oversight of the Region's elections and a direct financial relationship with its employees

The significance of the February 2024 ruling on salaries cannot be overstated. In the Region's neopatrimonial system, the payment of salaries to more than a million employees and pensioners was the main pillar of political loyalty. With the transfer of this payment to Baghdad, the financial relationship between the Kurdish citizen and the federal government became direct for the first time since 1991. In the terms of Chapter Five, this is precisely the mechanism through which the loyalty of peripheral networks can gradually shift from the families to the center. The KDP called these rulings an attack on federalism and a violation of the constitution; but the PUK, some of whose salary-earners in Sulaymaniyah had suffered from Erbil's delays, welcomed them. In this way, the rivalry of the two parties itself became one of the instruments of recentralization.

7.5 Fiscal Recentralization: The Pipeline and Oil

The second blow came from Paris. On 25 March 2023, the arbitral tribunal of the International Chamber of Commerce ruled, in a case that Iraq had brought against Turkey in 2014, that Turkey had violated the bilateral pipeline agreement by transporting the Region's oil without Baghdad's permission. Turkey immediately halted the flow of oil through the pipeline. The Region, which had been exporting about 400,000 barrels per day, suddenly lost its principal source of independent revenue. The three-year federal budget law of 2023 stipulated that the Region's oil must be sold through Iraq's State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO).

The halt in exports lasted about two and a half years. In September 2025 an interim agreement among the federal oil ministry, the Region's Ministry of Natural Resources, and international oil companies led to the resumption of exports—but this time on a fundamental condition: the Region's

[55]For an overview of the Federal Supreme Court's rulings and their implications, see International Crisis Group and Washington Institute analyses, 2022–2024; the rulings themselves are published by the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq.

oil is exported as Iraqi oil and through the federal mechanism.[56] The independent rentier had reverted to being a recipient of a share of federal rent.

The Paradox of 2026: A Pipeline That Acquired Strategic Value

The 2026 war and the disruption in the Strait of Hormuz changed this equation in an unexpected way. With exports from southern Iraq's fields halted by the disruption of shipping routes, the Region's pipeline to Ceyhan became the only route for Iraqi oil exports independent of the Persian Gulf. On 18 March 2026, Baghdad and Erbil agreed that Kirkuk oil would be exported to Ceyhan through the Region's pipeline network and that the revenue would go to the federal treasury; Masrour Barzani announced that, after a telephone call with Tom Barrack, the American envoy, he had ordered exports to be facilitated.[57] Shortly afterward, Basra oil was also exported by this route for the first time. In June 2026 al-Zaidi's government announced the goal of raising exports via this route to about 770,000 barrels per day, and in August 2026 Iraq and Turkey extended the pipeline agreement for one year with a capacity of 750,000 barrels.[58]

This development reveals a paradox of central importance to the book's question. On the one hand, the Region's infrastructure became a strategic asset for all of Iraq, and Erbil's bargaining leverage vis-à-vis Baghdad increased; for the first time since 2014, Baghdad needed the Region, not the other way around. On the other hand, this leverage was exercised in the form of cooperation with the federal government and for the benefit of the federal treasury, not in the form of fiscal independence. In other words, the new order values the Region not as a state in formation but as a "transit node" of a unified Iraq; and by accepting this role, Erbil demonstrated its alignment with that order.

7.6 Security: From the American Umbrella to Self-Help

Since 2020, two security trends have made the Region more vulnerable. The first is the attacks by the Islamic Republic and its affiliated groups: the missile attack on Erbil in March 2022; the January 2024 attack that killed a prominent Kurdish businessman and members of his family; drone attacks on the Region's oil and gas fields; and the dozens of missiles and drones fired at Erbil from the first days of the 2026 war. The second is the Iraq–U.S. agreement to end the mission of the international coalition, under which the military presence in federal Iraq ended earlier and in the Region continued until September 2026. According to the UK House of Commons Library, the final withdrawal of American forces was scheduled for 30 September 2026.

The end of the direct American military umbrella, together with the failure to unify the Peshmerga, places the Region in a position without precedent since 1991: without a military patron stationed on its soil, next door to an Islamic Republic at war, and with a federal government that dominates its financial resources. The Region's response to this situation, as we saw in Chapters Three and Four, has been strategic caution: avoiding involvement in the 2026 war and increasing cooperation with Baghdad.

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[56] On the September 2025 resumption and subsequent arrangements, see reporting summarized in *MEES*, 5 June 2026, and *Middle East Online*, 18 March 2026.

[57] *Middle East Online*, "Iraq, KRG reach deal to resume oil exports to Turkey's Ceyhan port," 18 March 2026; Kurdistan24, 6 April 2026.

[58] *MEES*, "Iraq Calls On Kurdistan IOCs To Boost Ceyhan Exports," 5 June 2026; on the August 2026 extension, see summaries of Iraqi–Turkish pipeline talks, August 2026.

7.7 Institutional Paralysis (2024–2026)

The Kurdistan parliamentary elections—held after repeated delays on 20 October 2024, and for the first time under the supervision of the federal electoral commission—gave no party a majority. The KDP won 39 seats, the PUK 23, New Generation 15, the Kurdistan Islamic Union 7, the National Stance Movement (*Halwest*) 4, the Justice Group 3, and the People's Front 2. After its first session in December 2024, parliament did not convene again, and the tenth cabinet had not been formed by the end of September 2026.[59]

The impasse transferred the rivalry of the two families from the Region to Baghdad. After Iraq's parliamentary elections of November 2025, the PUK—by capturing the presidency of Iraq in April 2026 despite the KDP's boycott, and then through its coalition with New Generation in July—built a 38-seat bloc in the Kurdistan parliament, nearly equal in weight to the KDP. Nevertheless, in August 2026 a KDP official spoke of the "good closeness" of the two parties and stressed that the KDP and the PUK "complement each other." In the spring of 2026, a PUK leader had announced that political relations between the two parties had effectively been severed and that dialogue was possible only through the mediation of external powers. The most recent sign is a report of 26 September 2026 of an agreement between the two parties to reactivate parliament in October; if realized, it will be the first step out of paralysis.

The Region's institutional paralysis, at a time when the most sensitive regional developments—from the Iran war to the American withdrawal and the Turkish peace process—are under way, has itself become a factor of recentralization: in the absence of an effective government and parliament in Erbil, Baghdad in practice fills the vacuum, from the payment of salaries to the management of oil exports.

Chapter Summary: Federalism in Practice

The past two decades offer three clear lessons about federalism in the Middle East that bear directly on the book's question, and especially on the design of a transition in Iran:

- **Lesson one, the text is not enough:** The 2005 Constitution was one of the most decentralized constitutions in the region, but its ambiguous provisions (oil) and unimplemented provisions (Article 140) became instruments of recentralization. A federalism that lacks a dispute-resolution mechanism trusted by both sides is interpreted in favor of the party that controls the constitutional court.
- **Lesson two, money matters more than weapons:** Baghdad retook Kirkuk by force in 2017, but it reclaimed most of the Region's powers between 2022 and 2026 through courts, budgets, and control of oil exports. In a neopatrimonial system, whoever pays the salaries commands the loyalty.
- **Lesson three, internal division strengthens the center:** Every ruling of the Federal Supreme Court and every step of recentralization benefited from the rivalry between the KDP and the PUK. The Kurds who negotiated with one voice in 2005 stood before Baghdad with two voices in 2024.

This chapter's answer to the central question is that the Kurds of Iraq have in practice adapted to the new order—not by free choice, but by necessity. The Region has retreated from the project of

[59]Shafaq News, 9 June 2026; Peregraf, "One Year After Kurdistan's Elections, Government Formation Remains Elusive," October 2025; Rudaw, "No political ties remain between KDP, PUK," 2026.

independent state-building (2014–2017) to managing limited autonomy within a unified Iraq, and it finds its value for the new order not in independence but in its role as an energy-transit node and a security buffer. For the Iran of the future, Iraq's experience is both a model and a warning: a model of legal decentralization that ended a war, and a warning that decentralization without a dispute-resolution mechanism and without a clear division of resources does not resolve the question but transfers it to courts and budgets. With this experience in mind, Part Five of the book turns to Iranian Kurdistan.

PART FIVE: Iranian Kurdistan

CHAPTER 8

Chapter 8. Social Structure, Historical Families, and Parties

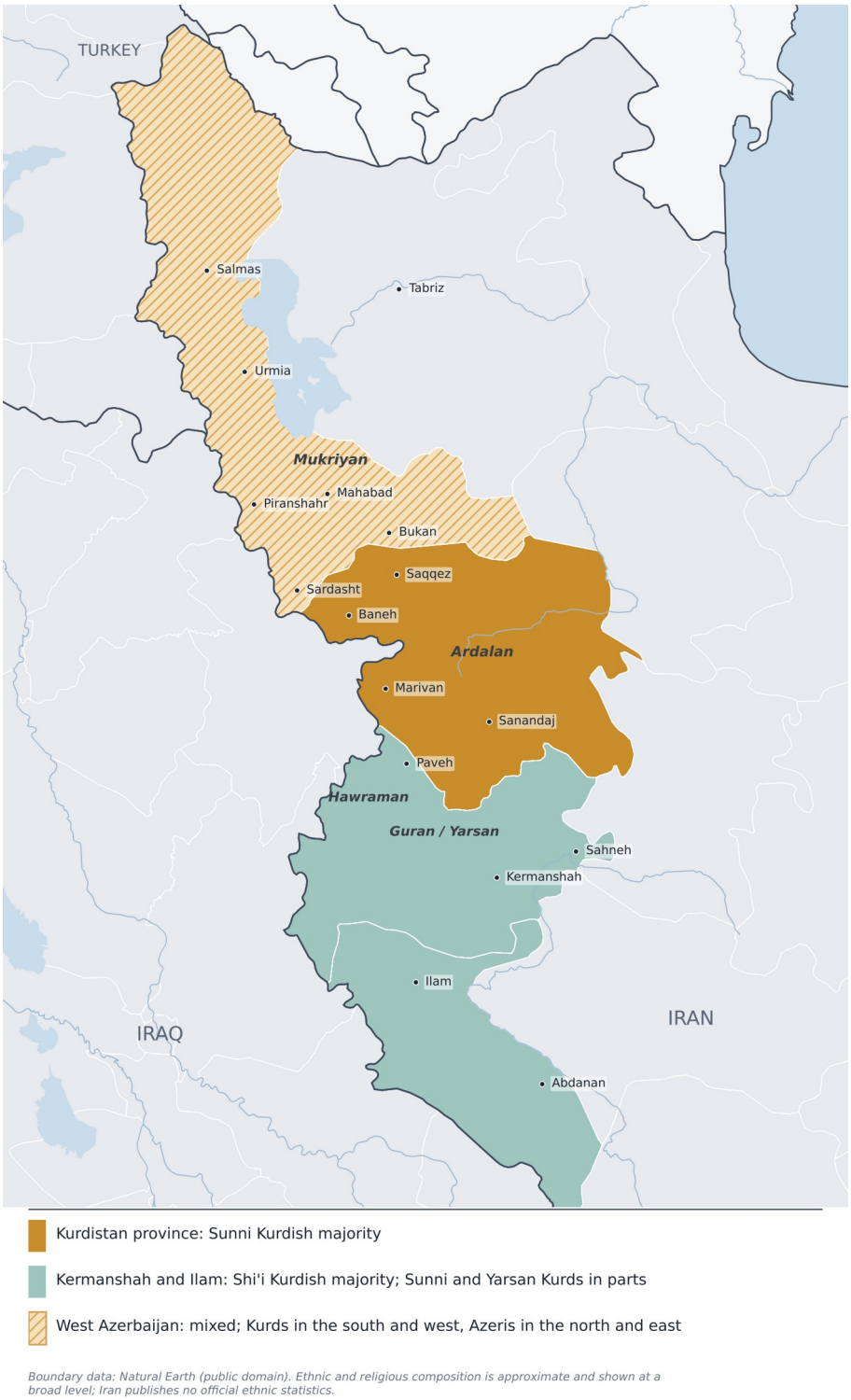
The central question of this book regarding post–Islamic Republic Iran is, above all, a question about the Kurds of Iran: who are they, who speaks on their behalf, and what do they want? Answering these questions is harder than answering the same questions about the Kurds of Iraq, because Iranian Kurdistan has neither a governing institution nor two dominant families. What exists is a society diverse in language, religion, and region; a set of historical families that have lost their political power; and parties that have spent most of their lives in exile. This chapter maps these three layers in order to lay the foundation for the analysis of subsequent chapters.

8.1 Human Geography: One Kurdistan or Several?

Iranian Kurdistan, in its political sense, extends from northern West Azerbaijan to Ilam in the south. But this expanse is not homogeneous in language, religion, or political culture, and it encompasses at least four distinct zones:

Table 8.1. The cultural zones of Iranian Kurdistan

Zone	Principal cities	Language	Religion	Dominant political culture
North and Mukriyan	Mahabad, Bukan, Piranshahr, Sardasht, Oshnavieh, Naqadeh, Salmas	Kurmanji in the north; Sorani (Mukri)	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Birthplace of the 1946 Republic and the KDPI; center of Kurdish nationalism
Hawraman and Ardalan	Sanandaj, Saqqez, Baneh, Marivan, Paveh, Kamyaran	Sorani (Ardalani); Hawrami	Sunni (Shafi'i)	Center of the left and Komala; religious networks; birthplace of the Jina movement
Kermanshah	Kermanshah, Eslamabad-e Gharb, Qasr-e Shirin, Sahneh, Kerend	Southern Kurdish (Kalhori); Gorani	Shi'i; Yarsan	Historically integrated into the central state; strong Iranian nationalism
Ilam and Feyli	Ilam, Mehran, Dehloran, Abdanan, Malekshahi	Southern Kurdish (Feyli)	Shi'i	Integrated; yet a center of the Dey 1404 (January 2026) protests



Map 4. Iranian Kurdistan: cultural zones and religious composition (approximate)

In addition to these four zones, a population of Kurmanj Kurds lives in North Khorasan, around Quchan, Shirvan, and Bojnurd, having been moved there in the Safavid period to guard the northeastern frontiers. These Kurds are Shi'i and have little political connection with the Kurdish national movement in the west of the country.

The significance of this diversity for the book's question is very great. The Kurdish national movement in Iran has from the outset been mainly a Sunni, Sorani-speaking movement in Mukriyan and Ardalan. The Shi'i Kurds of Kermanshah and Ilam—who may constitute nearly half of Iran's Kurds—have traditionally regarded themselves above all as "Iranian," and the Kurdish parties have had a limited base among them.[60] This divide is one of the reasons why no government in Tehran, whether Pahlavi or Islamic Republic, has seen the Kurdish question as a threat to the entire west of the country. But the events of Dey 1404 in Abdanan and Malekshahi showed that this pattern is changing; and if economic discontent and repression draw the southern Kurds onto the same path as the northern Kurds, the equation of the Kurdish question in Iran will be transformed.

Yarsan: A Minority within a Minority

Among the southern Kurds, followers of the Yarsan faith (Ahl-e Haqq) occupy a special position. This faith, whose scripture is written in Gorani and which is rooted in the regions of Guran, Sahneh, Kerend, and Dalahu, is neither among the officially recognized religions of the Islamic Republic, nor have its followers been permitted to express their religious identity freely. The number of Yarsan followers is contested, and estimates vary widely. In recent decades the Yarsanis have faced pressure to accept a Shi'i identity, restrictions on employment, and the arrest of religious activists.

The significance of Yarsan for the book's question is twofold. On the one hand, the Yarsanis are an example of a "minority within a minority": any solution to the Kurdish question that addresses only ethnic identity and ignores religious freedom leaves them without an answer. On the other hand, among the Yarsanis themselves there is disagreement about the relationship between religious identity and Kurdish identity; this shows that identity in western Iran is multilayered and cannot be reduced to a single ethnic label. A future constitution must guarantee religious freedom independently of ethnic rights.

8.2 Historical Families: From Power to Symbolic Capital

As we saw in Chapters One and Two, Reza Shah's state-building and the land reforms of the 1960s destroyed the economic and military foundations of the power of Kurdish families in Iran. Nevertheless, these families have not vanished from political memory, and knowledge of them is necessary for understanding the geography of loyalties and local networks:

- **Ardalan:** The *valis* of Kurdistan, centered on Sanandaj, who ruled with extensive autonomy under Iranian sovereignty until the mid-nineteenth century. The Ardalan family had close ties with the Qajar court, and its cultural legacy—including the works of Mastoureh Ardalan, the Kurdish woman poet and historian—remains part of Sanandaj's identity. The Ardalans symbolize Kurds who governed within the framework of the Iranian state, not against it.
- **Mukri and the Mukriyan tribes:** The Mukri families, and tribes such as the Dehbokri, Mangur, Mamash, and Gork, were the social pillars of Mukriyan. Their dual behavior in 1946—some supporting the Mahabad Republic and some coming to terms with the government at the moment of crisis—illustrates the pattern of tribal oscillation in Iran.
- **Qazi:** The family of the Qazis of Mahabad, who inherited the office of religious judge, from which Qazi Muhammad, president of the 1946 Republic, emerged. The family's capital today is symbolic, but it is a shared symbol for all of Iran's Kurdish nationalist currents.

[60]On the internal diversity of Iranian Kurds and its political consequences, see Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Allan Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

- **Shakak and the northern tribes:** The Shakak tribe, from which Simko emerged, and the Harki and Jalali tribes in the Urmia, Salmas, and Maku area live in regions where Kurds and Azeris are intermingled—regions for which any decentralization scenario must have a special mechanism.
- **Kalhor, Sanjabi, and Zanganeh:** Kermanshah families that were integrated into the history of the Iranian state. The Zanganehs gave the state a grand vizier in the Safavid period, and Karim Sanjabi, of the Sanjabi family, was leader of the National Front and the first foreign minister after the 1979 revolution. These families symbolize Kurds who were absorbed into Iran's national elite.
- **The Jaf and the sultans of Hawraman:** The Jaf of Javanrud and Paveh, with cross-border ties to the Jaf of Iraq, and the local ruling families of Hawraman, whose mountains have in contemporary history been a refuge for armed and Islamist movements.

The analytical point is that in Iran, unlike Iraq, none of these families today controls a party or commands an armed force. In transition scenarios they are not decision-makers but local networks of influence and mediation on which a transitional government or the Kurdish parties can rely. The only partial exception is the leadership of some parties that has continued within a single family, such as the role of the Yazdanpanah family in the Kurdistan Freedom Party and the Hosseini family in the Khabat Organization.

8.3 Religious and Civic Networks

Two non-party networks wield real influence in Iranian Kurdistan and are often overlooked in prevailing analyses.

Sunni Religious Networks

Sunni clerics (*mamostas*) in Iranian Kurdistan, especially in the Ardalan and Hawraman zones, have extensive social influence. The most important independent religious current was the "Maktab-e Qur'an" (School of the Qur'an), founded on the eve of the revolution by Ahmad Moftizadeh, a cleric from Sanandaj. Moftizadeh at first cooperated with the new government after the revolution, but after the Islamic Republic's constitution declared the Ja'fari school the official religion and the demands of the Sunnis went unheeded, he became its critic and spent about a decade in prison. The Maktab-e Qur'an current—religiously conservative and opposed to leftist and armed parties—today represents a segment of Kurdish religious society that is aligned neither with the government nor with the secular parties.

In contrast, the government has organized a network of aligned *mamostas* within official institutions and, since the first years after the revolution, has created the paramilitary force of the "Muslim Kurdish Peshmerga" from aligned Kurds—a force that was reactivated in the 2026 war. Kurdish religious society is thus also divided among three poles: aligned with the government, independent conservative, and aligned with the nationalist parties.

Civil Society and the Jina Movement

In the past two decades a new layer of activism has taken shape in Iranian Kurdistan that is not directly dependent on the parties: Kurdish-language activists, teachers, labor activists and advocates for the rights of *kolbars* (cross-border porters), environmental and women's rights activists, and human rights organizations such as Hengaw and the Kurdistan Human Rights Network, which document events from abroad. The nationwide movement of 1401 (2022), after the death of Jina

(Mahsa) Amini, a young woman from Saqqez, began in Kurdistan, and the slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* ("Woman, Life, Freedom"), which arose from the tradition of the Kurdish women's movement, became a nationwide slogan across Iran.[61]

This development has a twofold significance for the book's question. On the one hand, it showed that a discourse arising from Kurdistan can become Iran's national discourse; that is, the Kurds are not merely a "question" but one of the sources of Iranian democratic discourse. On the other hand, it showed that the young Kurdish generation inside Iran, like the young generation of Sulaymaniyah, does not necessarily follow the exiled parties; and any transitional government or any opposition coalition must also engage in direct dialogue with this layer.

Language and Culture: Policies of Tolerance and Restriction

Article 15 of the Islamic Republic's constitution permits the use of regional and ethnic languages in the press and media and the teaching of their literature in schools alongside Persian. But for decades this article was effectively not implemented. During the reform era, Kurdish-language publications expanded, and in 1394 (2015) the University of Kurdistan in Sanandaj launched the first bachelor's program in Kurdish language and literature. Nevertheless, mother-tongue education in schools remains prohibited, and in recent years a number of teachers and activists in voluntary Kurdish-language education have been imprisoned on security charges.

The Kurdish literary tradition in Iran, especially in Mukriyan, is an important cultural foundation of Kurdish identity. Poets such as Hazhar and Hêmin, who produced outstanding works during and after the Mahabad Republic, and Hazhar's translation of the *Shahnameh* into Kurdish, also demonstrate the deep connection between Kurdish culture and Iranian culture. This cultural connection, often overlooked in the nationalist narratives of both sides, is one of the potential foundations of the "citizenship narrative" proposed in Chapter Nine.

Women in Kurdish Politics

Women have played a more prominent role in Iranian Kurdish politics than in many other political currents in Iran. Komala admitted women as Peshmerga into its ranks from its earliest years; PJAK, following the Apoist movement, has a male–female co-chair structure and women's military units; and the slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* arose from this very tradition. For Iran's transition, this feature has a significance beyond the Kurdish question: Kurdistan can be one of the pioneers of gender equality in the Iran of the future, and the Kurdish parties are in this respect in unison with a large part of Iran's nationwide civil society.

Civic Networks Inside the Country

Alongside the exiled parties, a network of civic activism has taken shape inside Kurdistan that is not directly dependent on the parties: teachers' guild associations, labor activists in Sanandaj and other cities, and environmental activists. The Green Chia (*Sabz-e Chia*) association in Marivan, some of whose members lost their lives fighting fires in the Zagros forests, is an example of this activism, linking the protection of nature with local identity. These networks, which operate by peaceful means and within the framework of the law, may in a transition period enjoy greater legitimacy than the armed parties.

[61] On the Jina movement's Kurdish origins, see Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran* (2024), and reporting by Hengaw and the Kurdistan Human Rights Network, 2022–2023.

8.4 Parties: Six Organizations, Four Discourses

Iranian Kurdish party politics took shape in exile, mainly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and over four decades has undergone successive splits. In 2026, six main organizations are active.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)

The oldest Kurdish party in Iran, founded in Mahabad in 1945, it carries the legacy of the 1946 Republic. Its intellectual transformation occurred in the 1970s under the leadership of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, who formulated the slogan "Democracy for Iran, autonomy for Kurdistan"—that is, he defined the Kurdish demand within the framework of the democratization of all of Iran. Ghassemlou was assassinated in Vienna in July 1989 during negotiations with envoys of the Islamic Republic; and his successor, Sadegh Sharafkandi, was killed in September 1992 at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin. In 1997 a German court found the leadership of the Islamic Republic to have been involved in this assassination.[62]

From the 1990s, under the leadership of Mustafa Hijri, the party upgraded the slogan of autonomy to federalism within a democratic and secular Iran. In 2006 the party split, and the two branches operated separately until 2022, when they reunited in August 2022. The KDPI has the largest historical base in Mukriyan, has maintained the closest relationship with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq and the Barzani family, and has the most extensive relations with Western capitals among Iran's Kurdish parties. The U.S. president's telephone call with Mustafa Hijri in March 2026 was a sign of this very position.

The Komalas

Komala was founded in 1969 as a clandestine organization of leftist Kurdish students and intellectuals, mainly from the Ardalan zone, and became public after the 1979 revolution. Komala was initially a Marxist-Maoist organization, which in 1983 participated in founding the Communist Party of Iran. Its ideological and territorial rivalry with the KDPI in the 1980s led to a bloody war between the two organizations—a war that confirms, for Iran as well, the book's fourth hypothesis on the cost of internal division.

In 2000 Abdullah Mohtadi, one of the founders, broke with the Communist Party and established the "Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan," with a social-democratic orientation and a demand for federalism. This organization itself split in 2007, producing the "Komala of the Toilers of Kurdistan"; the two branches united in 2022, but the union collapsed in June 2023. Thus in 2026 three Komalas are active: the Komala of the Communist Party of Iran, the Komala of Iranian Kurdistan (Mohtadi), and the Komala of the Toilers. Mohtadi's Komala is the most pragmatic Kurdish party in its engagement with Iran's nationwide opposition and has taken part in cross-ethnic coalitions, including the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran.

The Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK)

PAK was founded in 1991 and, under the leadership of Hossein Yazdanpanah, has a harder nationalist discourse than the other parties, speaking of the right to self-determination and of "Eastern Kurdistan." PAK has relied on military capacity more than the other Iranian Kurdish parties, fought against ISIS alongside the Region's Peshmerga, and during the Dey 1404 protests spoke openly of "armed operations" against the IRGC. Its headquarters is in Erbil, and it has friendly relations with both of the Region's main parties.

[62]Kammergericht Berlin, judgment in the Mykonos case, 10 April 1997.

The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK)

PJAK was founded in 2004 as the Iranian branch of the Apoist movement, that is, the movement of Abdullah Öcalan's followers. Its ideology is "democratic confederalism," which, instead of a Kurdish nation-state, emphasizes local self-administration, gender equality, and a co-chair structure. Its bases are in the Qandil mountains. PJAK officially denies its link with the PKK, but critics and the region's governments regard it as part of the same network, and in 2009 the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned PJAK because of its link with the PKK. In the years before 2011, PJAK was the most active Kurdish armed force in Iran, until an unwritten ceasefire took shape after extensive IRGC operations in 2011. PJAK's fate is now tied to the fate of the PKK's dissolution process in Turkey.

The Khabat Organization of Iranian Kurdistan

Khabat, founded in 1980 with nationalist-religious origins, is the smallest organization in the 2026 coalition. Its significance lies in the fact that it builds a bridge between Kurdish nationalism and a segment of Sunni religious society—a bridge that the secular and leftist parties lack.

Diaspora and Media

Iranian Kurdish politics derives an important part of its power from the diaspora. Iranian Kurdish communities in Sweden, Germany, Britain, Norway, and Canada have produced a network of satellite and online media, human rights organizations, and lobbying activists. Organizations such as Hengaw and the Kurdistan Human Rights Network have become principal sources for international media on events in Kurdistan, and the parties have their own television channels. This diaspora has two functions: a bridge to Western capitals, and a source of independent information under conditions of internet restriction in Iran. But, as is also true of the nationwide opposition, the diaspora may hold views more radical than, or different from, those of society inside the country.

8.5 Comparative Table of the Parties

Table 8.2. Iranian Kurdish parties compared

Party	Founded	Discourse	Principal demand	Armed capacity	Base	2026 coalition
Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran	1945	Social-democratic nationalist	Federalism in a democratic, secular Iran	Medium	Mukriyan	Founding member
Komala of Iranian Kurdistan (Mohtadi)	2000 (roots 1969)	Social-democratic	Federalism	Limited	Ardalan, Sanandaj	Joined on 4 March
Komala of the Toilers	2007	Left	Federalism or autonomy	Limited	Ardalan	Founding member
Komala (Communist Party of Iran)	1983 (roots 1969)	Communist	Socialism; right to self-determination	Limited	Ardalan	Outside the coalition
PAK	1991	Hard-line nationalist	Right to self-determination	Considerable	Kermanshah and border areas	Founding member

Party	Founded	Discourse	Principal demand	Armed capacity	Base	2026 coalition
PJAK	2004	Apoist; democratic confederalism	Democratic self-administration	Considerable	Northern border areas, West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah	Founding member
Khabat	1980	Nationalist-religious	Self-determination	Limited	Ardalan	Founding member

The assessment of armed capacity in this table is approximate and relative; no independent and reliable data exist on the size of these parties' armed forces, and both the parties' own claims and government estimates are exaggerated.

8.6 Fault Lines: Why the Kurds of Iran Did Not Speak with One Voice

Before the coalition of February 2026, the Kurds of Iran spoke with multiple voices for four decades. Four fault lines explain this fragmentation:

- **The ideological fault line:** Social-democratic nationalism (KDPI), the left (the Komalas), hard-line nationalism (PAK), and Apoism (PJAK) hold four different visions of Kurdistan's future: from federalism within a democratic Iran to supra-state confederalism.
- **The regional fault line:** The rivalry between Mukriyan and Ardalan, rooted in two historical emirates and two dialects, was reproduced in the rivalry between the KDPI and Komala; and Kermanshah and Ilam until recently kept their distance from both.
- **The patron fault line:** Each party is close to one of the powers of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: the KDPI to the Barzanis, the Komalas to Sulaymaniyah, and PJAK to the Qandil network; and the rivalry of the hosts has fueled the rivalry of the guests.
- **The exile–homeland fault line:** The parties have been in exile for four decades, while the new Kurdish generation inside Iran has become more urban, more educated, and connected through online networks to wider Iranian society. The experience of the Jina movement showed that this generation can mobilize without instructions from the parties.

Dependence on the Host

One further structural feature distinguishes the position of Iran's Kurdish parties from that of their Iraqi counterparts: dependence on a host. These parties are based on the territory of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and their activity depends on the tolerance of the Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad. The Iran–Iraq security agreement of March 2023 committed Baghdad to disarming these parties and moving them away from the border areas; and in March 2026 the Kurdistan Regional Government formally announced that it would not permit its territory to be used for operations against its neighbors.[63] In the language of Chapter One, Iran's Kurdish parties are captives of the "triadic nexus": their kin-state, the Region, places its own survival interests above ethnic solidarity.

[63]On the 2023 Iran–Iraq security agreement, see Dana Taib Menmy, "Can Baghdad disarm Iranian Kurdish parties in northern Iraq?" *The New Arab*, 9 October 2023.

Chapter Summary

Iranian Kurdistan differs fundamentally in structure from Iraqi Kurdistan. In Iraq, two families with a de facto state, oil resources, and an organized armed force are the clear interlocutors of any negotiation. In Iran, the historical families have no power; the parties are in exile and dependent on their host; society is religiously and regionally diverse; and the new generation inside the country has an independent relationship with politics.

This difference has two opposing consequences for the book's central question. The positive consequence is that the Kurds of Iran, owing to the absence of a ruling family class with independent economic interests, have joined Iran's nationwide democratic discourse more than the Kurds of Iraq. The KDPI and Mohtadi's Komala both define their demand within the framework of a democratic and decentralized Iran, not secession. The negative consequence is that a transitional government in Tehran, unlike Baghdad in 2003, will not have a single, authoritative interlocutor in Kurdistan capable of guaranteeing an agreement. The coalition of February 2026 is the first serious attempt to solve this very problem; the next chapter examines its background and tests in relation to the Islamic Republic and the 2026 war.

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 9. The Islamic Republic and the Kurds: From 1979 to the War of 2026

The Islamic Republic's relationship with the Kurds began with war in the first months after the revolution and, over four and a half decades, never reached an agreement. This chapter traces the relationship across five periods: the foundational war of 1979–1983; the period of exile and assassination; the limited opening of the reform era; securitization and transnational repression; and finally the crisis of 2025 and 2026, which led to the formation of a coalition of Kurdish parties and to the threshold of a ground operation. The aim of the chapter is to extract the Islamic Republic's toolbox vis-à-vis the Kurds and the pattern of the Kurds' response to it—two kinds of knowledge that any transitional government in Iran will need.

9.1 The Foundational War (1979–1983)

The Kurds participated actively in the 1979 revolution and saw the fall of the monarchy as an opportunity to realize their demand for autonomy. In the days after the revolution's victory, garrisons and military centers in Kurdistan fell into the hands of the people and the parties, and the KDPI and Komala went public. The KDPI presented a program for Kurdistan's autonomy within the framework of Iran, and Sunni clerics led by Sheikh Ezzeddin Hosseini, the Friday prayer leader of Mahabad, who rose in support of the parties, demanded recognition of the rights of Sunnis.

But the fledgling government saw the Kurdish demand from the outset as a threat to the country's integrity and to the Islamic character of the system. The clashes of Nowruz 1358 (March 1979) in Sanandaj and of Farvardin 1358 (April 1979) in Naqadeh between Kurds and Azeris were the first signs. The turning point came in Mordad 1358: after fighting in Paveh, Ayatollah Khomeini, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, issued on 28 Mordad 1358 (19 August 1979) the order to attack Kurdistan—an order that became known in Kurdish memory as the "fatwa of jihad" against Kurdistan. Revolutionary courts presided over by Sadegh Khalkhali executed dozens of people in Sanandaj, Marivan, Paveh, and other towns after trials lasting a few minutes, and the massacres of villages such as Qarna and Qalatan in Shahrivar 1358 (September 1979) were etched into Kurdish collective memory.

The Kurdish People's Delegation and the Failure of Negotiations

In the first months after the revolution, Kurdish parties and personalities—from the KDPI and Komala to Sheikh Ezzeddin Hosseini—sought, in the form of the "Delegation of the Kurdish People," to negotiate with the central government with one voice. The delegation's central demand was autonomy for Kurdistan within the framework of Iran: an elected body to administer local affairs, official status for the Kurdish language in education and administration, and the assignment of defense, foreign policy, and macroeconomic planning to the central government. On the other side, the Provisional Government sent delegations to Kurdistan to negotiate and at times put forward plans for local "self-administration."

These negotiations, which continued in the intervals between battles, failed for two structural reasons. First, there was no single authority in Tehran capable of guaranteeing an agreement; the Provisional Government had no real authority, and the revolutionary centers of power—from the

Revolutionary Council to the nascent IRGC and the clergy—saw the Kurdish demand as a threat to the new system. Second, in Kurdistan too the delegation, despite its appearance of unity, was a coalition of rival currents that did not agree on the degree of compromise or the continuation of armed struggle. These two weaknesses—the absence of an authoritative interlocutor at the center and the absence of full cohesion on the periphery—are precisely the two conditions that Chapter Fourteen highlights for any future transition.

Three political events turned this war from a local conflict into a fundamental rupture. First, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, who had been elected to the Assembly of Experts for the Constitution, was barred from entering it. Second, the Islamic Republic's constitution declared the Ja'fari school the official religion and entrusted leadership to a Shi'i jurist; and Kurdistan effectively boycotted its referendum in Azar 1358 (December 1979). Third, negotiations conducted through the mediation of Ayatollah Taleghani and Provisional Government delegations reached an impasse after Taleghani's death and the fall of the Bazargan government.[64]

The outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in Shahrivar 1359 (September 1980) further complicated the conflict. The KDPI and Komala received Iraqi support, and the government called them Saddam's "fifth column." By 1983 (1362) the IRGC and the army had retaken the cities and most rural areas, and the parties were forced to retreat to the border areas and then into Iraqi territory. Thousands of dead—Peshmerga, government forces, and civilians—and widespread destruction were the legacy of this period.

The lesson of this period for the book's question is clear and consistent with the rule of Chapter Six: the Kurds acted at a moment of central-state weakness to realize their demands; the new state, not yet consolidated, saw the Kurdish demand as an existential threat; and instead of agreement at the moment of weakness, war broke out. 1979 is the most important historical warning for any future transition in Iran: a transition that does not resolve the Kurdish question in its first months may turn it into armed conflict for decades.

9.2 Exile and Assassination (1983–1997)

After 1983, Iran's Kurdish parties became exiled parties on Iraqi soil, and the civil war between the KDPI and Komala in the 1980s, mentioned in Chapter Eight, further sapped their strength. In this period, the Islamic Republic began a new strategy: the elimination of party leaders abroad.

On 22 Tir 1368 (13 July 1989), Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and two companions were killed in an apartment in Vienna during negotiations with envoys of the Islamic Republic. On 26 Shahrivar 1371 (17 September 1992), Sadegh Sharafkandi, his successor, was assassinated together with three colleagues at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin. In 1997 the Berlin court ruled that this assassination had been carried out on the orders of the highest officials of the Islamic Republic—a ruling that led to the recall of European Union ambassadors from Tehran.[65] At the same time, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, dozens of activists and cadres of Iran's Kurdish parties were assassinated in the 1990s, and in 1375 (1996) Iran targeted KDPI camps with artillery fire and a limited incursion around Koya.

[64]On the 1979 war in Kurdistan, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), ch. 13; Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

[65]Kammergericht Berlin, Mykonos judgment, 10 April 1997.

Two consequences of this period persist to this day. First, the deep distrust of Kurdish parties toward any negotiation with the Islamic Republic: Ghassemlou was killed at the negotiating table. Second, the consolidation of the pattern of "transnational repression," in which the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, instead of a safe haven, became an operational theater for Iran's security apparatus.

Iranian Kurdistan in the Iran–Iraq War

The eight-year war was a dual experience for Iran's Kurds. On the one hand, the Kurdish-inhabited border provinces—from Qasr-e Shirin and Sarpol-e Zahab to Marivan and Sardasht—were on the front line of the war and endured widespread destruction and displacement. On 7 Tir 1366 (28 June 1987), Iraqi aircraft bombarded the town of Sardasht with chemical weapons; Sardasht, before Halabja, was among the first towns whose civilian population was the target of a large-scale chemical attack, and for this reason the Kurds of Iran and Iraq are, in their collective memory, shared victims of Saddam's chemical weapons. On the other hand, Iran's Kurdish parties received help from Iraq in this very war, and the government used this fact to portray the entire Kurdish movement as "the enemy's fifth column."

The structural consequence of the war was the enduring militarization of Kurdistan. The IRGC established its regional headquarters in the northwest, and Kurdistan became the region with the highest density of military and security forces in the country. This structure, created for foreign war and for confronting the parties, was not dismantled after the war and became the infrastructure of the securitization of subsequent decades.

9.3 The Limited Opening of the Reform Era (1997–2005)

The presidency of Mohammad Khatami was the first and only period in which the Islamic Republic showed a relative opening toward the Kurdish question. Kurdish-language publications were licensed, cultural and linguistic activity expanded, a Sunni Kurdish governor was appointed for Kurdistan province, and Kurdish deputies in the Sixth Majlis raised ethnic demands as a parliamentary faction. Part of Kurdish society voted for reform with high turnout in the elections of 1997 and 2001.

But this opening was not institutionalized. With the end of the reform era, publications were closed and cultural activists were prosecuted. The killing of Shwaneh Qaderi, a young man from Mahabad, by security forces in Tir 1384 (July 2005), and the widespread unrest that followed in Kurdish cities, marked the symbolic end of this period. The lesson of the reform era for the book's question is that a large part of Kurdish society, given a minimum of political space, prefers participation within the system to armed struggle; but an opening that is not institutionalized and made law disappears with a change of government.

9.4 Securitization and Transnational Repression (2005–2021)

From 2005 (1384), the Islamic Republic's policy in Kurdistan became fully securitized. Four elements shaped this policy:

- **Execution of political prisoners:** Dozens of Kurdish political prisoners were executed on charges of *moharebeh* ("waging war against God") and party membership; the execution of Farzad Kamangar, a teacher from Kamyaran, together with four other prisoners in Ordibehesht 1389 (May 2010) became the symbol of this period. Kurds have consistently made up a disproportionate share of Iran's political prisoners and those executed.

- **The killing of* kolbars*: Poverty and unemployment in the border provinces drove thousands into* kolbari*—carrying goods on their backs across the border—and direct fire by border guards on* kolbars *left dozens dead each year.* Kolbari* became the symbol of the nexus between economic deprivation and securitization in Kurdistan.
- **Conflict with PJAK:** From 2004 to 2011, PJAK was the most active Kurdish armed force in Iran; after extensive IRGC operations in the border area in 1390 (2011), an unwritten ceasefire was established. The KDPI also resumed limited armed activity from 1395 (2016), after a two-decade hiatus.
- **Missile attacks on the Region:** In Shahrivar 1397 (September 2018), the IRGC struck the KDPI headquarters in Koya with ballistic missiles, killing a number of members of the party leadership and cadres. This attack was the first open use of ballistic missiles against the Kurdish opposition on Iraqi soil and set a pattern repeated many times in subsequent years.

The Political Economy of Deprivation

The securitization of Kurdistan also had an economic consequence often overlooked in political analyses. The Kurdish-inhabited provinces—especially Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Ilam—have in recent decades consistently been among the provinces with the highest unemployment rates and the lowest share of industrial investment. The security logic, which defined border areas as "sensitive zones," made investment difficult and substituted an informal border economy—from *kolbari* to fuel smuggling—for the formal economy. Major development projects, such as dam-building in Hawraman, have at times fueled discontent over the destruction of villages and cultural heritage rather than fostering development.

This economic deprivation is of central importance to the book's question. Kurdish discontent in Iran is not only a matter of identity; a large part of it is a demand for economic justice. The protests of Dey 1404, which began with the collapse of the national currency, and their spread to the Shi'i Kurds of Ilam, who had previously had a faint presence in the Kurdish national movement, showed that the linkage of economic deprivation with ethnic and religious discrimination has broadened the social base of the Kurdish question. Any transitional government that offers only a cultural or security response instead of an economic one will not have addressed the root of the problem.

9.5 Jina (2022): Kurdistan at the Heart of the Nationwide Movement

The death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a 22-year-old woman from Saqqez, in the custody of Tehran's morality police on 25 Shahrivar 1401 (16 September 2022), sparked a movement that began at her funeral in Saqqez and spread throughout Iran. Kurdistan had three distinctive features in this movement: widespread general strikes at the joint call of the parties, demonstrating their capacity for mobilization inside the country; harsher repression than in other regions, especially in Mahabad, Javanrud, Piranshahr, and Sanandaj, with the dispatch of heavy military forces; and extensive IRGC missile and drone attacks on the headquarters of Kurdish parties in the Region in Mehr and Aban 1401 (October–November 2022), on the charge that the parties were instigating the protests.

The Islamic Republic's diplomatic response to this crisis was the security agreement with Iraq of Esfand 1401 (March 2023), which committed Baghdad to disarming the Kurdish parties and moving them away from the border areas. The parties declared that they had not laid down their arms but moved some of their headquarters away from the border.[66] This agreement showed that the Islamic

[66]Dana Taib Menmy, "Can Baghdad disarm Iranian Kurdish parties in northern Iraq?" *The New Arab*, 9 October 2023.

Republic increasingly relies on the Iraqi state and on the parties' host, the Region, to contain the Kurds.

9.6 The Crisis of 2025 and 2026

From the Twelve-Day War to the Dey Protests

In the twelve-day war of Khordad 1404 (June 2025) between Israel and Iran, the Kurdish parties organized politically for the possibility of a power vacuum but did not enter military operations; and according to some media reports, the transfer of weapons to western Iran began at that time.[67] Thereafter, the collapse of the national currency and the deepening economic crisis led to protests that began on 7 Dey 1404 (28 December 2025) and spread across Iran during Dey.

Kurdistan played a central role in these protests. On 5 January 2026, the Kurdish parties in a joint statement called for a general strike on 8 January, and this strike was observed in more than fifty cities and towns in the provinces of Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan. Reports indicate that in Abdanan and Malekshahi in Ilam province, security forces abandoned their positions for a time. PAK and PJAK reported limited armed operations against IRGC forces in Kermanshah, Ilam, and Lorestan, and media close to the IRGC also spoke of Kurdish groups entering a "field phase." The Kurdistan Human Rights Network documented the deaths of 240 Kurds in these protests.[68]

The Coalition of 22 February

On 22 February 2026, five parties—the KDPI, PAK, PJAK, Khabat, and the Komala of the Toilers—announced the formation of the "Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan," and on 4 March the Komala of Iranian Kurdistan led by Abdullah Mohtadi also joined it. The Komala of the Communist Party of Iran remained outside. The coalition's declared aim was the overthrow of the Islamic Republic and the realization of the Kurds' right to self-determination.[69] Preparations for the coalition had been made months earlier, at a joint meeting in Cologne, Germany, and then at a meeting on 5 January in the Region. Analysts at the Kurdish Peace Institute noted that the Kurdish parties are the only part of the Iranian opposition with a battle-tested armed force.

The reaction of part of the nationwide opposition to this coalition was the first sign of a fault line that threatens the future of the transition. Reza Pahlavi, without naming them, accused "separatist groups" of making baseless claims and called territorial integrity a red line; the Kurdish parties replied that this language recalled the same security logic that had been used for decades against Kurdistan. In March, a report was published of an attack by a group of Pahlavi supporters on a Kurdish journalist in London, which the British police investigated.

The War and the Operation That Never Began

The war of the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic began on 28 February, and Ali Khamenei was killed that same day. The Kurdish coalition announced that its forces were ready "in the depths of Iran" and along the border, and on 2 March called on the armed forces stationed in Kurdistan to separate themselves from "the remnants of the Islamic Republic." PJAK called on the

[67]Reporting by ITV News (March 2026) and CNN (3 March 2026), as summarized in coverage of the 2026 Kurdish–Iranian crisis; these reports have not been independently verified.

[68]Kurdistan Human Rights Network, "KHRN documents 240 Kurdish deaths in 2026 protests in Iran," 12 February 2026; Hengaw, 8 January 2026; FDD's *Long War Journal*, 15 January 2026.

[69]Rudaw, 22 February 2026; Chatham House, "Kurdish groups in Iran face risky dilemma amid unclear US endgame," 9 March 2026; Kurdish Peace Institute, "The Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan: Risks and Opportunities," March 2026.

people to form "local administration and self-defense committees." At the same time, U.S. and Israeli airstrikes targeted garrisons, border posts, and security centers in Kurdish cities from Sanandaj and Kermanshah to Mahabad and Baneh—strikes that some observers regarded as preparation for a Kurdish advance. Hengaw reported that these strikes also took the lives of 21 Kurdish civilians.[70]

According to American media, the CIA and Mossad were working to arm Kurdish forces and prepare a ground operation from Iraqi territory, and the U.S. president telephoned the leaders of the Region and Mustafa Hijri. But on 7 and 8 March he declared openly that he did not want Kurdish forces to enter the war. According to Israel's Channel 12, a plan for an operation involving all the Kurdish parties was shelved owing to leaks, distrust, and doubts within the IDF's Military Intelligence; and some Turkish media reported pressure by Ankara on Washington and Erbil to halt it.[71] The Kurdish parties had earlier declared that they would not move without the skies being cleared, akin to the 1991 no-fly zone; and on 5 April the coalition denied the U.S. president's claim that it had received weapons intended for protesters.

The Islamic Republic's response during this same period displayed the toolbox of four decades all at once: preemptive missile and drone attacks on party headquarters in the Region; an open threat to target "all the facilities" of the Region; the revival of the Muslim Kurdish Peshmerga, which threatened the Kurdish parties in statements; and continued attacks on party headquarters even after the April ceasefire. As of September 2026, the regime, despite severe weakening, the collapse of the June memorandum of understanding, and the transformation of the war into a war of attrition, has not fallen, and the Kurdish parties remain in a position of waiting.

Symbolic Co-optation under the Pezeshkian Government

The election of Masoud Pezeshkian to the presidency in 1403 (2024)—born in Mahabad and with a Kurdish mother—raised for a time the question of whether the Islamic Republic was reconsidering its Kurdish policy. In Shahrivar 1403 (September 2024), a Sunni Kurd was appointed governor of Kurdistan province—an appointment reflected in Kurdish media as a symbolic gesture.[72] But this symbolic co-optation, reminiscent of the opening of the reform era, did not lead to structural change: the security structure in Kurdistan remained untouched, executions of Kurdish political prisoners continued, and electoral turnout in Kurdistan province in those years was among the lowest in the country. Less than two years later, Kurdistan again became one of the centers of protest in Dey 1404. The Pezeshkian experience is a further confirmation of the lesson of the reform era: symbolic co-optation without institutional change does not endure.

9.7 Assessing the Coalition: Strengths and Tests

Table 9.1. The 2026 coalition: strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses and tests
The first cross-ideological union in four decades, from social democrats to Apoists	Ambiguity in the shared demand: federalism or the right to self-determination?

[70]Hengaw, 9 March 2026; Rudaw, 3 and 7 March 2026; *The Amargi*, 2 March 2026.

[71]*Axios*, 5 March 2026; *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2026; Iran International, 7 March 2026; *The Times of Israel*, 29 March 2026. Accounts of the plan's origins and reasons for its collapse differ and remain partly unverified.

[72]Rudaw, "Sunni Kurd appointed governor of Iran's Kurdistan," 18 September 2024; *Britannica*, "Masoud Pezeshkian," on his Azerbaijani and Kurdish descent.

Strengths	Weaknesses and tests
Proven capacity for mobilization inside the country (the 8 January strike)	Dependence on a host (the Region) that does not permit operations
The only battle-tested armed force of the Iranian opposition	Dependence on an external patron that retreated in March 2026
A potential single negotiating interlocutor for a transitional government	The presence of PJAK, which Turkey and part of the nationwide opposition do not accept
Direct relations with Washington and European capitals	A fault line with the centralist opposition over territorial integrity
Lessons learned from the failures of 1946, 1979, and the civil war of the 1980s	Limited base in Kermanshah and Ilam, and distance from the young generation inside the country

9.8 Three Narratives of the Kurdish Question in Iran

One of the principal obstacles to resolving the Kurdish question in Iran is the existence of three conflicting narratives about it, each of which captures part of the reality and ignores another part:

Table 9.2. Three narratives of the Kurdish question in Iran

Narrative	Core argument	Evidence relied upon	What it ignores
Government narrative	The Kurdish question is a construct of foreign enemies and "terrorist" groups	Iraqi support for the parties during the war; Israeli and U.S. support in 2026	Domestic roots: economic and religious discrimination; popular support for the strikes
Centralist nationalist narrative	The Kurdish demand is a prelude to the partition of Iran	The Mahabad experience with Soviet support; the Iraqi Region; the discourse of "self-determination"	The mainstream demand (federalism within Iran); Kurdish participation in nationwide movements
Kurdish nationalist narrative	The Kurds are an oppressed nation entitled to self-determination	1979; executions; assassinations; denial of identity; deprivation	The internal diversity of the Kurds; the deep bond of a large part of them with Iranian identity

Each of these narratives can marshal real evidence for itself. This book proposes that Iran's transition needs a fourth narrative—a "citizenship narrative"—which denies neither Kurdish identity nor the concern for territorial integrity, but takes as its foundation equal citizenship with cultural rights and local self-government. The Jina movement, which turned a slogan born in Kurdistan into a nationwide Iranian slogan, showed that such a narrative has a base in Iranian society.

Chapter Summary: The Toolbox and the Pattern of Response

Four and a half decades of relations between the Islamic Republic and the Kurds reveal a fivefold toolbox: the complete securitization of the Kurdish question; the co-optation of a segment of the Kurds (aligned *mamostas* and the Muslim Peshmerga); exploitation of the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shi'i Kurds; transnational repression, from assassinations in Europe to missiles on the Region; and the economic deprivation of the border areas. None of these tools solved the Kurdish question; rather, they transformed it from a regional question into one of the centers of the nationwide anti-government movement.

The Kurds' pattern of response also evolved over this period: from armed struggle for autonomy (1979), to exile and survival (the 1980s and 1990s), to participation within the system during the opening (the reform era), to a nationwide civic movement (Jina), and finally to a political-military coalition with the horizon of overthrow (2026). The most important point for the book's central question is that in every period in which a minimum of political space existed, the majority of Kurdish society chose participation; and in every period in which this space was closed, the armed parties regained importance.

For post–Islamic Republic Iran, this chapter yields three warnings. First, a repetition of 1979: a transitional state that perceives the Kurdish demand as a threat in its first months may start a decades-long war. Second, the legacy of distrust: Kurds who lost Ghassemlou at the negotiating table will demand external and institutional guarantees for negotiating with any central government. And third, the fault line within the opposition: if the nationwide opposition does not reach agreement on the status of the Kurds before the fall, this fault line will be transferred to the battlefield on the day after the fall. Part Six of the book places these three warnings in the context of the region's geopolitics.

PART SIX: Geopolitics

CHAPTER 10

Chapter 10. Proxy Actor or Strategic Partner? The United States, Israel, and Europe

In the analysis of the Kurdish question, few questions carry as much political weight as that of the relationship with the West. In the narrative of the region's states—from Tehran and Ankara to Arab nationalists—the Kurds are the "instrument" of America and Israel. In the narrative of some Kurdish nationalists, the West is the Kurds' "natural ally" that has betrayed them many times. This chapter sets both narratives aside and asks, using specific criteria: was the Kurds' relationship with the United States, Israel, and Europe in each period a proxy relationship or a strategic partnership? And what does this distinction tell us about the future of the Kurds in the new order?

10.1 Framework: Distinguishing Proxy from Partnership

In the proxy-war literature, a proxy force is an actor that an external power uses to advance its own objectives, without being committed to the objectives of that actor itself.[73] By contrast, a strategic partnership is a relationship in which both sides share long-term interests and the external power is committed at least to the survival of its partner. To assess the Kurds' relationship with each external power, four criteria are applied:

- **Durability:** Does the relationship continue after the common threat is removed?
- **Institutionalization:** Has the relationship been institutionalized in the form of agreements, diplomatic representation, regular assistance, and formal mechanisms?
- **Commitment to survival:** Does the external power defend its Kurdish partner at a moment of existential danger?
- **Relative priority:** In a conflict between the interests of the Kurdish partner and those of an allied state (such as Turkey or Iraq), which takes precedence?

10.2 The United States: From Cold War Instrument to Conditional Partner

Phase One: Pure Proxy (1972–1975)

U.S. covert aid to Mulla Mustafa Barzani from 1972, delivered through the Shah of Iran, was a perfect example of a proxy relationship. The report of the U.S. Congress's Pike Committee showed that neither the United States nor Iran desired a Kurdish victory and that their aim was the attrition of Iraq, the Soviet ally; and when the Shah reached agreement with Saddam at Algiers, Washington stood aside without any action and did not respond to Barzani's requests for help.[74] By all four criteria this relationship was a proxy one: temporary, non-institutional, without commitment to survival, and subordinate to the interests of an allied state (Iran).

Phase Two: From Humanitarian Support to Partnership (1991–2003)

1991 was a qualitative transformation. The United States at first abandoned the Kurds after calling for an uprising, but the humanitarian catastrophe compelled it to create a safe haven and a no-fly

[73]Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

[74]U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on Intelligence (Pike Committee), *Final Report* (1976), Kurdish section as published in *The Village Voice*, 16 February 1976.

zone that lasted twelve years. For the first time, a great power continuously protected the survival of a Kurdish institution. Mediation of the 1998 Washington Agreement and cooperation in preparing for the 2003 war transformed this relationship into a partnership that reached its peak in 2003 with the opening of the northern front by the Peshmerga and U.S. special forces.

Phase Three: Partnership Limited to "One Iraq" (2003–2026)

After 2003, the U.S. relationship with the Kurds of Iraq was institutionalized: an extensive consulate in Erbil, the Region's representation in Washington, training and arming of the Peshmerga, and from 2016 regular Department of Defense financial assistance toward paying the salaries of part of the Peshmerga forces in the framework of the war against ISIS. In 2014, U.S. airstrikes prevented Erbil from falling to ISIS—the first clear instance of a commitment to the survival of the Kurdish partner.

But this partnership had a clear limit: "One Iraq." In 2017 the United States openly opposed the referendum and did not intervene when Kirkuk was retaken. Since then, U.S. policy has been to support the Region within Iraq, not against Iraq; and in 2026 this policy continued in the form of open support for Nizar Amedi for the presidency of Iraq, encouragement of Erbil's oil cooperation with Baghdad, and the end of the military presence in the Region in September 2026.

Syria: A Partnership That Reverted to Proxy

The U.S. relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces from 2015 to 2019 was America's most effective military partnership in the war against ISIS. But the relationship was never institutionalized: neither political recognition of the Autonomous Administration nor a security guarantee against Turkey. The withdrawal of part of the U.S. forces in October 2019 opened the way to a Turkish operation; and in 2025 and 2026, Washington's turn toward Ahmad al-Sharaa's government in Damascus—for which Tom Barrack was the special envoy—set the stage for the Syrian government's offensive in January 2026 and the dissolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces in August. In one analyst's words, Washington showed that these forces no longer had "protected status."[75]

Iran 2026: The Return of the 1975 Logic

Washington's behavior toward Iran's Kurdish parties in March 2026 was an open return to the proxy logic. Reports spoke of encouraging the parties to undertake a ground operation, direct calls by the U.S. president to Kurdish leaders, and an offer of air cover; but within a week he announced that he did not want the Kurds to enter the war, and the plan was shelved.[76] The important point is that this time, unlike 1975, the Kurds demanded a guarantee before moving: a no-fly zone. Their refusal to move without a guarantee is a sign that the lesson of 1975 has been learned.

10.3 Israel: The Periphery Doctrine and the "Alliance of Minorities"

Israel's relationship with the Kurds is rooted in the "periphery doctrine" formulated by Ben-Gurion in the 1950s: Israel, besieged in the Arab world, should establish ties with the non-Arab states and peoples on its periphery, including Iran, Turkey, Ethiopia, and the Kurds. In the 1960s and until 1975, Israel provided military and training assistance to the Barzani movement through Iran, and Mulla Mustafa Barzani visited Israel at least twice. There was also another human bond: Kurdish Jews, who mostly emigrated to Israel in the 1950s, carry a shared cultural memory.

[75] Al Jazeera, "Kurdish-led SDF has dissolved, but has Syria really unified its military?" 26 August 2026.

[76] *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2026; Iran International, 7 March 2026; *The Times of Israel*, 29 March 2026.

After 2003 this relationship remained largely informal and covert, but it became visible at several moments. In 2015 press reports showed that a large share of Israel's oil imports that year came from the Kurdistan Region.[77] In September 2017 Israel was the only state that openly supported the Region's independence referendum—support that brought Israeli flags into referendum rallies in Erbil and gave Tehran, Ankara, and Baghdad a propaganda argument against the referendum. In November 2024 Israel's foreign minister called the Kurds and the Druze Israel's "natural allies" in the region—a new formulation of the periphery doctrine that may be called the "alliance of minorities."

In the 2026 war, Israel was at the center of the plan for a Kurdish operation in Iran. According to Axios, the idea of using Iran's Kurdish parties as a ground force was raised by the Israeli prime minister and the Mossad, and the CIA later joined it; and the Israeli outlet Ynet later reported that the Mossad had armed a number of Kurdish fighters before the plan was halted.[78]

Asset or Liability?

For the Kurds, the relationship with Israel has always been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Israel is one of the few states that has openly supported the ideal of Kurdish self-government and has an effective lobby in Washington. On the other hand, this relationship is a powerful propaganda tool in the hands of the Kurds' enemies: the Islamic Republic justified its missile attacks on Erbil in 2022 and 2024 by claiming the existence of "Mossad headquarters"; Turkey and Arab nationalists called the 2017 referendum "a second Israel project"; and in Iran, the narrative that "the Kurds are Israel's instrument" is one of the pillars of the government's propaganda against the 2026 coalition. For this reason, the Region's leaders have always concealed or denied their relationship with Israel. In the new order, founded on the normalization of Israel's relations with Arab states, this equation may change; but as long as Tehran, Ankara, and Baghdad regard this relationship as a threat, the Kurds will be compelled to keep it in the shadows.

10.4 Europe: A Dual Policy

Europe's relationship with the Kurds has four components that are not always in harmony with one another:

- **Humanitarian and cultural support:** France was among the pioneers of the safe haven in 1991, and Danielle Mitterrand, wife of the French president, became one of the Kurds' best-known supporters. The Kurdish Institute of Paris is among the most important Kurdish cultural centers in Europe. The parliaments of several European countries, including Britain, have recognized Anfal as genocide.
- **Military support against ISIS:** In 2014 Germany, in a decision that departed from that country's post–World War II arms-export tradition, supplied weapons to the Peshmerga and stationed a training mission in Erbil. France and Britain also took part in airstrikes and training.
- **Countering the PKK:** The European Union has placed the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations, and Germany has banned its activities since 1993; this policy reflects the priority given to relations with Turkey, a NATO member.

[77] *Financial Times*, reporting of August 2015 on Israeli imports of Kurdish crude.

[78] *Axios*, 5 March 2026; Ynet, 4 June 2026. These accounts have not been independently confirmed.

- **Diaspora and migration:** The largest Kurdish population in Europe lives in Germany, mostly with roots in Turkey; and the irregular migration of young Iraqi Kurds to Europe has also made the Kurdish question a domestic issue for European governments.

These four components have produced a dual policy: support for the cultural rights and humanitarian survival of the Kurds, opposition to border changes, and security cooperation with the region's states against Kurdish armed currents. Europe pays more attention than the United States to human rights and minority rights within existing states and is less prepared to offer military support. The Mykonos case also gives Germany a special place in the Iranian Kurdish question: the German court was the first Western judicial body to declare the responsibility of the Islamic Republic's leadership for the assassination of Kurdish leaders.

Russia and China: Marginal but Present

Russia, which in the Soviet period gave refuge to Mulla Mustafa Barzani, invested after 2017 through Rosneft in the Region's energy sector, including the pipeline, and also had a channel of communication with the Syrian Democratic Forces. China is present mainly as a buyer of oil and an investor in Iraq's infrastructure. Neither power has been a political patron of the Kurds, and neither is regarded as an alternative to the West in the new order.

10.5 Comparative Assessment

Table 10.1. Kurdish relations with Western powers: proxy or partnership?

Relationship	Durability	Institutionalization	Commitment to survival	Relative priority	Assessment
U.S. and Barzani (1972–1975)	Low	Low	No	Subordinate to Iran	Proxy
U.S. and the Region (1991–2003)	High	Medium	Yes (no-fly zone)	Subordinate to containing Saddam	Partnership in formation
U.S. and the Region (2003–2026)	High	High	Yes against ISIS; not against Baghdad	Subordinate to "One Iraq"	Conditional partnership
U.S. and the SDF (2015–2026)	Medium	Low	Not against Turkey or Damascus	Subordinate to Turkey, then Damascus	Proxy
U.S. and Iranian Kurdish parties (2026)	Low	Low	No	Subordinate to war calculations	Potential proxy, unrealized
Israel and the Kurds	High	Low (covert)	Unknown	Subordinate to rivalry with Iran	Informal strategic alignment
Europe and the Kurds	High	Medium	Humanitarian, not military	Subordinate to Turkey and Iraq	Normative support

Chapter Summary: Three Rules of Western Support

The analysis of this chapter shows that the answer to the question "proxy or partnership?" depends on the period and on the Kurdish actor. Only the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has managed to convert a proxy relationship into an institutionalized partnership; and the reason, as Chapter One predicted, was the conversion of the relationship into institutions, a constitution, and an economy. From five decades of experience, three rules about Western support for the Kurds can be extracted:

- **Rule one, the common enemy:** Western support for the Kurds has always begun in the presence of a common enemy (Saddam, ISIS, the Islamic Republic) and has declined when that enemy was removed or changed.
- **Rule two, the priority of the allied state:** In every conflict between the interests of the Kurds and those of a state allied with the West—Turkey or Iraq, and now the new Syria—the interests of the allied state have taken precedence.
- **Rule three, existing borders:** The West has supported Kurdish rights within existing borders, but never the alteration of borders; the 2017 referendum was the clearest test of this rule.

These three rules have a decisive implication for the book's central question. In post–Islamic Republic Iran, the West will support Kurdish rights within the framework of a unified, democratic, and decentralized Iran, but it will support no project of secession, especially if the new government in Tehran is an ally of the West. This reality has two consequences: Kurdish currents that define their demand in terms of federalism within Iran, such as the KDPI and Mohtadi's Komala, will enjoy international backing in the new order; and currents that speak of secession or supra-state confederalism will not. At the same time, the same rule warns the transitional government in Tehran: the West will support Iran's territorial integrity, but not repression; a government that seeks to resolve the Kurdish question on the 1979 model will lose Western support. The next chapter examines the most important regional variable: Turkey.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter 11. Turkey: From Hostility to Integration, and the End of the PKK

If one country can be regarded as the key to the new order for the Kurds, that country is Turkey. Turkey is home to the world's largest Kurdish population; the longest Kurdish armed struggle of the twentieth century took place on its soil; it is the most important economic partner and the vital export route of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; and in Syria it played a decisive role in ending Kurdish autonomy. The transformation of Turkey's relationship with the Kurds over the past two decades may be the most important structural change in Kurdish geopolitics: a Turkey that once denied even the word "Kurd" is today Erbil's strategic partner and has negotiated dissolution with the PKK, its enemy of forty years. This chapter traces this transformation in three arenas: the Kurdish question within Turkey, the relationship with the Region, and the peace process of 2024–2026.

11.1 From Denial to War (1923–1999)

From its foundation, the Republic of Turkey rested on Turkish nation-building. After the suppression of the revolts of Sheikh Said, Ararat, and Dersim, examined in Chapter Two, the official policy of the state was to deny the existence of the Kurds as a people. The use of the Kurdish language in the public sphere was restricted or banned, and in official discourse the Kurds were called "Mountain Turks."

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), founded in 1978 under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan with a Marxist-nationalist ideology, began its armed struggle in August 1984. The state's response, in addition to extensive military operations, was the creation of the "village guard" system: Kurdish militias armed by the state against the PKK—the same pattern as the Hamidiye and the *jash*, whose lineage Chapter Two traced. In the 1990s, at the height of the war, thousands of Kurdish villages in southeastern Turkey were evacuated or destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. To date this war has left more than forty thousand dead.

Öcalan's capture in Kenya in February 1999 and his transfer to the island prison of İmralı was a turning point. In prison, Öcalan gradually shifted his ideology from a Kurdish nation-state to "democratic confederalism": local self-administration, direct democracy, and gender equality without changing borders. This ideological transformation—embodied in Syria in the form of the Autonomous Administration and in Iran in the form of PJAK—later became the theoretical foundation of the peace process.

11.2 The AKP and Two Peace Processes

The coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 changed the state's approach. In its first decade, linguistic restrictions were eased, a Kurdish-language state television channel was launched, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spoke openly of "the Kurdish question." In 2013 the government made public its direct negotiations with Öcalan; Öcalan's Nowruz 2013 message, which declared the end of the era of armed struggle, marked the beginning of the "Resolution Process."

But the first process collapsed in 2015. Three factors shattered it: the electoral success of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in June 2015, which crossed the ten-percent threshold and deprived the ruling party of its majority; the Syrian war and the expansion of the territory of PKK-affiliated forces in northern Syria, which Ankara saw as an existential threat; and the bombings and clashes of the summer of 2015. The war resumed and this time spread to the cities; the historic districts of Cizre, Sur in Diyarbakır, and Nusaybin became scenes of urban warfare in 2015 and 2016. Thereafter HDP leaders, including Selahattin Demirtaş, were imprisoned, and dozens of elected Kurdish mayors were replaced by government-appointed trustees.

The lesson of 2015 for the book's question is that the peace process in Turkey was a function not of the Kurdish question at home but of Ankara's regional and electoral calculations. When Syria created a new threat and Kurdish political success shifted the domestic balance of power, the process collapsed.

11.3 Turkey and the Region: From Threat to Partner

Turkey's relationship with the Kurds of Iraq followed an entirely different path. In the 1990s Ankara saw the Kurdish de facto state as a potential threat, but in practice cooperated with it: İncirlik Air Base supported the no-fly zone, the Ibrahim Khalil crossing was the Region's economic artery, and the KDP cooperated with the Turkish army in Turkey's cross-border operations against the PKK in 1992, 1995, and 1997. After 2003, Turkey's concern over Kirkuk and the status of the Turkmen strained the relationship for several years.

The transformation began in 2008 and, in less than five years, made the Region Turkey's closest economic partner in Iraq. Three logics lay behind this transformation:

- **Economic logic:** The Region became one of Turkey's largest export markets in the region; thousands of Turkish companies became active in the Region's construction, trade, and services, and the 2013 energy agreement and the independent pipeline made Turkey the exclusive route for the Region's oil exports.
- **Security logic:** Ankara realized that the KDP, as the PKK's ideological rival and the ruler of the border areas, was the best partner for containing the PKK on Iraqi soil.
- **Logic of regional rivalry:** A Region close to Turkey was a counterweight to the Islamic Republic's influence in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah.

The opening of a Turkish consulate in Erbil in 2010, Erdoğan's visit to Erbil in 2011, and the Diyarbakır meeting in 2013 were the symbolic stages of this transformation. The 2017 referendum was the only serious test of this partnership: Turkey opposed it and threatened to close the border and the pipeline, but in practice, unlike Baghdad and Tehran, it did not cut the Region's economic artery. This distinction is meaningful: Ankara did not want the Region to become independent, but neither did it want to lose it.

Military Presence: Partnership in the Shadow of Bases

The other side of this partnership is Turkey's extensive military presence on the Region's territory. Since 2019, in the course of successive "Claw" operations, Turkey has established dozens of bases and outposts in the border areas of Duhok and Erbil, and its drones and aircraft have struck PKK positions in Qandil, Sinjar, and Makhmour. These operations have also caused civilian casualties and met with official protests in Baghdad, but the KDP has in practice accommodated them. By

contrast, Turkey's relationship with the PUK—which Ankara accused of tolerating the PKK and cooperating with the Syrian Democratic Forces—was hostile; in April 2023 Turkey closed its airspace to flights from Sulaymaniyah airport.

In the terms of Chapter One, the relationship between Turkey and the Region is an example of an "asymmetric partnership": the Region is economically and in security terms dependent on Turkey, and Turkey uses this dependence to advance its principal priority, the elimination of the PKK.

11.4 The Second Peace Process (2024–2026)

An Unexpected Beginning

The second peace process began where few expected. In October 2024 Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Erdoğan's nationalist ally, who for decades had been among the staunchest opponents of any negotiation with the PKK, proposed in parliament that Öcalan address parliament if the PKK announced its dissolution, and that he could benefit from the possibility of conditional release. Delegations of the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), the successor of the HDP, met Öcalan on İmralı several times from the end of 2024.

From the Call to Dissolution

On 27 February 2025, Öcalan issued his "Call for Peace and a Democratic Society," asking the PKK to convene a congress and dissolve itself. The PKK declared a ceasefire on 1 March, and in May 2025, after its twelfth congress, announced its dissolution and the end of armed struggle. On 11 July 2025, in a symbolic ceremony at the Jasana cave in the Surdash area of Sulaymaniyah province, thirty PKK fighters read a disarmament statement and burned their weapons.[79] In October 2025 the PKK announced the withdrawal of its forces from Turkish territory.

Impasse and the Framework Law

In the first half of 2026 the process stalled over the sequencing of steps: Ankara regarded complete disarmament as a precondition of any legal step, and the PKK regarded legal guarantees as a precondition of disarmament. The knot was untied in August 2026. On 10 August the Turkish parliament adopted, with 467 votes in favor, the "Law on Strengthening National Solidarity and Social Integration," known as the "Framework Law."[80] The law provides for mechanisms such as supervised release, deferral of sentences, and judicial supervision for PKK members, but stipulates that its provisions will be implemented only after Turkey's National Security Council confirms that the PKK and its affiliated structures have been fully dissolved and have surrendered all weapons. The İYİ Party, one of the opposition nationalist parties, opposed it and called it a path to a lifetime presidency for Erdoğan.

Kurdish critics and independent observers have noted that the law still labels the PKK a terrorist organization and ignores structural issues such as identity, language, and local democracy; and the government has not yet clearly stated the ultimate political goal of the process.[81] In September 2026 the speaker of the Turkish parliament announced that the legal process would not move forward until the dissolution was officially confirmed, and that a commission would oversee the law's implementation.

[79] Kurdistan24, "Türkiye Prepares Legislative Framework to Formalize PKK Disarmament and Reintegration," 2 June 2026; Euronews, 11 July 2025.

[80] *Balkan Insight*, "Turkish Parliament Overwhelmingly Approves PKK Disarmament Law," 11 August 2026.

[81] *Manara Magazine*, "Erdoğan's Strategy for PKK's Disarmament, Elections, and Power," 22 September 2026.

The Iraqi Dimension: A Four-Way Mechanism

For the subject of this book, the most important aspect of the new phase is its Iraqi dimension. According to the daily *Hürriyet*, in late September 2026 a four-way coordination mechanism was established among Ankara, Baghdad, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah under the supervision of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MİT), under which PKK members will hand over their weapons to the authorities of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, or the central government of Iraq.[82] This mechanism has two important consequences. First, the PUK, which Turkey for years regarded as a patron of the PKK, is now Ankara's official partner in the disarmament process; and this makes possible the normalization of relations between Sulaymaniyah and Ankara. Second, both Kurdish families of Iraq are, for the first time, simultaneously present in a joint security project with Turkey and Baghdad.

11.5 Why Now? Ankara's Strategic Logic

Analysts have cited four motives to explain Turkey's turn:

- **Syria:** With the fall of Assad and the rise of al-Sharaa's government, Ankara found an opportunity to resolve the question of the Syrian Democratic Forces through Damascus; and the peace process with the PKK weakened the ideological and organizational foundation of these forces. The dissolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces in August 2026 showed that this strategy had succeeded.
- **Rivalry with Israel:** While Israel spoke of an "alliance of minorities," Ankara sought to turn the Kurdish movement from an enemy into an ally so that Israel could not exploit it.
- **The Iran war:** The weakening of the Islamic Republic and the possibility of a power vacuum in western Iran made Turkey worry about the expansion of the influence of PJAK, the Iranian branch of the Apoist movement; and reports indicate that in March 2026 Ankara applied pressure to prevent a Kurdish operation in Iran.
- **Domestic politics:** Critics of the process, including some opposition parties, believe that Erdoğan needs Kurdish votes and the support of the DEM Party to amend the constitution or to run again.

Whatever the weight of each motive, the outcome is clear: in the new order, Turkey has defined the Kurds not as an ethnic threat but as a population to be integrated into the state and separated from regional rivals. Ankara is partnered with the Iraqi Region, advanced the integration of the Kurds into the central state in Syria, and at home is moving the PKK from war to politics.

11.6 Turkey and the Kurds of Iran

Turkey's relationship with the Kurds of Iran has received less attention, but it is vitally important for scenarios of the future Iran. Ankara has three clear positions. First, firm opposition to PJAK and to any Apoist structure in Iran; and therefore PJAK's membership in the February 2026 coalition, from Turkey's perspective, renders the entire coalition suspect. Second, opposition to any border change or extensive autonomy that might become a model for Turkey's Kurds. Third, a preference for a stable central government in Tehran with which Ankara can maintain economic and security relations.

[82] *Hürriyet*, late September 2026, as reported in *Manara Magazine*, 22 September 2026.

Yet this same Turkey, through its domestic peace process, has also set a model before the Iran of the future: the integration of an armed Kurdish movement into politics through law, parliamentary oversight, and a multilateral disarmament mechanism. If Turkey's process succeeds and extends to PJAK, the greatest obstacle on Turkey's side to a federal solution for the Kurds of Iran will be removed.

Table 11.1. Turkey's approach to the Kurds: past and present

Arena	Turkey's past approach	Turkey's approach in 2026	Consequence for the Kurds
Kurds of Turkey	Denial and war	Legal integration of the PKK, without political recognition of identity	End of the war; questions of identity unresolved
Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Potential threat	Economic and security partner; opposed to independence	Asymmetric dependence
Kurds of Syria	Enemy (PKK)	Integration into the Damascus state	End of autonomy
Kurds of Iran	Relative inattention	Opposition to PJAK; preference for stability	Limits on maximal demands

Chapter Summary

This chapter's answer to the book's central question is that Turkey, as one of the three pillars of the new order, has defined most clearly the path of Kurdish compatibility: integration into existing states, with cultural rights and political participation, without independent arms and without border change. Kurdish actors that accept this path—such as the KDP in Iraq and now even the Apoist movement in Turkey—become Ankara's partners; and actors that do not accept it will face the opposition of one of the most powerful states in the region. For post–Islamic Republic Iran, this means that Turkey will not seriously oppose a federal solution within Iran that disarms or integrates PJAK; but it will strongly resist any armed autonomy or Apoist project. The next chapter examines two other actors: the Islamic Republic in relation to the Region, and the new Syrian state.

CHAPTER 12

Chapter 12. The Islamic Republic and the Region, and the Lesson of Syria

This chapter places side by side two cases that at first glance are different but share a common question: how does a Kurdish actor survive or collapse in the face of a powerful and hostile state, without a durable guarantee from a great power? The first section addresses the Islamic Republic's relationship with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: a neighbor that has both given refuge and fired missiles. The second section examines the experience of the Kurds of Syria: a quasi-state that rose in a decade and was dissolved in a year. These two cases are the most important empirical evidence for assessing the future of Iran's Kurds in the new order.

Section One: The Islamic Republic and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

12.1 The Two-Faced Neighbor

The Islamic Republic's relationship with the Kurds of Iraq has been dual from the outset. In the Iran–Iraq War, Tehran was the ally of both main Kurdish parties of Iraq. In 1991 Iran opened its borders to hundreds of thousands of displaced Kurds, while Turkey initially kept its border closed. In August 2014, when ISIS reached the vicinity of Erbil, the Islamic Republic was among the first countries to send weapons and advisers to the Region. This record has given Tehran the credibility of a "reliable neighbor" among some Iraqi Kurdish elites, especially in Sulaymaniyah.

But the other face of this relationship is the transnational repression of Iranian Kurdish parties on the Region's soil, and a continuous effort to prevent the Region from becoming a base for the United States and Israel. From the assassinations of the 1990s to the missile strikes on Koya in 2018, on Erbil and party headquarters in 2022, on Erbil in 2024, and the extensive attacks of 2026, Tehran has shown that it regards the Region not as an independent state but as its own security backyard. From Tehran's perspective, the Region poses two threats: hosting the Iranian Kurdish opposition, and hosting the presence of the United States and—Tehran claims—Israel. Both threats were activated simultaneously in the 2026 war.

12.2 The Toolbox of Influence

The Islamic Republic has used five instruments to exert influence in the Region:

Table 12.1. The Islamic Republic's instruments of influence in the Kurdistan Region

Instrument	Method	Examples
Direct coercion	IRGC missile and drone strikes justified by "terrorist headquarters" or "Mossad"	Koya 2018; Erbil 2022 and 2024; the attacks of 2026
Proxy forces	Iraqi Shi'i armed groups and the Popular Mobilization Forces in the disputed territories	Rocket and drone attacks on Erbil airport and the Region's gas fields
Political influence in the Region	Close ties with the PUK and, earlier, with Gorran	Reported mediation in Kirkuk, 2017

Instrument	Method	Examples
Influence through Baghdad	Pressure on the federal government through the Coordination Framework	The 2023 security agreement on disarming Iranian Kurdish parties
Economy	Border trade, crossings, currency and smuggling networks	The Haj Omran and Bashmaq crossings

Through the closing or opening of crossings and the flow of goods, Tehran can affect the livelihoods of the Region's border areas, especially Sulaymaniyah. The 2023 security agreement showed that these instruments are, on the whole, effective: Baghdad and Erbil both agreed to move Iran's Kurdish parties away from the border.[83]

12.3 The 2026 War: The Final Test

The 2026 war brought this relationship to its climax. From the first day of the war, Tehran confronted the Region with the threat of "targeting all its facilities" if Kurdish forces entered Iran, and Erbil was struck by dozens of missiles and drones. The response of the Region—of both families—was identical: refusing to allow the Region's territory to be used for a ground operation. This behavior showed that the Islamic Republic's instrument of coercion, even in wartime and under severe weakening, still has deterrent effect on the Region.

But the war simultaneously transformed the Islamic Republic's position in the Region. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz turned the Region's pipeline to Turkey into a strategic asset for Iraq and increased the dependence of Baghdad and Erbil on Ankara, not Tehran. The PUK, Tehran's historic ally, turned toward Washington and Ankara by capturing the presidency of Iraq with American support and participating in Turkey's peace process. And the end of the U.S. military presence in September 2026, although it made the Region more vulnerable, also removed one of the main justifications for Tehran's attacks. In other words, the Islamic Republic still has the capacity to destroy in the Region, but it has lost its capacity to attract and persuade.

For post–Islamic Republic Iran, this experience carries a clear message: the Region, which for four decades has been harmed and frightened by Tehran, will welcome a new Iranian government with open arms, provided that government ends the policy of transnational repression and sees the Region as an economic partner rather than a security backyard. The Region can be transformed from a source of instability on the western border into one of the economic and security partners of a new Iran.

Section Two: The Lesson of Syria, from Rojava to Dissolution

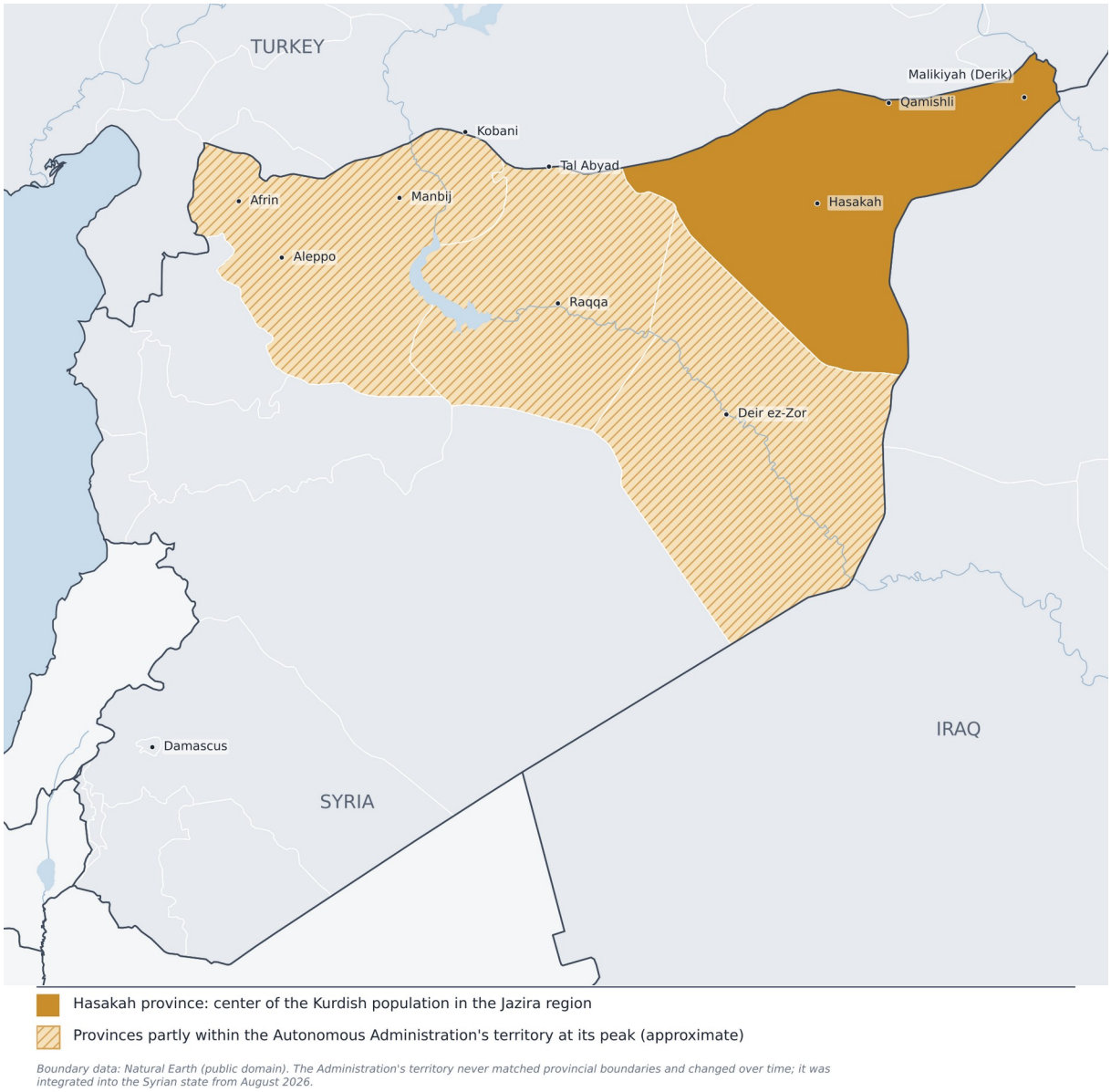
12.4 The Rise (2012–2019)

In 2012, at the start of the Syrian civil war, the Assad regime withdrew much of its forces from the Kurdish-inhabited areas of northern Syria, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Apoist movement, took control of these areas. What the Kurds called "Rojava" (the West) became a laboratory for Öcalan's democratic confederalism: local councils, male–female co-chairs, and an autonomous administration.

[83]Dana Taib Menmy, *The New Arab*, 9 October 2023.

The turning point was the siege of Kobani by ISIS in 2014 and 2015. The resistance of Kobani, with American air support, made the Kurdish forces the principal partner of the international coalition in Syria. In 2015 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were formed with a Kurdish core and the participation of Arab tribes, and by 2019, with American support, they had liberated Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, and a large part of northern and eastern Syria, including Arab-majority areas such as Deir ez-Zor. At its peak, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria controlled nearly a third of Syria's territory and a large share of its oil and wheat resources, and held tens of thousands of ISIS prisoners and family members in camps such as al-Hol.

But the very factors that helped this quasi-state rise also carried the seeds of its fall. Turkey conducted successive operations against it: Afrin in 2018 and the northeast in October 2019, after the withdrawal of part of the U.S. forces. To survive, the SDF also had to conclude agreements with Russia and the Assad regime. And its legitimacy in the Arab-inhabited areas governed by Kurds always remained fragile.



Map 5. The Kurds of Syria and the territory of the Autonomous Administration at its peak (approximate)

12.5 The Fall (2024–2026)

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the rise of Ahmad al-Sharaa's government in Damascus transformed the equation. The United States, which now had an allied government in Damascus, turned toward strengthening the Syrian central state. In March 2025 al-Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi, commander of the SDF, signed an agreement to integrate the institutions of the northeast into the Syrian state, but its implementation was slow and contested.

In January 2026 the Syrian government launched an extensive military operation in the northeast, and some Arab tribes that had previously sided with the SDF joined Damascus. The SDF, without American support and facing Turkey and Damascus, accepted a new agreement on 30 January. In return, the Syrian government, by issuing Decree 13, recognized the citizenship of stateless Kurds, declared Kurdish a "national language," and made Nowruz an official holiday.[84] On 20 August 2026 the Autonomous Administration was integrated into state structures, and on 25 August Mazloum Abdi announced the complete dissolution of the SDF.[85] Protests in Qamishli in September 2026 over the reduction of Kurdish-language education showed that the integration has not yet become stable.

12.6 The Region and Rojava: A Comparison

Why did the Kurdistan Region of Iraq survive for two decades while Rojava was dissolved within one? A comparison of the two is the most important test of the book's hypotheses:

Table 12.2. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Autonomous Administration of Syria compared

Variable	Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Autonomous Administration of Syria	Result
Legal recognition	2005 Constitution	None; only military agreements	Institutionalization made survival possible
External patrons	Diverse (United States, Turkey, Iran)	Mainly the United States (single)	A single patron created vulnerability
Relationship with Turkey	Economic partner	Enemy (link to the PKK)	Hostility with a powerful neighbor was lethal
Ideology	Conservative nationalism	Apoism	A supra-national ideology alienated neighbors
Territory	Mainly Kurdish-inhabited	A large Arab-inhabited portion	Ruling over non-Kurds eroded legitimacy
Economic base	Oil and an independent pipeline (until 2023)	Oil without a legal export route	The absence of a transit route increased dependence
Internal cohesion	Bipolar, but united against external threats	Hegemony of one party; elimination of Kurdish rivals	Narrow base; limited

This comparison clearly confirms the book's hypotheses. Rojava failed on every variable on which the Region succeeded: it had no legal recognition, depended on a single patron, was hostile to its most powerful neighbor, had an ideology unacceptable to its neighbors, and governed a non-Kurdish population. But the comparison holds another point as well: the fall of Rojava did not mean the complete defeat of the Kurds of Syria. In 2026 the Kurds obtained citizenship, a national language,

[84]Middle East Council on Global Affairs, "How Damascus Reclaimed Syria's Northeast," February 2026.

[85]Al Jazeera, "Kurdish-led SDF has dissolved, but has Syria really unified its military?" 26 August 2026.

and the Nowruz holiday—rights they had been denied before 2011. In other words, the quasi-state was dissolved, but part of its achievements was consolidated in the form of citizenship rights within the central state.

12.7 The Lessons of Syria for the Kurds of Iran

- **Guarantees before the patron departs:** The Kurds of Syria were America's partners for a decade but obtained no legal guarantee; when America turned, they had nothing but military force. The Kurds of Iran must secure their guarantees before the fall, in joint charters with the nationwide opposition and in the commitments of external powers.
- **An ideology acceptable to neighbors:** Apoism was unacceptable to Turkey, and this alone sealed the fate of Rojava. PJAK's presence in Iran's Kurdish coalition carries the same risk, unless the PKK's dissolution process extends to it as well.
- **Avoiding rule over non-Kurds:** The mixed areas of western Iran, especially West Azerbaijan, are the same test that Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa were for the SDF. Any claim to control areas with a non-Kurdish majority erodes the legitimacy of the Kurdish project and creates new enemies.
- **A defensible minimum achievement:** The Syrian experience of 2026 showed that even in the worst scenario, the Kurds can consolidate linguistic, cultural, and citizenship rights within the central state. For the Kurds of Iran, this minimum is the floor of negotiation with any transitional government.

Summary of the Chapter and of Part Six

The three chapters of Part Six provide a coherent picture of the position of the Kurds in the new Middle Eastern order. The West (Chapter Ten) supports Kurdish rights within existing borders and, in a conflict, gives priority to its allied state. Turkey (Chapter Eleven) has defined the path of compatibility: integration into the state, without independent arms and without border change. The Islamic Republic (this chapter) still has the capacity to destroy in the Region but has lost the capacity to attract. And the Syrian experience (this chapter) showed that a Kurdish quasi-state without legal recognition, with a single patron and an ideology unacceptable to its neighbors, does not survive in the new order.

From these four analyses, one overall conclusion emerges for the book's central question: the new Middle Eastern order has a place for the Kurds, but a limited and conditional one. This order accepts Kurds who live within existing states, with guaranteed rights, political participation, and limited self-government, and without independent arms or a supra-national ideology. With this conclusion, Part Seven turns to the book's final answer: which Kurdish actors are compatible with this order, and what will their future be in Iran and Iraq?

PART SEVEN: Answering the Central Question

CHAPTER 13

Chapter 13. Indicators of Alignment and Incompatibility: An Assessment Framework

The six preceding parts of this book examined the Kurdish question from different angles: theory, history, families, institutions, parties, and geopolitics. This chapter brings their findings together into a single analytical instrument: a framework for assessing the degree of alignment or incompatibility of each Kurdish actor with the new Middle Eastern order. The aim of this framework is not to produce precise numbers, since political phenomena cannot be measured in this way; its aim is to make analytical judgment transparent, comparable, and open to critique, so that the reader may disagree with any score while knowing which argument that disagreement concerns.

13.1 Defining the "New Order" and "Alignment"

On the basis of the findings of Part Six, the "new Middle Eastern order" is defined in this book as a set of four features: the return and strengthening of central states (Baghdad, Damascus, and possibly a new Tehran); the convergence of the United States with Turkey, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and reconstituted central states; the strategic weakening of the Islamic Republic's axis; and the declining willingness of great powers to support non-state armed forces. "Alignment" means the capacity and willingness of a Kurdish actor to find a durable place in this order without entering into an existential conflict with one of its pillars. "Incompatibility" is the opposite.

This definition carries an important normative point that must be stated explicitly: alignment with the new order is in itself neither good nor bad. The new order may restrict Kurdish rights, and an actor that is not aligned with it may be defending a legitimate ideal. This framework predicts who will survive in this order, not who is in the right.

13.2 Seven Indicators and the Method of Assessment

Each of the seven indicators introduced in Chapter One is scored on a scale from 1 to 5. A higher score always means greater compatibility with the new order. The following table specifies the criteria for each score:

Table 13.1. The seven indicators and their scoring criteria

Indicator	What is measured	Score 1	Score 5	Basis in the book
1. Ceiling of demands	The maximum political demand declared and pursued in practice	Independence or a cross-border state	Participation in the existing state with cultural rights	Chapters 7 and 8
2. Source of legitimacy	The degree to which legitimacy is negotiable	Revolutionary-ideological, non-negotiable	Electoral or familial, and negotiable	Chapters 3–5
3. Ideological acceptability	Acceptability of the ideology to the pillars of the order (especially Turkey and the U.S.)	Supra-national and banned	Liberal-nationalist	Chapters 10 and 11

Indicator	What is measured	Score 1	Score 5	Basis in the book
4. Economic base	Linkage of economic interests with the pillars of the order	No independent economic base; dependent on a patron	Rent and trade tied to Turkey, the Gulf, and Baghdad	Chapter 7
5. Diversity of patrons	Degree of dependence on a single external patron	Complete dependence on one patron	Balanced relations with several powers	Chapters 10 and 12
6. Military integrability	Degree of independence of the armed force from state structures	Independent and active armed force	No independent armed force	Chapters 7 and 11
7. Internal cohesion	Capacity to speak with one voice and implement agreements	Armed rivalry and schism	Cohesive leadership with a rule of succession	Chapters 4, 5, and 8

The sixth indicator requires explanation, because it contains a paradox: an independent armed force has been the Kurds' most important bargaining lever, yet in the new order it is also the most important obstacle to their integration. This indicator measures only "integrability," not bargaining power. An actor with a low score on it may be more powerful in the short term, but in the long term it will face greater pressure to disarm.

Total scores range between 7 and 35. For interpretation, three thresholds are used: 27 and above, "high alignment"; 20 to 26, "conditional alignment"; and below 20, "structural incompatibility."

13.3 Testing the Framework: Two Closed Cases

Before applying the framework to current actors, one must ask whether it correctly predicts the fate of cases whose outcomes are already known. Two cases are suitable for this test: the Syrian Democratic Forces on the eve of Assad's fall (end of 2024) and the PKK before the start of the second peace process (2023).

Table 13.2. Testing the framework on closed cases

Case	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	Actual outcome
SDF (end of 2024)	2	2	1	2	1	1	4	13	Forced integration and dissolution (2026)
PKK (2023)	1	2	1	1	2	1	4	12	Dissolution through negotiation (2025–2026)
KDP at the referendum moment (2017)	1	5	4	4	3	2	3	22	Loss of Kirkuk; return to alignment

For both closed cases, which score far below the threshold of 20, the framework predicts structural incompatibility with the new order and, ultimately, dissolution. The difference in their paths—one forced, the other negotiated—is explained by the seventh indicator (cohesion) and Öcalan's centralized leadership: owing to its high cohesion, the PKK was able to manage its own dissolution. The third case shows that scores are not fixed: by raising its ceiling of demands to independence in 2017, the KDP temporarily lowered its score to "conditional alignment" and paid the price. This test confirms the validity of the framework, at least at the level of predicting the general direction.

13.4 Matrix of Current Actors (September 2026)

Table 13.3. Alignment scores of current Kurdish actors (September 2026)

Actor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	Category
Kurdistan Democratic Party (Barzani)	4	5	5	5	4	2	4	29	High alignment
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Talabani)	4	4	4	4	4	2	3	25	Conditional (rising)
New Generation	5	3	4	2	3	5	2	24	Conditional
Iraqi parliamentary Islamists	5	3	3	2	3	5	3	24	Conditional
Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran	3	3	4	1	3	3	4	21	Conditional
Komala of Iranian Kurdistan (Mohtadi)	3	3	4	1	3	4	3	21	Conditional
Komala of the Toilers	3	3	3	1	2	4	3	19	Structural incompatibility (borderline)
Khabat	2	3	3	1	2	4	3	18	Structural incompatibility (borderline)
PAK	2	3	2	1	2	2	3	15	Structural incompatibility
PJAK	2	2	1	1	2	2	4	14	Structural incompatibility

Several scores require explanation:

- **KDPI, indicator 1 (score 3):** The party's official demand is federalism within a democratic Iran, which is compatible with territorial integrity; but its joining a coalition that speaks of the "right to self-determination" has created an ambiguity that lowers the score from 4 to 3.
- **Iranian Kurdish parties, indicator 4 (score 1):** None of Iran's Kurdish parties has an independent economic base, and their financial survival depends on their host and patrons. This shared structural weakness lowers all their scores, but it will change rapidly in a transition scenario in which they enter state institutions.
- **PJAK, indicator 7 (score 4):** PJAK, like the entire Apoist movement, has high organizational discipline. This cohesion, which under current conditions does not lower its incompatibility score, will become an instrument for the orderly management of disarmament if the PKK's dissolution process is extended to it—as happened in Turkey.
- **PUK, indicator 7 (score 3):** Bafel Talabani has achieved cohesion by eliminating rivals—a cohesion not grounded in rules or institutions and therefore more fragile than that of the Barzani family.

13.5 Three Clusters of Actors

The matrix divides the Kurdish actors into three distinct clusters:

- **Cluster one, "the state-integrated" (scores 24–29):** The KDP, the PUK, New Generation, and the Iraqi parliamentary Islamists. What they have in common is that all operate within a recognized state structure (the Region within federal Iraq). Their alignment with the new order is not an ideological choice but a structural consequence of their position. The main

threat to this cluster is not external but internal: the erosion of legitimacy, the rivalry of the two families, and the question of succession.

- **Cluster two, "the federalist opposition" (score 21):** The KDPI and Mohtadi's Komala. These two define their demand within the framework of a democratic and decentralized Iran; their ideology is acceptable to the West; and they maintain balanced relations with the region's powers. Their weakness is structural and temporary: the absence of an economic base and dependence on a host. If a decentralized transitional state takes shape in Iran, this cluster has the greatest capacity to move into cluster one.
- **Cluster three, "the maximalist armed" (scores 14–19):** PAK, PJAK, and at its margin the Komala of the Toilers and Khabat. What they have in common is a higher ceiling of demands, greater reliance on military capacity, and—in PJAK's case—an ideology that one of the pillars of the order, Turkey, does not accept. The scores of this cluster are close to those of the SDF and the PKK before their dissolution.

13.6 Dynamics: What Changes the Scores?

The scores in this matrix are a snapshot of the moment of September 2026, not a fixed destiny. Five events can shift the scores appreciably, and for policymakers these very events constitute "leverage points":

Table 13.4. Drivers of change in alignment scores

Driving event	Actors affected	Direction of change	Indicators affected
Constitutional guarantee of decentralization in Iran	KDPI, the Komalas, Khabat	Increase (3 to 5 points)	1, 4, 6
Extension of the PKK dissolution process to PJAK	PJAK	Sharp increase (up to 8 points)	1, 3, 6
Centralized transition and repression in Iran	All Iranian Kurdish parties	Decrease; movement toward cluster three	1, 6
Succession crisis or financial collapse in the Region	KDP, PUK	Decrease	4, 7
Unification of the Peshmerga in a single ministry	KDP, PUK	Increase	6, 7

This table shows that the position of Iran's Kurdish actors depends decisively on the decisions of the transitional government in Tehran. The same actors can, in one scenario, become partners of the state and, in another, incompatible armed forces. In other words, the Kurds' capacity for compatibility is not an independent variable but is largely a function of the policy of the emerging state—precisely the book's first hypothesis.

13.7 Limitations of the Framework

This framework has three clear limitations. First, the scores are analytical judgments, not empirical measurements; any other analyst might assign different scores, and the framework is designed precisely to make such disagreement transparent. Second, the indicators carry equal weight, whereas in reality one of them—for example, ideological acceptability to Turkey—may carry

decisive weight at a particular moment, as it did in Syria. Third, the framework measures Kurdish society through its organizations and therefore omits the unrepresented young generation, introduced in Chapters Five and Eight as the unknown variable. These three limitations are compensated for in the following chapters through scenario analysis.

Chapter Summary

This chapter's answer to the first half of the book's central question—the Kurds' predisposition to alignment with or incompatibility with the new order—is as follows: the Kurds are not a single actor; they fall into three distinct clusters. The Kurds of Iraq (cluster one) have aligned with the new order, more by structural necessity than by choice. Iran's federalist Kurdish opposition (cluster two) has a high capacity for alignment, the realization of which depends on the form of the transitional state in Tehran. And the maximalist armed forces (cluster three) are in a condition of structural incompatibility, with scores close to those of the forces dissolved in 2025 and 2026; but the PKK's experience showed that even this cluster, with the right mechanism, can move from war to politics.

The next chapter answers the second half of the question: the Kurds' capacity to adapt to emerging governments in post–Islamic Republic Iran. There, this matrix is set against four transition scenarios to show how each actor will behave in each scenario.

CHAPTER 14

Chapter 14. The Kurds and Post–Islamic Republic Iran: Scenarios, Constitution, and Security Arrangements

The previous chapter showed that the capacity of Iran's Kurds to adapt to the new order is a dependent variable: the same parties can become partners of the state or incompatible armed forces, depending on how the emerging government in Tehran takes shape and how it treats them. This chapter examines this relationship in four steps: transition scenarios and the behavior of each actor in each scenario; constitutional models for resolving the Kurdish question; security arrangements and transitional justice; and the sequencing of steps. Finally, the "zone of possible agreement" between national red lines and Kurdish red lines is mapped.

Before beginning, a methodological note: this chapter is not written from the perspective of either side. The concern of Iranian nationalists about partition is rooted in real experience, including the 1946 Republic, which was formed with Soviet support; and the concern of the Kurds about repression is likewise rooted in real experience, from 1979 to the assassination of Ghassemlou. Any solution that ignores either of these two fears will not be durable.

14.1 The Starting Point: September 2026

At the end of September 2026, the Islamic Republic, under the leadership of Mojtaba Khamenei, is severely weakened in a war of attrition with the United States and Israel and under a U.S. naval blockade, but it has not yet fallen. In the last week of September, indirect talks mediated by Qatar, Pakistan, and Egypt continued on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, but Iran's proposal for a ceasefire and a phased reopening of the Strait of Hormuz was rejected by the U.S. president. Iran's nationwide opposition is fragmented, and no agreement on the rules of transition has emerged among the major political currents—especially the monarchists centered on Reza Pahlavi, the republicans, the left, and the nationalities. The Kurds, unlike much of the opposition, have an organized coalition with a battle-tested armed force, but they have a host in the Region that does not permit operations and an external patron that retreated in March. And the fault line between the centralist opposition and the Kurdish coalition has become visible since the verbal confrontation of February and March.

14.2 Four Scenarios

The scenarios rest on two principal drivers: the mode of transition (organized or chaotic) and the orientation of the dominant force in the transition (centralist or pluralist). The fourth scenario, regime survival, lies outside these two axes.

Table 14.1. The scenario matrix

	Dominant force: centralist	Dominant force: pluralist
Organized transition	Scenario A: Centralized nationalist transition	Scenario B: Negotiated transition with decentralization
Chaotic transition	Scenario C: Collapse and power vacuum (with gradual dominance of a new center)	Scenario C: Collapse and power vacuum (with initial fragmentation)

Scenario A: Centralized Nationalist Transition

In this scenario, the dominant force of the transition—backed by parts of the army and security forces that have split from the regime, and with external support—emphasizes "territorial integrity" and a single army and sees the Kurdish question essentially as a security issue. Cultural rights may be promised, but political decentralization is postponed or rejected.

Probable behavior of actors: The KDPI and Mohtadi's Komala negotiate at first, but if they obtain no guarantee within a few months, they move toward a coalition with the armed cluster. PAK and PJAK resist the entry of central forces into Kurdish areas from the outset. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, by the logic of survival, draws closer to the new government and presses Iran's Kurdish parties not to become involved. Turkey supports the centralized government. The United States and Europe support territorial integrity but apply human rights pressure in the event of widespread repression.

Principal risk: A repetition of the 1979 pattern. The new state, not yet consolidated, faces a war in the west of the country that drains its resources and legitimacy and gives greater weight to the security forces on which it depends for consolidation. In other words, Scenario A carries the risk of reproducing the security state.

Scenario B: Negotiated Transition with Decentralization

In this scenario, before the fall or in the first weeks after it, a charter is signed among the principal opposition forces, including the Kurdish coalition, that sets out the principles of the future constitution: territorial integrity and a single army, together with decentralization, linguistic rights, and religious freedom. Kurdish representatives are present in the transitional institutions.

Probable behavior of actors: The KDPI and Mohtadi's Komala become active partners of the transitional state, and their scores in the matrix of the previous chapter reach the range of "high alignment." The Komala of the Toilers and Khabat follow them. PAK will probably go along if it receives a role in local security arrangements. PJAK is the most important test: its acceptance depends on the extension of Turkey's process. The Region becomes mediator and host of the negotiations. Turkey does not seriously object as long as PJAK is disarmed or integrated. The United States and Europe support it as the preferred model.

Principal risk: Slowness and fragility. Negotiation among multiple forces takes time, and if the transition on the ground moves faster than the negotiations, the charter may be rendered ineffective before it is signed. In addition, part of nationalist public opinion will see decentralization as a prelude to partition.

Scenario C: Chaotic Collapse

In this scenario, the regime collapses without an organized successor, and a power vacuum forms in parts of the country. In Kurdistan, parties and local committees—responding to the call PJAK issued in March 2026—take control of the cities.

Probable behavior of actors: The Kurdish parties establish de facto authority in Mukriyan and Ardalan; but the risk of rivalry among them, especially over key cities and mixed areas, is high, and the experience of the 1994 civil war in Iraq and the war between the KDPI and Komala in the 1980s is a warning. In West Azerbaijan, the risk of Kurdish–Azeri conflict in mixed areas is serious.

Turkey, fearing PJAK, may intervene directly. The Region faces a wave of refugees and the risk of spillover.

Principal risk: The security dilemma (Chapter One) in its most acute form. Kurds arming themselves for self-defense will be perceived by the new center and by nationalists as the beginning of partition, and their reaction will confirm the Kurds' fears. If this scenario ends with the gradual dominance of a centralist center, it turns into Scenario A at a much higher cost.

Scenario D: Regime Survival as a Military-Security State

In this scenario, the war of attrition ends in a ceasefire, and the regime, under the leadership of Mojtaba Khamenei and dominated by the IRGC, becomes a military-security state. In Kurdistan, repression intensifies, the Muslim Peshmerga expand, and pressure on Baghdad and Erbil to implement the 2023 security agreement fully and to expel the Kurdish parties increases. Under pressure from its host, the Kurdish coalition may collapse, and Iran's Kurds return to the pre-2022 period—but with a younger and angrier generation.

Actor Behavior across the Four Scenarios

Table 14.2. Probable behavior of actors under each scenario

Actor	A: Centralized	B: Negotiated	C: Chaotic	D: Regime survival
KDPI	Conditional negotiation, then resistance	Active partner	De facto authority in Mukriyan	Exile and pressure
Komala (Mohtadi)	Negotiation; mediator with the nationwide opposition	Active partner	Local authority in Ardalan	Exile
PAK	Armed resistance	Conditional cooperation for a security role	Armed control of areas	Limited operations
PJAK	Armed resistance	Conditional on Turkey's process	Armed control; aim of self-administration	Unwritten ceasefire; operations
Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Alignment with the new Tehran; containing the parties	Mediator and host	Managing spillover; neutrality	Under pressure; expelling the parties
Turkey	Support	Conditional acceptance	Possible intervention	Opposition to PJAK; pragmatism with Tehran
United States and Europe	Support with human rights pressure	Full support	Crisis management; support for territorial integrity	Continued pressure

14.3 Constitutional Models

Scenario B, the most desirable scenario in terms of cost and durability, requires a clear answer to one question: which form of decentralization? The comparative literature and the region's experience place five models before Iran:

Table 14.3. Constitutional models for the Kurdish question in Iran

Model	Description	Acceptability to Kurds	Acceptability to nationalists	Regional acceptability	Assessment
Unitary state with cultural rights	Centralized state; Kurdish in education and media	Low	High	High	Insufficient; repeats the reform-era experience
Administrative decentralization at the provincial level	Elected provincial councils and governors; provincial budgets	Medium	High	High	A formal foundation, but insufficient on its own
Territorial (provincial) federalism	Federal units based on existing provinces; limited legislative powers	High	Medium	Medium	The most suitable balance
Asymmetric ethnic autonomy	Special powers for a Kurdistan region (the Iraqi 2005 model)	High	Low	Low	Risk of partition fears and recentralization
Democratic self-administration (Apoist)	Supra-state local councils	Medium (PJAK only)	Very low	Very low	Impracticable in the new order

It is worth recalling that Iran has a precedent of its own: the Law of Provincial and District Councils of the Constitutional era, which provided for elected local councils with real powers. This precedent shows that decentralization is not an imported concept but part of the tradition of Iranian constitutionalism.[86]

The comparative literature also highlights a key distinction: between "territorial" federalism, whose units are defined on the basis of geography and provinces, and "ethnic" federalism, whose units are defined on the basis of ethnic identity. The experiences of ethnic federalism, from Yugoslavia to Ethiopia, have shown that this model can freeze ethnic identities and turn competition over unit boundaries into conflict; whereas territorial federalism, if accompanied by guaranteed cultural rights, both satisfies the demand for self-government and prevents the ethnicization of politics.[87] The Iraqi experience (Chapter Seven) offers a further warning: asymmetric autonomy without a dispute-resolution mechanism and a clear division of resources leads to recentralization through courts and budgets.

The Proposed Package

On the basis of this analysis, the package with the greatest likelihood of simultaneous acceptance by the Kurds, the nationalists, and the regional powers comprises eight components:

1. **Territorial federalism based on existing provinces:** No ethnic "Kurdistan region," but real powers for all provinces in education, culture, health, local development, and local policing.
2. **Elected councils and governors:** Direct election of the provincial council and governor, with the possibility of cooperation among neighboring provinces in cultural affairs.
3. **Constitutional guarantee of languages:** Kurdish, and Iran's other languages, as a second official language in provinces where its speakers form a majority, with the right to mother-tongue education alongside Persian as the common national language.

[86]Law of Provincial and District Councils (*Qanun-e Anjomanha-ye Ayalati va Velayati*), 1907, part of the Iranian constitutional settlement.

[87]On territorial versus ethnic federalism, see Alfred Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 4 (1999); Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, "Must Pluri-national Federations Fail?" *Ethnopolitics* 8, no. 1 (2009).

4. **Religious freedom and equal citizenship:** Full equality of citizens regardless of religion; an end to discrimination against Sunnis and Yarsanis in access to public office.
5. **A special mechanism for mixed areas:** In West Azerbaijan and other areas with mixed populations, power-sharing in the provincial council, administrative bilingualism, and guaranteed rights for intra-provincial minorities.
6. **A balanced fiscal system:** National revenues centralized, but with a transparent legal formula for allocation to the provinces and a compensation fund for deprived border provinces. This component applies the principal lesson of Iraq: without a clear fiscal formula, federalism becomes an instrument of pressure by the center.
7. **An independent constitutional court:** With a composition that guarantees balanced representation of the regions, as arbiter of disputes between the center and the provinces.
8. **Explicit red lines:** A single army, national foreign policy and defense, national ownership of subsoil resources, and a constitutional prohibition of secession.

14.4 Security Arrangements and Transitional Justice

Integration of the Armed Forces

The question of Kurdish armed forces is the most difficult question of the transition, because both sides see it as a matter of survival: without a monopoly of arms the center is not a state; and without a security guarantee the Kurds will not lay down their arms. The region's experiences show three failed solutions and one semi-successful one: forced integration (Syria 2026), achieved by force owing to the SDF's lack of backing; the preservation of an independent force (Iraq), which never completed the integration of the state; war (Iran in 1979 and Turkey until 2024); and a phased legal process (Turkey 2025–2026), which is still incomplete but promising.

On this basis, the proposed model has three stages:

- **Stage one (the first months):** A ceasefire and an interim security memorandum of understanding; Kurdish forces remain in their positions and do not enter mixed areas; central forces likewise do not enter Kurdish cities without coordination. A joint committee with a neutral observer (the United Nations or the European Union) monitors the ceasefire.
- **Stage two (the first year):** Registration and organization of forces; formation of a "provincial guard" under the ultimate command of the national army, which some Peshmerga join after vetting; and a program of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration for the rest, using UN standards. At the same time, the former regime's security structures in Kurdistan, including the Muslim Peshmerga, are dissolved.
- **Stage three (after the adoption of the constitution):** Full integration, together with the constitutional guarantees set out in the previous section.

PJAK requires a special path coordinated with Turkey's process: a law similar to Turkey's Framework Law, with a mechanism for the social reintegration of members, and coordination with Ankara and Erbil. Turkey's experience showed that the Apoist movement, with its centralized leadership and discipline, can move from war to politics if a legal framework exists.

Transitional Justice

No durable agreement with the Kurds is possible without addressing the past. Kurdish memory of the Islamic Republic, as Chapter Nine showed, is the memory of the executions of 1979, the assassination of leaders at the negotiating table, the killing of *kolbars*, and the repression of 2022 and 2026. Transitional justice in Kurdistan must have three components: a truth commission to document human rights violations from 1979 to the end of the regime; judicial prosecution of those who ordered and perpetrated serious crimes; and reciprocal amnesty for combatants on both sides for non-serious offenses, as a precondition for integration. Beyond its moral function, this component has a political function: it shows that the new government is not the successor to the logic of 1979.

14.5 Sequencing: Before the Fall, the First Hundred Days, and After

The common lesson of 1979 in Iran, of 1970 and 2005 in Iraq, and of 2026 in Syria is that time is the decisive variable: an agreement not concluded at the moment of the center's weakness becomes much harder later; and an agreement concluded at that moment but not institutionalized collapses as the center consolidates. The proposed sequencing is therefore as follows:

Table 14.4. Proposed sequencing of the transition in Kurdistan

Stage	Key action	Purpose
Before the fall	A joint charter of the nationwide opposition and the Kurdish coalition on constitutional principles (territorial integrity, decentralization, linguistic rights, a single army)	Preventing the opposition fault line from moving onto the battlefield
Before the fall	Commitment by external powers (United States, Europe, Turkey) to support the charter	External guarantee; the lesson of Syria
The first days	Ceasefire and interim security memorandum; a Kurdish representative on the transitional council	Avoiding 1979
The first hundred days	Release of political prisoners; declaration of interim linguistic rights; dissolution of the regime's security structures in Kurdistan	Confidence-building
The first year	Constituent assembly with balanced representation; organization of forces; truth commission	Institution-building
After the constitution	Referendum; full integration of forces; provincial elections	Consolidation

14.6 The Zone of Possible Agreement

Is there space for agreement between the two sides' red lines? A comparison of the declared or probable red lines gives a positive answer:

Table 14.5. National and Kurdish red lines compared

National red lines (center and nationalists)	Kurdish red lines (mainstream)	Are they compatible?
Territorial integrity and prohibition of secession	Self-government within the framework of Iran	Yes; territorial federalism satisfies both
A single army	Security guarantee against repression	Yes; a provincial guard under the national army with a constitutional guarantee

National red lines (center and nationalists)	Kurdish red lines (mainstream)	Are they compatible?
Persian as the common national language	Education and local administration in Kurdish	Yes; provincial bilingualism
National ownership of resources	A fair share of national revenue for the development of deprived areas	Yes; a legal fiscal formula
National foreign policy	An end to transnational repression and recognition of cross-border cultural ties	Yes; these two do not conflict
Rejection of a "right to self-determination" meaning secession	"Right to self-determination" in the discourse of the 2026 coalition	The principal issue; requires a shared definition meaning internal self-government

The concept of "self-determination" has two meanings in international law: "external" self-determination, which can lead to secession, and "internal" self-determination, meaning the right of a people to administer its own affairs within the framework of the existing state. The mainstream of Iranian Kurdish politics—namely the KDPI and Mohtadi's Komala—in practice speaks of the second meaning; but the ambiguity of the term gives nationalists an argument for suspicion and gives maximalist Kurdish currents room to maneuver. A shared, written definition of this term in the transition charter may be the most important step toward closing this fault line.

Chapter Summary: Answering the Second Half of the Question

Do the Kurds have the capacity to adapt to an emerging government in post–Islamic Republic Iran? This chapter's answer is positive but conditional. The mainstream of Iranian Kurdish politics, which defines its demand in terms of federalism within a democratic Iran, has a high capacity for adaptation—a capacity that history also confirms, since in every period in which a minimum of political space existed, the majority of Kurds chose participation. The red lines of this current can be reconciled with national red lines, and the only real knot—the definition of the "right to self-determination"—can be untied through dialogue.

But the scenario analysis has a still more important conclusion: the greatest danger to post–Islamic Republic Iran in Kurdistan is not Kurdish separatism, but two other things: a securitized and centralist reaction by a transitional government that repeats 1979, and a chaotic collapse that activates the security dilemma. Both dangers can be reduced by a single measure: agreement before the fall. A charter signed before the day of the fall between the nationwide opposition and the Kurdish coalition, and backed by external guarantees, is the key to preventing both bad scenarios. For this reason, this chapter can serve as the basis of a "Kurdish clause" in any national transition compact. The next chapter answers the same question for Iraq and brings together the book's policy recommendations.

CHAPTER 15

Chapter 15. The Future of the Region in Iraq, and Policy Recommendations

This chapter does two things. First, it answers the book's central question for Iraq: does the Kurdistan Region have the capacity to adapt to a recentralizing Iraq, and what will its future be in the coming decade? Second, it turns the findings of the whole book into specific policy recommendations for five groups of addressees: Iran's transitional forces, Iran's Kurdish parties, the leaders of the Region, the United States and Europe, and the regional powers.

15.1 Seven Drivers of the Region's Future

On the basis of Chapters Three through Seven, the Region's future depends on seven drivers, some internal and some external:

Table 15.1. Drivers of the Region's future

Driver	Status, September 2026	Current direction
Relations between the two families	Political relations severed; initial agreement to reactivate parliament in October	Uncertain; possibility of limited improvement
Baghdad's recentralization	Control of salaries, oil exports, and electoral rules	Continuing
Strategic value of the pipeline	One-year extension with Turkey; the only export route independent of Hormuz	Increasing Erbil's leverage
U.S. presence	End of the military presence on 30 September 2026	Shrinking security umbrella
Iran's trajectory	War of attrition; regime weakened but not fallen	Uncertain and decisive
Turkey's peace process	Framework Law; four-way mechanism	Reduced tension between Ankara and Sulaymaniyah
Succession and the young generation	Masoud Barzani at 80; an unrepresented young generation	Latent risk

15.2 Four Scenarios for the Region's Future

Scenario One: Managed Recentralization (Most Likely)

Parliament is reactivated in the autumn of 2026, and the tenth cabinet is formed after lengthy bargaining, comprising the two main parties and possibly New Generation. The financial relationship with Baghdad is stabilized within the current framework: oil is exported through SOMO, salaries come from Baghdad, and the Region becomes a federal unit with extensive administrative and cultural autonomy but limited fiscal and security autonomy. The two families shift their rivalry further to Baghdad: the PUK through the presidency, and the KDP through the foreign ministry and influence in the government. This scenario means the end of the project of independent state-building and the acceptance of the status of a "privileged region within Iraq."

Scenario Two: Return to Two Administrations (Serious Risk)

The impasse continues, or leads to a new crisis with the formation of an unstable government. The PUK–New Generation bloc in Sulaymaniyah and the KDP in Erbil and Duhok each establish independent relations with Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara, and the Region's common institutions become an empty shell. Four triggers can activate this scenario: a succession crisis in one of the two families, Iranian pressure on Sulaymaniyah if the regime survives, the open preference of an external power for one of the two parties, and an acute financial crisis. The end of the American presence, which in the past served as the final mediator, increases this risk.

Scenario Three: Redefined Federalism (Less Likely)

Erbil uses the pipeline's new strategic value, the weakening of the Islamic Republic, and Baghdad's need for stability in the north to negotiate a comprehensive package: a federal oil and gas law that clarifies the Region's share and powers, a phased mechanism for the disputed territories to replace Article 140, and the unification of the Peshmerga with federal funding. This scenario requires two difficult conditions: the unity of the two parties in negotiating with Baghdad, and active mediation by the United States or Turkey.

Scenario Four: Independence (Highly Unlikely)

All the findings of the book—from the lesson of 2017 to the lesson of Syria in 2026 and the third rule of Western support (Chapter Ten)—show that within the foreseeable horizon none of the pillars of the new order will support the Region's independence. This scenario is conceivable only in the event of the complete collapse of the Iraqi state.

Warning Indicators

Table 15.2. Warning indicators for each scenario

Scenario	Indicators to monitor
One: Managed recentralization	Formation of parliament and cabinet; regular payment of salaries from Baghdad; increased exports from Ceyhan; presence of both parties in the federal government
Two: Return to two administrations	Failure to reactivate parliament; separate agreements of Sulaymaniyah with Tehran or Baghdad; armed clashes between the forces of the two parties; illness or withdrawal of Masoud Barzani without a succession arrangement
Three: Redefined federalism	Joint two-party negotiation with Baghdad on an oil law; mediation by the United States or Turkey; progress in Peshmerga unification
Four: Independence	Collapse of the federal state; a fundamental change in the position of Turkey or the United States

15.3 The Linked Fate of Iran and the Region

One of the principal findings of this book is that the future of the Region and the future of Iran's Kurds cannot be separated. The following table shows the effect each Iranian scenario would have on the Region:

Table 15.3. Effects of Iranian scenarios on the Region

Iranian scenario (Chapter 14)	Effect on the Region	Likely Region scenario
A: Centralized transition	The Region draws closer to the new government and contains the Iranian Kurdish parties; reduced missile threat; risk of border involvement in the event of war in Iranian Kurdistan	One
B: Negotiated transition	The Region as mediator and host of negotiations; broad economic opening with Iran; reduced proxy influence of Tehran in Iraq	One or Three
C: Chaotic collapse	A wave of refugees; armed spillover; rivalry of the two parties over influence in Iranian Kurdistan	Two
D: Regime survival	Double pressure to expel the parties; continued attacks; pressure on Sulaymaniyah	One or Two

The clear conclusion of this table is that the Region gains most from Iran's Scenario B and loses most from Scenario C. This convergence of interests makes the Region a natural beneficiary of a negotiated transition in Iran, and therefore one of the actors on which a future transitional government can count.

15.4 Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the book's findings, and the chapter on which each is based is indicated alongside it.

To Iran's Transitional Forces and the Nationwide Opposition

- **A charter before the fall:** Reach a written agreement with the Kurdish coalition on constitutional principles before the day of the fall; a fault line not closed before the fall will move onto the battlefield after it (Chapters 9 and 14).
- **A shared definition of "self-determination":** Rather than rejecting the term outright, define it in the charter as internal self-government within the framework of Iran; this will attract the Kurdish mainstream and isolate the maximalist currents (Chapter 14).
- **Avoid securitized language:** Using terms such as "separatist" for the entire Kurdish coalition pushes the mainstream toward the armed currents; maintain the distinction between federalism and secession in public discourse (Chapter 9).
- **See the Region as a partner:** The transitional government should end transnational repression and use Erbil and Sulaymaniyah as mediators (Chapter 12).
- **A hundred-day program for Kurdistan:** Have a specific confidence-building program: release of political prisoners, dissolution of the regime's security structures in the region, and declaration of interim linguistic rights (Chapter 14).

To Iran's Kurdish Parties

- **Internal rules before victory:** Put in writing, before any victory, the mechanisms for power-sharing, dispute resolution, and the management of areas among coalition members; the civil war of 1994 in Iraq and that of the 1980s in Iran are clear warnings (Chapters 6 and 8).
- **Guarantees before action:** Preserve the lesson you applied in March 2026: do not enter any operation without legal and external guarantees (Chapters 10 and 12).

- **Avoid mixed areas:** Any claim to control areas with a non-Kurdish majority erodes the legitimacy of the Kurdish project; this is the lesson of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa (Chapter 12).
- **Broaden the base:** Engage in dialogue with the Kurds of the south (Kermanshah and Ilam) and with the young generation inside the country, independently of exile structures (Chapter 8).
- **The PJAK question:** Smooth the path, with Ankara and Erbil, for extending Turkey's process to PJAK; without it, Turkey will block any solution (Chapters 11 and 13).

To the Leaders of the Kurdistan Region

- **Unity vis-à-vis Baghdad:** Every step of recentralization has exploited the rift between the two parties; conduct negotiations with Baghdad on oil and the disputed territories jointly (Chapter 7).
- **Use the pipeline's leverage:** The pipeline's strategic value in 2026 is a temporary window; use it to secure a federal oil and gas law before it closes with the reopening of Hormuz (Chapter 7).
- **Unify the Peshmerga:** With the end of the American presence, a divided Peshmerga is a security vulnerability; its unification is the Region's survival insurance (Chapters 7 and 13).
- **Succession and the young generation:** Institutionalize a rule of succession and open political space for the young generation; the Region's principal threats are internal (Chapters 3–5).

To the United States and Europe

- **Support the transition charter:** Publicly support, before the fall, a charter that guarantees Kurdish rights within the framework of a unified Iran; this external guarantee removes the greatest obstacle to Kurdish trust (Chapter 10).
- **Avoid repeating 1975:** Refrain from encouraging Kurdish forces to undertake operations you are not prepared to support fully; the cost to credibility of such behavior lasts for decades (Chapters 9 and 10).
- **Mediation in the Region:** After the military withdrawal, preserve the role of mediator between the two parties and between Erbil and Baghdad through diplomatic and economic instruments (Chapter 7).
- **Transitional justice:** Provide technical and financial support for a truth commission on Kurdistan in the future Iran; Germany, owing to the Mykonos case, has a special standing in this regard (Chapter 9).

To Turkey and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf

- **Turkey:** Make the experience of the Framework Law available as a model to Iran's transition, and support a territorial federal solution that integrates PJAK; such a solution reduces the Apoist threat on Turkey's eastern border (Chapter 11).
- **The Persian Gulf states:** The economic reconstruction of Iran's deprived border provinces, including Kurdistan, can be the most important material incentive for compatibility; poverty and *kolbari* are among the roots of unrest (Chapter 9).

Chapter Summary

This chapter's answer to the central question for Iraq is that the Kurdistan Region has, in practice, adapted to a recentralizing Iraq; and its most likely future is managed recentralization, in which the Region becomes a privileged but not semi-independent region within Iraq. The principal risk to this future is not conflict with Baghdad but internal collapse into two administrations—a risk that a succession crisis, the end of the American presence, and a chaotic collapse in Iran can activate.

The recommendations of this chapter share a common message that has recurred throughout the book: the fate of the Kurds in the new order depends less on their essence and more on decisions taken in three centers—the capitals of the central states, the Kurds' own leadership, and the capitals of the patron powers. Wherever these three centers have moved toward an institutionalized, guaranteed, and balanced agreement, the Kurds have become compatible; and wherever one of them has resorted to force, maximalism, or abandonment, conflict has returned.

PART EIGHT: The States and the Kurds

CHAPTER 16

Chapter 16. How Four States See the Kurds: Threat, Integration, or Partnership?

The preceding chapters of this book examined the Kurdish question mostly from the perspective of the Kurds themselves: their families, parties, coalitions, and calculations. This final chapter reverses the angle of vision and asks: how do the four states in which the Kurds live—Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq—see the Kurds, and how do they treat them? The answer to this question is the other half of the equation of compatibility, since, as the book's first hypothesis showed, the behavior of the Kurds is to a large extent a function of the behavior of the state.

The working hypothesis of this chapter, which arises from comparative observation, is as follows: the Islamic Republic of Iran has seen the Kurds essentially from a security perspective, as a threat to sovereignty; Turkey has to a large extent held the same view; in Syria, despite the change of regime, the security view has continued; but in Iraq, the Kurds play a role in the highest-level equations of sovereignty and are also regarded as an opportunity. This chapter tests this hypothesis against historical and behavioral evidence and shows that it is confirmed in broad terms but requires four important refinements.

16.1 Framework of Comparison: Five Models and Six Dimensions

The literature on the management of ethnic diversity places the approaches of states toward ethnic minorities on a spectrum between "elimination" and "accommodation."[88] To compare the four states, five ideal-type models are defined along this spectrum:

- **Denial and assimilation:** The state denies the existence of the people and aims at its complete absorption into the dominant national identity.
- **Securitization:** The state accepts the existence of the people but sees its political demands as a threat to sovereignty and territorial integrity and deals with it mainly through security instruments.
- **Selective co-optation:** The state co-opts part of the people's elite and grants them privileges while maintaining the security structure and political restrictions.
- **Managed integration:** The state recognizes cultural and citizenship rights and integrates armed movements into politics through law, but does not accept political self-government.
- **Constitutional partnership:** The people is recognized in the constitution as a constituent part of the state, has self-governing institutions, and shares in central power.

The behavior of each state is assessed along six dimensions: legal recognition of identity; linguistic and cultural rights; participation in political power; security approach; cross-border behavior toward the Kurds of other countries; and economic treatment of Kurdish-inhabited areas.

[88]For typologies of state strategies toward ethnic minorities, see John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary (eds.), *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation* (London: Routledge, 1993); Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

16.2 Iran: From Inclusive Nationalism to Ideological Securitization

The Pahlavi Legacy: Cultural Acceptance, Political Repression

The Pahlavi state's view of the Kurds had a feature that distinguished it from its Turkish and Arab counterparts: Iranian nationalism regarded the Kurds not as an "other" but as an original part of the Iranian nation and as historical kin of the Iranians. In this narrative, Kurdish was an Iranian language related to Persian, and Nowruz and the *Shahnameh* a shared heritage. This view led to limited cultural acceptance, including Kurdish radio broadcasts. In the political sphere, however, the Pahlavi state suppressed every autonomist movement, from Mahabad in 1946 to the KDPI revolt of 1967 and 1968. Interestingly, in the suppression of the 1967–1968 revolt, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq under Mulla Mustafa Barzani—who at that time enjoyed the Shah's support—cooperated with the Iranian state against the Kurds of Iran: another example of the Barzani family's survival logic examined in Chapter Three.

The Islamic Republic: Three Layers of Threat

The Islamic Republic transformed this legacy. Its view of the Kurds rests on three interwoven layers of threat:

- **The sovereignty layer:** The demand for autonomy or federalism is perceived as a prelude to partition and a threat to territorial integrity. This layer is shared with earlier nationalism.
- **The ideological layer:** The majority of politically active Kurds are Sunni, and their principal parties are secular or leftist; in a system that has founded its legitimacy on Shi'i *velayat-e faqih* and the official Ja'fari school (Article 12 of the Constitution), these two features simultaneously make the Kurds an ideological "other." This layer did not exist in the Pahlavi period.
- **The geopolitical layer:** The Kurds are perceived as instruments of foreign enemies, from Ba'thist Iraq in the 1980s to the United States and Israel in 2026; and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as host to the parties, has become a security backyard.

The state's behavior arises from these three layers: the administration of Kurdistan by the IRGC's regional headquarters and the security institutions; Article 15 of the Constitution on local languages, effectively not implemented; the near-complete exclusion of Sunni Kurds from senior civil and military posts; widespread executions; transnational repression from Vienna and Berlin to Koya and Erbil; and the economic deprivation of the border areas. Periods of opening, from the reform era to the Pezeshkian government, remained at the level of symbolic co-optation.

Verdict: The working hypothesis regarding Iran is fully confirmed. The Islamic Republic is a clear example of the "securitization" model with a dose of "selective co-optation." But an important refinement is needed: the core of the Islamic Republic's security view is ideological-religious and geopolitical rather than ethnic. This distinction is of decisive importance for Iran's future, to which we return in section 16.8.

16.3 Turkey: From Denial to Managed Integration, and the Dual View

Over a century, the Turkish state's approach to the Kurds has passed through four distinct phases—five, if the current one is counted separately:

Table 16.1. Phases of Turkey's approach to the Kurds

Period	Dominant model	Indicators
1924–1980	Denial and assimilation	Turkish nation-building; suppression of revolts; the term "Mountain Turks"; restrictions on Kurdish
1980–2002	Securitization	Legal ban on Kurdish (law of 1983, repealed 1991); state of emergency in the southeast (1987–2002); village guard system; evacuation of villages
2002–2015	Opening and co-optation	The first peace process; easing of linguistic restrictions; Kurdish-language state television
2015–2024	Return of securitization	Urban warfare; imprisonment of HDP leaders; trustees imposed on municipalities
2024–2026	Managed integration	Dissolution of the PKK; the 2026 Framework Law; implementation conditional on confirmation by the National Security Council

The key point about Turkey, which refines the working hypothesis, is Ankara's "dual view." Until 2024 Turkey saw the Kurds within the country mainly from a security perspective, but from the late 2000s it saw the Kurds of Iraq—that is, the Kurdistan Region—as an opportunity: an economic partner, an energy route, and an ally against the PKK and the influence of the Islamic Republic. In other words, Turkey showed that a state can simultaneously see its own Kurds as a threat and its neighbor's Kurds as an opportunity. Since 2024, even the domestic view has been changing: the 2026 Framework Law shows that Ankara has moved the Kurdish question from a purely security file to a legal-security file, although the condition of confirmation by the National Security Council is a reminder that security logic remains the final arbiter.[89]

Verdict: The working hypothesis regarding Turkey is confirmed for most of the past century, but with two refinements: first, Turkey has a dual view and sees the Kurds of Iraq as an opportunity; second, in 2026 Turkey is in transition from securitization to managed integration and in this respect has now diverged from Iran.

16.4 Syria: From Denial and Instrumentalization to Centralized Integration

The Syrian state's view of the Kurds under the Arab nationalism of the Ba'th was among the harshest examples of denial in the region. In 1962 a special census in Hasakah province stripped tens of thousands of Kurds of Syrian citizenship; the number of these "stateless" persons and their descendants reached some three hundred thousand in subsequent decades. The "Arab Belt" plan of the 1970s settled Arab villages along the Turkish border in Kurdish-inhabited areas. The Kurdish language was banned in education and in the public sphere, and the Qamishli uprising of 2004 was violently suppressed.[90]

But Assad's Syria had another feature that distinguishes it from Iran: the instrumentalization of a neighboring country's Kurds. In the 1980s and 1990s Damascus hosted Abdullah Öcalan and PKK bases and used them as leverage against Turkey, including over the waters of the Euphrates—until a Turkish military threat in 1998 forced Damascus to expel Öcalan and sign the Adana Agreement.

[89] *Balkan Insight*, "Turkish Parliament Overwhelmingly Approves PKK Disarmament Law," 11 August 2026.

[90] Human Rights Watch, *Syria: The Silenced Kurds* (New York, October 1996); on the 2004 Qamishli events and the stateless population, see Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria* (New York, 2009).

This "inverted dual view"—repressing its own Kurds while using Turkey's Kurds—is a perfect example of the triadic nexus of Chapter One. On the eve of the civil war, in April 2011, the regime issued a decree granting citizenship to some of the stateless; and from 2012, by withdrawing its forces from Kurdish areas, it accepted a tacit coexistence with the Democratic Union Party.[91]

Ahmad al-Sharaa's government, which came to power after December 2024, has a new view but with the same centralist core. On the one hand, through Decree 13 in 2026 it did what no Syrian government before it had done: recognizing the citizenship of all the stateless, declaring Kurdish a "national language," and making Nowruz an official holiday. On the other hand, it ended the political and military autonomy of the Kurds with the military operation of January 2026 and integrated the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces into the centralized structure of the state. The protests of September 2026 in Qamishli over the reduction of Kurdish-language education showed that the cultural concessions, too, are fragile in practice.

Verdict: The working hypothesis regarding Syria is confirmed: the security and centralist view has continued from the Ba'th to the new state. But two refinements are needed: first, Assad's Syria instrumentalized Turkey's Kurds, so its view was not purely securitizing but also instrumental; second, the new state has taken a step beyond all previous Syrian states in the field of citizenship and cultural rights. Syria's current model is "centralized integration with cultural concessions."

16.5 Iraq: From Genocide to Partnership

Iraq is the great paradox of this comparison. The state that today has given the Kurds a greater share in the structure of power than any other state is the same state that in 1988 committed the gravest repression of contemporary Kurdish history: Anfal and Halabja. Over a century, Iraq's approach has passed through all the models: limited recognition under the monarchy; the "partnership" proclaimed in the interim constitution of 1958; autonomy on paper in the 1970 agreement; Arabization and Anfal under the Ba'th; and finally constitutional partnership after 2003.

After 2003, the Kurds in Iraq acquired a role in the highest-level equations of sovereignty: the presidency of Iraq, held by Kurds since 2005; the foreign ministry and other key posts; the institution of the Region with its own parliament, government, and forces; and Kurdish as an official language of Iraq. The ruling Shi'i elites in Baghdad have seen the Kurds as an opportunity for several reasons: an ally against the return of the Ba'th and of Sunni Arab power in the early years; a necessary partner in forming parliamentary coalitions; a partner in the war against ISIS; and in 2026, the owner of the only oil export route independent of Hormuz. The United States and Turkey have reinforced this view.

But in Iraq "opportunity" is intertwined with "rivalry." As Chapter Seven showed, Baghdad has reduced the Region's powers by force since 2017 and through courts and budgets since 2022; and some Shi'i forces close to Tehran view the Kurds, especially the KDP, with suspicion. The partnership of the Kurds in Iraq is therefore a real partnership, but a contested one in the process of being redefined.

Verdict: The working hypothesis regarding post-2003 Iraq is confirmed: Iraq is the only state that has given the Kurds a share in the structure of sovereignty and also regards them as an opportunity. But two refinements are necessary: first, this partnership was the product of the particular moment

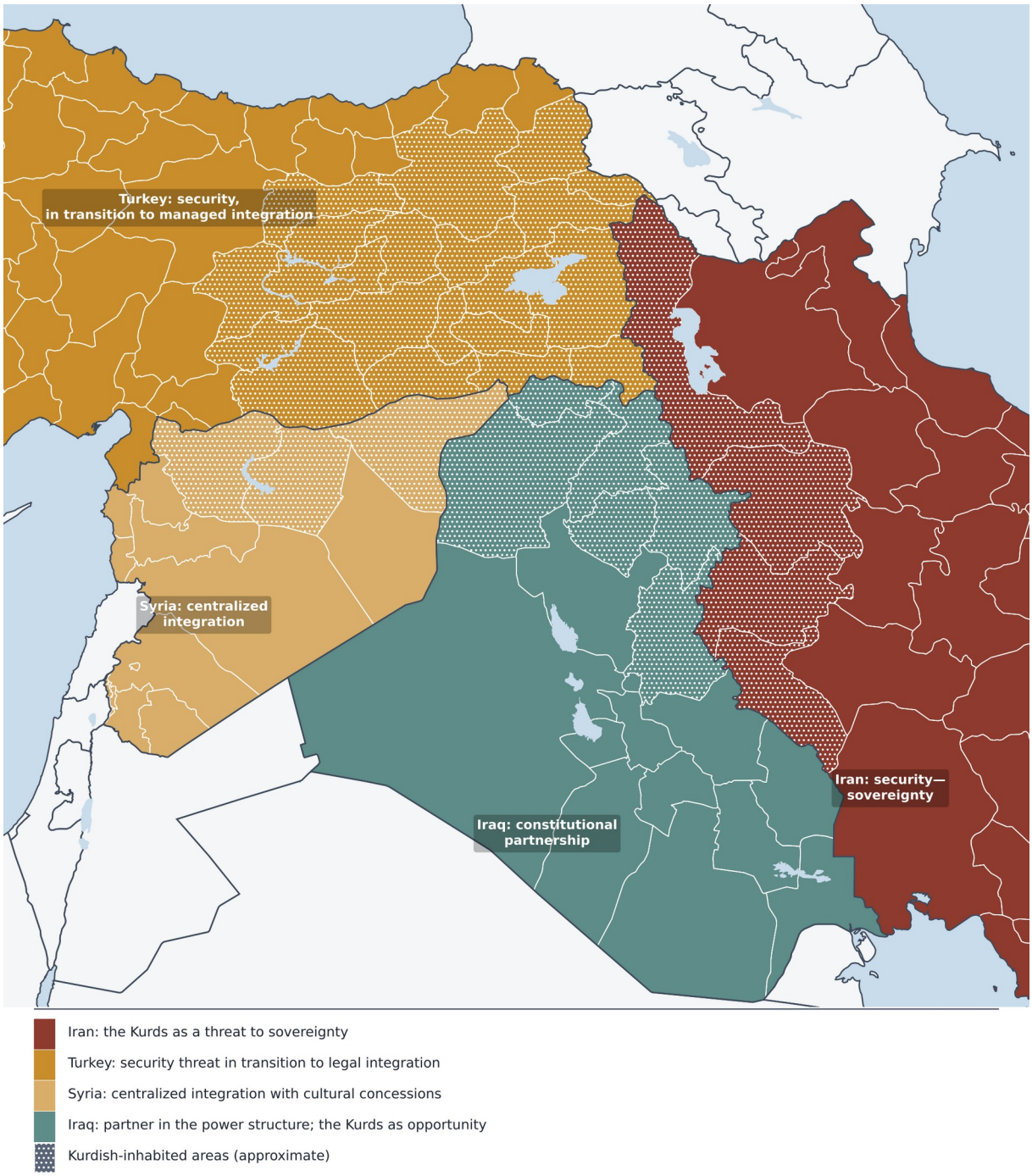
[91]On the April 2011 citizenship decree, see Reuters, "Syria's Assad grants citizenship to Kurds," 7 April 2011; on the 1998 Adana Agreement, see Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel, and Russia, 1991–2000* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2001).

of 2003–2005—the collapse of the central state, the military and institutional power of the Kurds, and the presence of an external guarantor—not of a gradual evolution in the state's outlook. Second, this partnership has in recent years come under the pressure of recentralization.

16.6 Systematic Comparison (September 2026)

Table 16.2. Four states' approaches to the Kurds compared (September 2026)

Dimension	Iran	Turkey	Syria	Iraq
Legal recognition of identity	Implicit and limited; no political recognition	Implicit legal recognition; no constitutional recognition	Decree 13: Kurdish a "national language"; no self-government	Full recognition in the 2005 Constitution
Linguistic rights	Article 15 effectively unimplemented; a limited university program	Private education and media permitted; limited public education	Recognized; fragile implementation	Kurdish an official language of Iraq
Participation in central power	Very limited; Sunni Kurds excluded from senior posts	Through parties and parliament; party to the peace process	Limited; being defined	Presidency, ministries, the Region's institutions
Security approach	Complete securitization; executions; Muslim Peshmerga	In transition to legal integration; the National Security Council as final arbiter	Forced military integration	Legal Peshmerga; incomplete integration
Cross-border behavior	Attacks on parties in the Region; assassinations in Europe	Operations against the PKK in Iraq; partnership with Erbil	Historical instrumentalization of the PKK	Unwilling host to Iranian Kurdish parties and the PKK
Economic treatment	Deprivation of border areas; *kolbari*	Limited investment; strong economic bond with the Region	Control of the northeast's oil resources	Growing control by Baghdad over the budget share
Dominant model	Securitization with selective co-optation	Managed integration (in formation)	Centralized integration with cultural concessions	Constitutional partnership (contested)



Map 6. The dominant approach of the four states toward the Kurds (analytical assessment, September 2026)

16.7 Why Do the Four States Have Four Different Views?

Five factors explain the differences in the four states' views:

- **The type of state nationalism:** Turkish ethno-linguistic nationalism and Ba'thist Arab nationalism defined the Kurds as an ethnic "other" and therefore led to denial. Iran's historical-cultural nationalism regarded the Kurds as kin and avoided denial. But the Islamic Republic added a religious-ideological layer and made Sunni and secular Kurds an ideological "other."

- **The constitutional moment and the balance of power:** Iraq is the only country whose constitution was written at a moment when the Kurds were in the strongest position in their history and the central state in its weakest. The constitutions of Turkey (1924), Syria (1973), and Iran (1979) were all written at moments of central strength.
- **An external guarantor:** The U.S. presence in Iraq after 2003 guaranteed the partnership of the Kurds; no such guarantor existed in any other country, and in Syria the withdrawal of the guarantor led to the end of autonomy.
- **The institutional weight of the Kurds:** Since 1991 the Kurds of Iraq have had a state-like institution with which the central state was obliged to deal; the Kurds of Iran and Turkey had no such institution.
- **The type of political system:** Iraq's post-2003 consociational power-sharing system inherently requires the participation of groups; the centralized systems of Iran, Turkey, and Syria have no such need.

16.8 Implications for the Future Iran: A Hidden Opportunity

The comparison of the four states yields an important and little-noticed conclusion about Iran. The Islamic Republic's security view of the Kurds, rightly highlighted by this chapter's working hypothesis, is rooted less in Iranian nationalism than in the religious-ideological and geopolitical layers of the system. Iran's historical nationalism, unlike Turkish and Ba'thist Arab nationalism, did not regard the Kurds as an "other"; and the cultural ties—from a related language and Nowruz to the Kurdish translation of the *Shahnameh*—are real and deep.

The implication of this distinction is clear: with the end of the Islamic Republic, the religious-ideological layer of the security view disappears, and the geopolitical layer also fades if the new Iran normalizes relations with its neighbors and the West. What remains is the sovereignty layer—the concern about partition—a layer that, as Chapter Fourteen showed, can be answered through territorial federalism and constitutional guarantees. In other words, post–Islamic Republic Iran is structurally better prepared to move from securitization to citizenship than Turkey was in 2002 or Syria in 2024.

But the Iraqi experience also carries a warning: the partnership of the Kurds in Iraq was born not of a gradual evolution in the state's outlook but of the moment of collapse and constitution-writing. If the future Iran wishes to move beyond the security model, it must consolidate this move at the very moment of transition and in the constitution; for, as the experience of the reform era and of the Pezeshkian government showed, an opening that is not institutionalized disappears with a change of government. And unlike Iraq, Iran should not have to pass through catastrophe to reach this point.

Chapter Summary

The compatibility of the Kurds with the new order depends not only on their own predisposition but also on the view of the states; and the view of the states, as this chapter has shown, is not fixed. Turkey moved from denial to integration, Syria from denial to centralized integration with cultural rights, and Iraq from genocide to partnership. Only Iran has not, in four and a half decades, emerged from the security model; and this makes Iran's coming transition the greatest test of the Kurdish question in the decade ahead.

Table 16.3. Testing the working hypothesis: verdicts and refinements

State	Working hypothesis	Verdict	Refinement
Iran	Security view; the Kurds as a threat to sovereignty	Fully confirmed	The core of the view is religious-ideological and geopolitical, not ethnic
Turkey	Largely the same	Confirmed for most of the century	Dual view (the Region as opportunity); transition to managed integration since 2024
Syria	Continuation of the security view	Confirmed	Historical instrumentalization of the PKK; unprecedented cultural concessions in 2026
Iraq	Partnership in sovereignty; the Kurds as opportunity	Confirmed for the post-2003 period	Product of the moment of collapse and of an external guarantor; under pressure of recentralization

Conclusion: "The Kurdish Question"—A Permanent File or a Solvable One?

This book began with a question: to what extent are the Kurds predisposed to alignment with, or incompatibility with, the new Middle Eastern order, and are they capable of adapting to emerging governments in post–Islamic Republic Iran and in Iraq? Fifteen chapters examined this question from the perspectives of theory, history, families, institutions, parties, and geopolitics. This conclusion summarizes the findings in three steps: a verdict on the hypotheses, a three-level answer to the central question, and a reflection on the future of "the Kurdish question."

1. Verdict on the Hypotheses

Table C.1. Verdict on the four hypotheses

Hypothesis	Verdict	Principal evidence
One: Kurdish compatibility is a function of the form of the emerging state	Confirmed	The reform era in Iran; the 1970 agreement and the 2005 Constitution in Iraq; Decree 13 in Syria; the dynamics of the scores in Chapter 13
Two: Families in Iraq, parties in Iran	Confirmed, with one modification	The survival logic of the Barzanis and Talabanis; the programmatic orientation of Iran's parties. Modification: the PUK showed that a family without a rule of succession descends into armed conflict
Three: Dependence on a single patron creates vulnerability	Strongly confirmed	Mahabad 1946; Algiers 1975; Kirkuk 2017; Syria 2019 and 2026; Iran, March 2026
Four: Internal division destroys bargaining power	Confirmed	The civil war of 1994–1998; the KDPI–Komala war of the 1980s; the recentralization of 2022–2026, exploiting the two-party rivalry

Chapter Sixteen, in turn, examined the other side of the equation: the view of the states. The Islamic Republic of Iran has seen the Kurds from a security perspective, as a threat to sovereignty; Turkey held a similar view for most of the past century but is in transition to managed integration; Syria has continued the security and centralist view, this time with unprecedented cultural concessions; and only Iraq, after 2003, has given the Kurds a share in the structure of sovereignty and regarded them as an opportunity. This comparison showed that the compatibility of the Kurds and the view of the states are two sides of the same coin.

2. A Three-Level Answer to the Central Question

The Regional Level: The New Order and the Kurds

The new Middle Eastern order—founded on the return of central states, the convergence of the United States with Turkey and the Persian Gulf states, and the weakening of the Islamic Republic—has a place for the Kurds, but a limited and conditional one: within existing borders, with guaranteed cultural rights and political participation, without independent arms, and without a supra-national ideology. The years 2025 and 2026 marked the end of the "armed Kurdish exception" in three of the four countries: the PKK dissolved, the SDF dissolved, and the Kurdish operation in Iran never

began. Only the Kurdistan Region of Iraq survived as a state-like institution—and it, too, came to terms with Baghdad out of necessity.

The answer to the first half of the question is therefore this: the Kurds have a high tactical predisposition to alignment, since their history is a history of changing allies in order to survive; but in most cases this alignment is not a free choice but a response to constraints imposed by states and great powers. The Kurds fall into three clusters: the state-integrated in Iraq, who have aligned; the federalist opposition in Iran, which has the capacity to align; and the maximalist armed groups, which are in a condition of structural incompatibility.

The Iranian Level: Adapting to an Emerging Government

The mainstream of Iranian Kurdish politics—the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran and the Komala of Iranian Kurdistan—has a high capacity to adapt to an emerging democratic and decentralized government. The red lines of this current can be reconciled with national red lines, and the only real knot—the definition of the "right to self-determination"—can be untied by distinguishing between its internal and external meanings. History also confirms this capacity: in every period in which a minimum of political space existed, the majority of Iran's Kurds preferred participation to armed struggle.

But this book also carries a central warning: the greatest danger to the future Iran in Kurdistan is not Kurdish separatism but a repetition of 1979—a transitional government that sees the Kurdish demand as an existential threat and chooses war instead of agreement at the moment of weakness. The second danger is a chaotic collapse that activates the security dilemma. The key to preventing both is an agreement concluded before the fall between the nationwide opposition and the Kurdish coalition, backed by external guarantees.

The Iraqi Level: Adapting to Recentralization

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has, in practice, adapted to a recentralizing Iraq. Its most likely future is that of a privileged but not semi-independent region within Iraq. Its principal danger is not external but internal: collapse into two administrations in the event of a succession crisis or a continued rivalry between the two families. The paradox of 2026—the strategic value of the Region's pipeline at the moment of Hormuz's closure—showed that the new order values the Region not as a state in formation but as a transit node of a unified Iraq.

3. "The Kurdish Question": A Permanent File?

In the political literature of the Middle East, "the Kurdish question" has often been described as a permanent file: a question unresolved since 1918 that seemingly will never be resolved. This book has shown that this description is only half the truth. The Kurdish question, in the sense of the demand for an independent nation-state for all Kurds, is not solvable in the current regional order and within the foreseeable horizon, because none of the region's states and none of the great powers accepts it. But the Kurdish question, in the sense of the place of the Kurds as equal citizens with cultural rights and local self-government within existing states, is solvable; and the experiences of Iraq after 2005, Turkey after 2025, and even Syria in 2026 have each, in imperfect form, shown paths to its resolution.

The difference between these two meanings is the difference between "the Kurdish question" as a security file and "the Kurdish question" as a constitutional file. As long as states see it in security terms, it will remain a permanent file; and when they resolve it in the constitution, it will become an ordinary matter of domestic politics—just as the question of national minorities has become an ordinary matter in many multinational democracies.

Post–Islamic Republic Iran will face this very choice. It can turn the Kurdish question, as happened in 1979, into a security file and a decades-long war; or, drawing on the constitutionalist tradition of the Constitutional Revolution and the lessons of the region's experience, it can resolve it in the constitution and make Kurdistan—from which the discourse of "Woman, Life, Freedom" arose—one of the pillars of a democratic Iran. This book has shown that the Kurds of Iran, in their mainstream, are ready for the second choice. The real question is whether the architects of the transition in Tehran will be ready as well.

Appendix 1: Chronology, 1918–2026

Table A1.1. Comparative chronology

Period	Iraq	Iran	Turkey and Syria
1918–1924	Rule and revolts of Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, "King of Kurdistan"	Simko's movement (until 1922)	Treaty of Sèvres (1920); Lausanne (1923)
1925–1926	Annexation of Mosul to Iraq	Consolidation of Reza Shah's power	Sheikh Said revolt (1925)
1931–1945	Revolts of Sheikh Ahmad and Mulla Mustafa Barzani	Disarmament of the tribes; *takhteh-qapu* policy	Ararat and Dersim (1927–1938)
1946–1947	Founding of the KDP (16 August 1946)	Mahabad Republic; execution of Qazi Muhammad	—
1958–1970	Barzani's return; the September Revolution; the 1964 split; the 11 March agreement	Consolidation of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule; land reform	—
1972–1975	Covert U.S. aid; the 1974 autonomy law; the Algiers Agreement; founding of the PUK	The Shah, Barzani's patron and then abandoner	Founding of the PKK (1978)
1979–1983	—	Revolution; the order of 28 Mordad 1358; war in Kurdistan	Start of the PKK's war (1984)
1983–1988	Massacre of the Barzanis (1983); Anfal and Halabja (1988)	Exile of the parties; the KDPI–Komala war	—
1989–1992	Uprising; Resolution 688; no-fly zone; 1992 elections	Assassination of Ghassemlou (1989) and Mykonos (1992)	—
1994–1998	Civil war; Erbil 1996; the Washington Agreement	Attacks on party headquarters in the Region	Capture of Öcalan (1999)
2003–2006	Fall of Saddam; the 2005 Constitution; unification of the two administrations	The reform-era opening and its end (2005)	Founding of PJAK (2004)
2009–2013	Rise of Gorran; energy agreement with Turkey	Securitization; executions	Rojava (2012); Turkey's first peace process (2013)
2014–2017	ISIS; the referendum; Kirkuk, 16 October	—	Kobani; collapse of the peace process (2015)
2018–2021	Government of Nechirvan and Masrour; Lahur's expulsion from the PUK leadership	Missile attack on Koya (2018)	Afrin (2018); Turkish operation in northeastern Syria (2019)
2022–2024	Federal Supreme Court rulings; halt of oil exports (2023); 2024 elections	The Jina movement; Iran–Iraq security agreement (2023)	Bahçeli's proposal (2024); fall of Assad (December 2024)
2025	Arrest of Shaswar Abdulwahid and Lahur Sheikh Jangi; resumption of oil exports	The twelve-day war; start of the Dey protests	Öcalan's call; dissolution of the PKK; weapons-burning ceremony

Period	Iraq	Iran	Turkey and Syria
January–March 2026	Pipeline agreement for Kirkuk oil	8 January strike; the 22 February coalition; war and the killing of Khamenei; the Kurdish operation plan and its halt	Damascus offensive; the 30 January agreement; Decree 13
April–September 2026	Presidency of Nizar Amedi; al-Zaidi government; PUK–New Generation coalition; end of the U.S. military presence	War of attrition; ceasefire and its collapse	Turkey's Framework Law; dissolution of the SDF

Appendix 2: Political Genealogies

The Barzani Family

Table A2.1. The Barzani family

Generation	Figure	Relationship	Role
First	Sheikh Abd al-Salam Barzani	—	Naqshbandi sheikh; executed 1914
First	Sheikh Ahmad Barzani	Brother	Leader of the 1931 and 1932 revolts
First	Mulla Mustafa Barzani	Brother	Founder of the party; leader of the September Revolution
Second	Idris Barzani	Son of Mulla Mustafa	Party strategist; died 1987
Second	Masoud Barzani	Son of Mulla Mustafa	Party president since 1979
Third	Nechirvan Barzani	Son of Idris	President of the Region since 2019
Third	Masrour Barzani	Son of Masoud	Prime Minister since 2019
By marriage	Hoshyar Zebari	Masoud's maternal uncle	Former foreign minister of Iraq

The Talabani Family

Table A2.2. The Talabani family

Generation	Figure	Relationship	Role
Preceding	Ibrahim Ahmad	Jalal Talabani's father-in-law	KDP secretary-general; leader of the politburo faction
First	Jalal Talabani	—	Founder of the PUK; President of Iraq 2005–2014
First	Hero Ibrahim Ahmad	Jalal's wife	Senior figure and behind-the-scenes arbiter
Second	Bafel Talabani	Jalal's son	President of the PUK
Second	Qubad Talabani	Jalal's son	Deputy Prime Minister of the Region
Second	Lahur Sheikh Jangi	Jalal's nephew	Former co-president; on trial
Second	Polad Sheikh Jangi	Jalal's nephew	On trial

Note: Details of the family relationships of peripheral members of the two families are not reported consistently across sources and should be checked against Kurdish sources before publication.

Appendix 3: Principal Kurdish Parties in Four Countries (September 2026)

Table A3.1. Principal Kurdish parties by country

Country	Party	Orientation	Status
Iraq	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Conservative nationalism	Largest party in the Region (39 seats)
Iraq	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Historically leftist; pragmatic; social-democratic	Presidency of Iraq; 23 seats
Iraq	New Generation Movement	Populist; anti-elite	15 seats; ally of the PUK
Iraq	Kurdistan Islamic Union / Justice Group	Parliamentary Islamism	7 and 3 seats
Iraq	Gorran	Secular reformist	Marginalized
Iran	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran	Social-democratic nationalism	Member of the 2026 coalition
Iran	The Komalas (three organizations)	From social-democratic to communist	Two organizations are coalition members
Iran	PAK	Hard-line nationalism	Coalition member
Iran	PJAK	Apoist	Coalition member
Iran	Khabat	Nationalist-religious	Coalition member
Turkey	Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM)	Left; pro–Kurdish rights	Parliamentary party to the peace process
Turkey	PKK	Apoist	Dissolved (2025); in the disarmament process
Turkey	HÜDA PAR	Kurdish Islamism	Ally of the ruling party
Syria	Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Apoist	Political role being redefined after the SDF's dissolution
Syria	Kurdish National Council in Syria	Nationalist; close to Barzani	Rival of the PYD

Appendix 4: Summary of Key Documents

- **The 11 March 1970 Agreement (Iraq):** Recognition of the Kurdish nation in the constitution; official status for Kurdish in Kurdish-inhabited areas; a Kurdish vice-president; autonomy within four years in areas with a Kurdish majority on the basis of a census. Not implemented owing to the dispute over Kirkuk.
- **The 1974 Autonomy Law (Iraq):** An autonomous region comprising Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok, with legislative and executive councils in Erbil; without Kirkuk. Proclaimed unilaterally; its boundaries became the basis of the future Region.
- **UN Security Council Resolution 688 (5 April 1991):** Condemnation of the repression of Iraqi civilians, including the Kurds, as a threat to international peace and security; a call for humanitarian access. The basis of the safe haven and the no-fly zone.
- **The Washington Agreement (September 1998):** End of the civil war between the KDP and the PUK through U.S. mediation; revenue-sharing, normalization, and joint elections. In practice, the two administrations remained in place until 2006.
- **The Constitution of Iraq (2005):** Recognition of the Region; precedence of regional law in non-exclusive matters; the right to form regional guards; Kurdish an official language; Article 140 on the disputed territories; ambiguous provisions on the management of oil and gas.
- **The Iran–Iraq Security Agreement (March 2023):** Iraq's commitment to disarm the Iranian Kurdish parties based in the Region and move them away from the border.
- **Öcalan's Call (27 February 2025):** A request that the PKK convene a congress and dissolve itself; an end to armed struggle in favor of democratic politics.
- **Declaration of the Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan (22 February 2026):** The union of five parties (joined on 4 March by the Komala of Iranian Kurdistan) with the aim of overthrowing the Islamic Republic and realizing the Kurds' right to self-determination.
- **Decree 13 (Syria, 2026):** Grant of citizenship to stateless Kurds; declaration of Kurdish as a "national language"; Nowruz made an official holiday.
- **Turkey's Framework Law (10 August 2026):** Mechanisms for the social reintegration of PKK members (supervised release, deferral of sentences); implementation conditional on confirmation by the National Security Council of complete dissolution and the surrender of weapons.

Note: To respect the length limits of the book, the full texts of these documents are not included in this appendix; the reader is referred to the official sources for the full texts.

Appendix 5: List of Maps

Table A5.1. Maps in the text

No.	Title	Location in the book
1	Kurdish-inhabited areas in four countries (approximate, at the provincial level)	Chapter 1, section 1.8
2	Centers of the historical Kurdish emirates and key sites of contemporary history	Chapter 2, section 2.1
3	The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the disputed territories, and the pipeline route	Chapter 7, section 7.1
4	Iranian Kurdistan: cultural zones and religious composition	Chapter 8, section 8.1
5	The Kurds of Syria and the territory of the Autonomous Administration at its peak	Chapter 12, section 12.4
6	The dominant approach of the four states toward the Kurds	Chapter 16, section 16.6

Methodological note: All maps were drawn for this book on the basis of Natural Earth boundary data, which is in the public domain. Kurdish-inhabited areas are shown approximately and at the provincial level, because none of the four states publishes official ethnic statistics and no precise ethnic boundary exists. Map 6 represents the analytical assessment of Chapter Sixteen, not objective data. High-resolution map files are also available separately for print.

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“As long as the Kurdish question is seen as a security file, it will remain a permanent file; once it is resolved in the constitution, it will become an ordinary part of politics.”

In 2025 and 2026 the Kurdish question was transformed simultaneously in all four countries: the PKK dissolved itself, the Kurdish forces of Syria were integrated into the Damascus state, the Kurdish parties of Iran united for the first time in four decades, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq faced Baghdad's recentralization. Analyzing the Barzani and Talabani families, the Kurdish parties of Iran, and the outlook of the four states—Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq—this book asks to what extent the Kurds will be compatible with the new Middle Eastern order and with emerging governments in post–Islamic Republic Iran and in Iraq; and it offers a measurable assessment framework, transition scenarios, and a package for resolving the Kurdish question in Iran's future constitution.

Ebrahim Roshandel is a former diplomat and an analyst of Iranian and Middle Eastern political affairs. At Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs he served as an expert on Turkey and as deputy director of the Political Bulletin department, and in recent years he has focused on designing a democratic transition in Iran, the networks of the Revolutionary Guards, and political Islam. His works include *Forty-Seven Years* and *Meet The Revolution*.

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