

The Future

Issue 1– Spring 2025 | A Journal of Analytical Policy Papers Published by the Center for Future Studies (CFS)

U.S. Foreign Policy Toward the Kurds During the Second Trump Administration

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- A photograph of Donald Trump speaking at a podium. He is wearing a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a red tie. He is pointing his right index finger upwards. The podium is blue with the word "TRUMP" in large white letters and the website "www.DonaldJTrump.com" below it. The background consists of several American flags.
- Reshaping the Middle East's Geopolitical Landscape.
 - The Future of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).
 - Iran's Middle East Policy at a Crossroads: The Fallout of Assad's Potential Collapse.
 - Russian Soft Power in Middle East.



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The Future

“The Future” is a quarterly policy magazine published by the Center for Future Studies (CFS) in the Kurdistan Region. The magazine features accessible, insightful analysis of Kurdish affairs and regional political dynamics across Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Each issue delivers thoughtful policy papers that translate complex geopolitical issues into clear, actionable insights for a broad audience.

Vision

To establish “The Future” as a leading policy magazine that bridges research and practical understanding, making complex regional issues accessible to decision-makers, professionals, and engaged citizens interested in Kurdistan and the broader Middle East.

Mission

The magazine’s mission encompasses several key objectives. It presents clear, compelling policy analysis grounded in the research of the Center for Future Studies while translating complex regional dynamics into accessible insights for non-academic readers. “The Future” provides forward-looking perspectives on developments affecting Kurdistan and surrounding regions and elevates diverse voices contributing to policy discussions about the region. Through balanced, well-researched content, it aims to inform and influence policy conversations.

Publication Focus

The publication focuses on several core areas. Policy analysis breaks down regional political developments and their implications, while expert commentary features insights from policy experts, regional analysts, and political figures. The magazine identifies future trends and emerging issues likely to shape the region. A regional spotlight offers focused analysis of key developments in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Visual data elements use infographics and visual elements to illustrate complex regional dynamics.

Editorial Structure

The editorial structure of “The Future” follows a quarterly publishing schedule with Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall issues. Each issue contains eight to ten policy papers, approximately 2,000-3,000 words each. Regular sections include interviews with key figures, opinion pieces, and data-driven analysis. The magazine features a visually engaging design with infographics, maps, and professional photography, and often presents thematic issues addressing pressing regional developments.

Target Audience

The target audience for “The Future” includes policy professionals and decision-makers, government officials and diplomatic personnel, business leaders with regional interests, journalists and media professionals, and educated general readers interested in Kurdish affairs and Middle Eastern politics.

“The Future” complements Kfuture.Media’s news coverage by providing deeper analysis and forward-looking perspectives, making the Center for Future Studies’ research accessible to a wider audience while maintaining analytical rigor and policy relevance.

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Issue 1 – Spring 2025

Editorial:

Reshaping the Middle East's Geopolitical Landscape



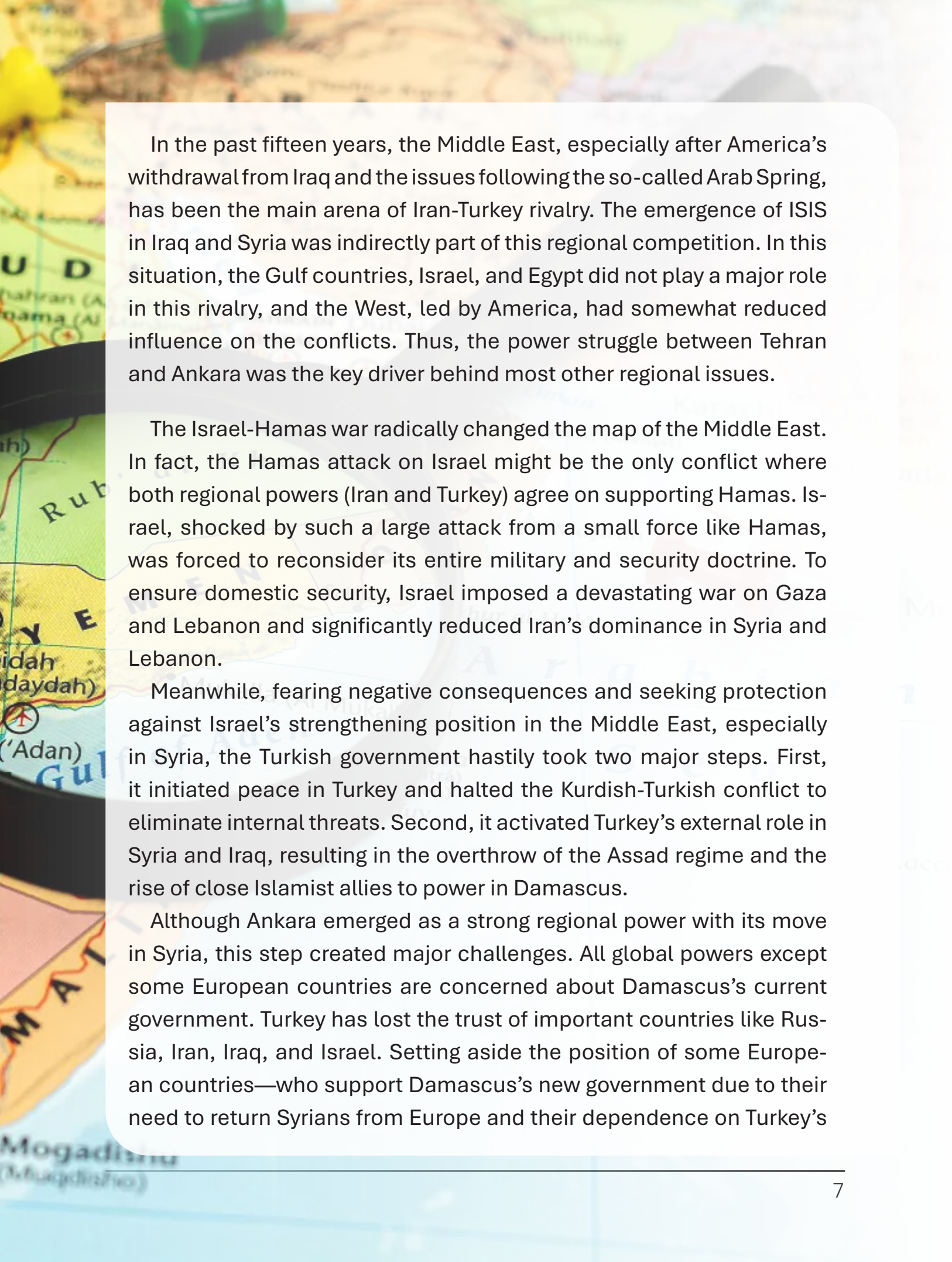
Dr. Yousif Goran

Dr. Yousif Goran is the President of the Center for Future Studies (CFS) and a former Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He earned his Ph.D. in Law from the University of Sulaymaniyah. His research focuses on politics, international law, educational policy, constitutional law, and security.

Perhaps after World War II and the emergence of the new Middle East following the creation of Israel and the intense struggle between the Eastern and Western blocs, this region has never experienced such uncertainty about its future and radical geopolitical and geostrategic changes as it does now. These changes will likely have significant impacts on all state and non-state actors, including Kurds.

The image we see in the Middle East is a condensed version of a larger picture occurring at the international level. The shift from Western and American unipolarity to multipolarity has created a kind of chaos in various regions of the world. This is partly due to the continuous efforts of regional powers to expand and fill the void left by retreating global powers, and partly due to the strategic vacuum occurring during strategic transitions and the concerns of most global and regional powers about their future roles and positions.





In the past fifteen years, the Middle East, especially after America's withdrawal from Iraq and the issues following the so-called Arab Spring, has been the main arena of Iran-Turkey rivalry. The emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria was indirectly part of this regional competition. In this situation, the Gulf countries, Israel, and Egypt did not play a major role in this rivalry, and the West, led by America, had somewhat reduced influence on the conflicts. Thus, the power struggle between Tehran and Ankara was the key driver behind most other regional issues.

The Israel-Hamas war radically changed the map of the Middle East. In fact, the Hamas attack on Israel might be the only conflict where both regional powers (Iran and Turkey) agree on supporting Hamas. Israel, shocked by such a large attack from a small force like Hamas, was forced to reconsider its entire military and security doctrine. To ensure domestic security, Israel imposed a devastating war on Gaza and Lebanon and significantly reduced Iran's dominance in Syria and Lebanon.

Meanwhile, fearing negative consequences and seeking protection against Israel's strengthening position in the Middle East, especially in Syria, the Turkish government hastily took two major steps. First, it initiated peace in Turkey and halted the Kurdish-Turkish conflict to eliminate internal threats. Second, it activated Turkey's external role in Syria and Iraq, resulting in the overthrow of the Assad regime and the rise of close Islamist allies to power in Damascus.

Although Ankara emerged as a strong regional power with its move in Syria, this step created major challenges. All global powers except some European countries are concerned about Damascus's current government. Turkey has lost the trust of important countries like Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Israel. Setting aside the position of some European countries—who support Damascus's new government due to their need to return Syrians from Europe and their dependence on Turkey's

military protection—many countries worldwide have expressed varying degrees of concern about the future of Damascus’s current government. Maintaining stability in Syria, especially after events in Alawite areas, is a difficult task that Turkey cannot successfully accomplish alone.

Generally, all opinions suggesting that after Assad’s fall, more stability would come to the region have been proven wrong. This situation has intensified regional competition between the main countries in the region (Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia), which appears to have direct impacts on regional security.

As Kurds and the Kurdistan Region, being an essential part of the Middle East, it is important that we carefully monitor regional changes and recognize our own capabilities and those of the states and regional powers surrounding us. In Iraq, we need to resolve all our suspended issues based on the constitution and become genuine partners in governance, so that we can establish a strong, federal, and pluralistic Iraq. In this way, Iraq can become not only a source of stability and prosperity for the country but also spread its influence throughout the region, supporting diversity, the rights of all components, and confronting extremist sectarian, religious, and nationalist ideologies.

Syria Towards a Foggy Future



Farid Asasard

Farid Asasard is a Kurdish political strategist and former director of the Kurdistan Center for Strategic Studies. Born in Erbil in 1956, he holds a BA in Psychology from the University of Baghdad. Now serving as Secretary of the PUK Leadership Council, he focuses on political strategy, governance, and Kurdish affairs.

This coverage reveals the essence of the Syrian crisis, which encompasses a series of rejected and negative phenomena, including the absence of democracy, government corruption, the lack of an effective parliament, violence by security institutions, rampant corruption within government bodies from top to bottom, and, most importantly, the absence of a culture of tolerance. Syria is heading towards a foggy future, and the anticipated transitional phase will be difficult, dangerous, complex, and potentially prolonged.

After nearly half a century of rule by the Assad family and 24 years under Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian regime has collapsed, marking the end of a sad and painful chapter in Syrian history. Despite the fall of the dictatorship in Syria, the features of the new system remain unclear, and the future of Syria is still shrouded in uncertainty.

Throughout the previous period, Syria lived under the rule of a single party and a single family, consistently ranking at the bottom of the list of the worst countries in the world in terms of human rights violations, corruption,



and the absence of public freedoms. The former Syrian regime, similar to its predecessor in Iraq, was a one-party rule. During that era, Syria lacked free media, was never a state governed by the rule of law, and opposition members and citizens suffered from arbitrary arrests and torture by security institutions. Bashar al-Assad inherited his father Hafez al-Assad's position in the state, the party, and the dictatorship. Under his rule, indicators of repression and human rights violations rose steadily year after year.


Bashar al-Assad was not originally prepared to assume the presidency because his father was not confident in his ability to bear the burden of such a position. Hafez al-Assad had more trust in his eldest son, Basil, and was preparing him to succeed him. However, Basil died in a car accident, paving the way for Bashar to ascend to the presidency.

After Hafez al-Assad's death, Bashar was granted the highest military rank in the army by Abdul Halim Khaddam, the Vice President, through Presidential Decree No. 9, enabling him to become the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. However, this was not enough for Bashar to succeed his father and become president, as he was not of the required age. The Syrian Constitution at the time stipulated that the president must be at least 40 years old, while Bashar was only 34. To circumvent this requirement, the Syrian Parliament convened and amended a constitutional clause, lowering the age limit from 40 to 34. These legal and constitutional maneuvers reveal the nature of the Syrian regime, which does not even respect its own constitution and laws.

When Bashar assumed power at the beginning of the new millennium in 2000, Syrians hoped that the second generation of the Assad family would be more mod-



12 ذكرى الثورة
السورية
Anniversary of the
Syrian Revolution



ern and open in governance, ensuring a prosperous life and a brighter future for them and their children. In reality, Bashar, before assuming the presidency, was a young and cheerful man, and the Syrian street hoped he would lead the country towards a bright future and political openness.

In the referendum held to appoint a new president following Hafez al-Assad's death, Bashar al-Assad was the sole candidate and received 99% of the votes. Such a percentage is difficult to achieve in genuine referendums, and considering that "yes" votes typically outweigh "no" votes in future referendums, obtaining such high results is considered normal in the absence of freedom due to repressive practices by Syrian security institutions and the lack of any independent or neutral oversight. Therefore, voter turnout and the percentage of votes obtained were high according to official announcements, as such referendums are usually not supervised by independent institutions

or international observers.

In the 2007 referendum, held to renew Bashar al-Assad's presidential term, he received 99% of the votes, an undoubtedly high percentage rarely achieved in genuine referendums.

In 2011, coinciding with the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring, streets were filled with citizens demanding freedom, democracy, and reforms. However, the violence the regime used against peaceful protesters led them to raise the slogan of overthrowing the regime, transforming the process from protest to armed rebellion, resulting in a civil war that claimed between 580,000 and 617,910 lives, including over 300,000 civilians, according to UN statistics. The Arab Spring failed to overthrow the regime, and the Syrian dilemma persisted.

In 2014, a presidential election was held with the participation of several candidates, in which Bashar al-Assad received 88% of the votes,

while the other two candidates competing against him received 12%. The election was overseen by the state. One candidate was a member of parliament, a member of the ruling Ba'ath Party, and a former minister, while the other was also a member of parliament and a former member of the Syrian Communist Party. In 2021, another presidential election was held in Syria, in which Bashar al-Assad received 95% of the votes. It is worth noting that there is no independent commission in Syria responsible for electoral affairs, and the conduct of these elections was neither appropriate nor consistent with a UN Security Council resolution calling for a new constitution for Syria before elections, ensuring that the elections under the new constitution would be free.

The former Syrian regime set difficult conditions for candidacy for the presidency, including obtaining the approval of 35 members of parliament, without which one could not run. The majority of parliament members were from the ruling

Ba'ath Party.

Following the 2021 elections, the Syrian government announced that 15 million citizens had participated and cast their votes, while the Syrian Human Rights Organization stated that the government's announced number was incorrect, and the actual number was 5 million. The European Union conducted an assessment of the elections, stating, "There are no democratic voting conditions in these elections."

This coverage reveals the essence of the Syrian crisis, encompassing a series of rejected and negative phenomena, including the absence of democracy, government corruption, the lack of an effective parliament, violence by security institutions, rampant corruption within government bodies from top to bottom, and, most importantly, the absence of a culture of tolerance. Syria is heading towards a foggy future, and the anticipated transitional phase will be difficult, dangerous, complex, and potentially prolonged.

The Future of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)



Dr. Omed Rafiq Fattah

Professor Dr. Omed Rafiq Fatah serves as the President of Cihan University Sulaimaniya (CUS), in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from Sulaimani University (2012) and a Master's degree in Political Science from Al-Nahrain University (2006). In addition, he is a researcher at Center for Future Studies (CFS). His research interests span political science, security studies, international relations, authority and authoritarianism, political security, and public policy-making.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) stands at a critical juncture as it works to form its tenth cabinet following recent parliamentary elections. Without a written constitution, the government formation process relies on established laws requiring nomination by parliament, presidential appointment, and a confidence vote. With no party securing a majority, negotiations between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) are underway to establish a coalition government. Unlike previous cabinets focused primarily on positions, current discussions center on crafting a comprehensive policy framework that addresses democratic transition, regional relationships with Iraq, economic diversification beyond oil revenues, and implementing meaningful reforms across all governance areas to combat corruption and strengthen institutions.

1. Legal Procedures for Forming the New Cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government

The Kurdistan Region does not have a written constitution that explicitly outlines the government formation process. However, several legal texts and laws regulate this process, including:



سیدعبدالله
وزیر امور خارجه

شعبان شعبان چاچي
نماینده مردم در مجلس شورای اسلامی



- **Kurdistan Parliamentary Election Law No. 1 of 1992 (as amended)**
- **Law of the Council of Ministers of the Kurdistan Region No. 3 of 1992 (as amended)**
- **Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq Presidency Law No. 1 of 2005 (as amended)**

Based on the provisions in these laws, the process of forming a new cabinet follows three key stages:

1. Nomination Stage: The Kurdistan Parliament nominates and appoints a prime minister, who is then tasked with forming the Council of Ministers.

2. Appointment Stage: The President of the Kurdistan Region formally appoints the nominated prime minister, granting them 30 days to form the Council of Ministers.

3. Vote of Confidence Stage: The Kurdistan Parliament must approve the proposed cabinet through a **vote of confidence**. If the parliament rejects three different cabinet compositions (including the prime minister, deputies, and ministers), the president is required to dissolve the parliament by decree and call for new general elections.

These legal procedures highlight the significant role of the Kurdistan Parliament in government formation. According to **Article 50(1) of the Kurdistan Parliamentary Election Law No. 1**, the parliament exercises this power with the approval of an absolute majority of its present members. In the nomination stage, the parliament must approve both the prime minister and deputy prime minister by an absolute majority. Likewise, in the confidence vote stage, the cabinet must secure an absolute majority of present members to officially become the Council of Ministers.

Since no single political force in the Kurdistan Region has secured the **50% +1** majority required to form a government, a coalition government must be established, bringing together two or more political parties.

Formation of the New Cabinet

Months after the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) parliamentary elections, the new cabinet is expected to be formed soon. However, due to the shifting political balance and the absence of a clear majority, a coalition government must be established in Kurdistan. As a result, negotiations

between the two main parties that won the elections, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), are underway. The likely outcome is a coalition between these two dominant forces, along with smaller parties holding one to two seats in parliament, including Turkmen and Christian communities.

In light of the current political situation, which is largely stagnant, the formation of the government will be more challenging and take longer than expected. On one hand, some political parties have already decided not to participate in the cabinet and will instead take on the role of the opposition. On the other hand, the experience of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the ninth cabinet has led to a formal call for a redefinition of partnership. This demand may also apply to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which seeks a unified government where all involved parties share responsibility.

So, here are the perspectives on the future of the Kurdistan Regional Government:

2. What will be the general policy of the Kurdistan Regional Government?

The government is legally responsible for formulating public policy, and the parties that make up the government must work to incorporate their political visions into the public policy of the region. In this case, the focus is on how to formulate a cohesive public policy for all sectors. Unlike previous cabinets that focused primarily on positions, the current discussions are centered on crafting a comprehensive policy framework.

In other words, the technical committee will agree on a joint document as an alternative to the strategic agreement between the PUK and KDP. This document will act as a political contract, and after being voted on in the Kurdistan Parliament, it will become binding as the government program.

It is crucial that this political document takes into account the capacity of the Kurdistan Region's political system, which has historically been focused on economic consumption rather than finding strategic solutions to the challenges of democratic transition. The public policy must be designed with the spirit of future statehood, encompassing formulation, construction, planning, and evaluation. For the tenth cabinet, the public policy should be comprehensive,

avoiding the narrow focus on one region while marginalizing another, and moving away from the policy of sector prioritization. Instead, it should be a planned, inclusive policy designed for long-term development and stability.

3. Relationships:

The KRG is currently an active non-state actor and one of the most untested experiences in the region. In terms of relations, there are three levels of interaction, in addition to the domestic level. Here, we focus primarily on the relationship between the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. At present, the Kurdistan Region shares a strained and unstable relationship with the central government. To ensure the maintenance of this relationship during this stage, the Kurdistan Region must abide by the permanent Iraqi constitution, which recognizes it as a constitutional entity.

To formalize this relationship further, alongside constitutional guarantees, the Kurdistan Region must commit to elections and uphold its legitimate powers as a legal entity. Additionally, the region's economic, financial, and trade relations must be regulated through legal agreements within a proper framework, rather than operating outside the unified econom-

ic policy. The current lack of a clear economic strategy poses a significant risk. Since 2013, the Kurdistan Region has been without a budget law, with a budget seizure law in effect instead. The focus remains on employee salaries, and corruption, both organized and unorganized, at the border crossings is widespread.

The KRG must redesign its oil and energy policy, aligning it with a new economic map.

4. Reform as a Tool of Good Governance:

Reform, in its essence, involves renewal, development, and review. Each step of the reform process should be gradual, based on consensus. In other words, reform must proceed with agreement from all relevant parties. It is a fundamental tool for ensuring good governance.

Legal support should be provided, and both parliamentary and governmental oversight bodies must be established and strengthened. The political and economic changes taking place globally require the leaders of the ruling power to engage in a genuine reform process. This involves utilizing resources and institutional capacities to serve citizens, uphold their

rights, and combat corruption through transparent and legal means that protect public wealth.

Whether comprehensive or partial, the reform process requires the future Kurdistan government to have a strategic vision for developing the role of institutions. These institutions, currently facing paralysis, must be transformed into effective entities led by capable leaders. These leaders will drive institutions to serve society, respecting the rule of law, ensuring equality and justice, and combating financial and administrative corruption. The next government should also prioritize training institutions to address citizens' issues, ensuring transparency, equality, and justice in dealing with individuals in society. Administrative procedures should be simplified, and the e-government system should be expanded, particularly in the realm of service delivery. Efforts should focus on diversifying the economy beyond single revenue sources (oil and border revenues). Encouraging and supporting the private sector, implementing sustainable development programs, and creating an environment conducive to attracting domestic and foreign investment in manufacturing are crucial steps. The government should rely on experts and consultants with

clean reputations, offering opportunities to talented youth with clear criteria for selecting positions.

Reform in Kurdistan should not be limited to a few administrative and financial institutions; it must be a comprehensive process across all areas of governance.

5. What Will the Future Hold?

The future of governance in Kurdistan faces numerous uncertainties, influenced by shifts in global power dynamics, the weakening of some regional forces, and the strengthening of others. Additionally, the upcoming elections in Iraq will prompt the PUK and KDP to make compromises and form the tenth cabinet. They will likely agree on shared points, providing golden opportunities for the governance system. However, the political system in Kurdistan faces a real threat of collapse due to incompetence and dysfunction. Governance cannot thrive without a transparent, stable, and efficient service government. Legal principles must take precedence, starting with the activation of the constitution-drafting committee to create a regional constitution, ensuring that the new stage of governance can proceed effectively.

An Analysis of U.S. Foreign Policy Toward the Kurds During the Second Trump Administration



Dr. Jalil Omar Ali

Dr. Jalil Omar Ali holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Sulaimani University, specializing in regional conflicts in the Middle East through realism and constructivism. He heads the Political Science Department at Sulaimani University and has been teaching since 2003. His research focuses on international politics, security, political systems, and Turkish foreign policy.

Much has been written about U.S. policy toward the Kurds, yet there remains a limited understanding of President Donald Trump's stance on the Kurdish issue and his approach to their legitimate aspirations. This is particularly significant in the context of the Middle East, a region marked by instability, conflict, and war. Understanding President Trump's personality, the structure of his administration, and its strategic approach is crucial for analyzing U.S. policy toward the Kurds during his tenure. Moreover, the Kurdish cause in the region is highly complex, spanning four different states—each with distinct characteristics and significance in U.S. Middle East policy—making a uniform analysis challenging.

Donald Trump's Approach to Politics

A fundamental principle in understanding Trump's political approach is recognizing his background in economics and business. He is widely known for his real estate ventures and economic studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Trump's outlook differs significantly from that of conventional politicians. After all, Trump is a businessman rather than a politician.

In the political sphere, diplomats and policymakers typically articulate their positions through carefully crafted statements designed to minimize controversy and present their views as proposals. By contrast, the business world often prioritizes direct, outcome-driven negotiations, where making deals, issuing promises, leveraging threats, and provoking reactions are commonplace. Applying traditional political interpretations to Trump's rhetoric is therefore misleading, as he often disregards diplomatic conventions.

As an outsider to the political establishment, Trump does not adhere to Washington's conventional governance principles, such as commitments to free trade, unwavering support for allies, or the promotion of human rights on a global scale. Instead, his decisions are guided by what he perceives as serving the immediate interests of the American people. This was evident from his first day in office when he decided to withdraw from the World Health Organization, rolled back climate change initiatives, imposed sanctions on the International Court of Justice, and enacted stricter immigration policies. Additionally, he sus-

pended U.S. foreign aid for 90 days, exempting only Israel and Egypt.

While foreign policy is shaped by multiple actors, the president plays the most influential role—especially in the U.S., where executive power in this domain is extensive. Consequently, U.S. policy under Trump is heavily influenced by his personal perspectives and decisions-making style. Therefore, understanding his psychological approach is essential to analyzing how his administration addresses the Kurdish issue.

Beyond the president, four key parties influence U.S. policy under his administration. First, the National Security Council, the Pentagon, and the State Department. Second, U.S. national security officials within Congress, including members of both the House and Senate. Third, the high-tech sector, represented by figures like Elon Musk and other billionaires influencing the administration. And fourth, the Jewish lobby, which plays a significant role in Middle Eastern affairs. However, these groups often have distinct and occasionally conflicting interests, creating challenges for both Trump and his administration in formulating a coherent foreign policy.

Another crucial aspect of Trump's governance is his approach to U.S. alliances. His remarks and threats—such as suggesting the annexation of Canada, reclaiming the Panama Canal, occupying Greenland, renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the “Gulf of the United States”. However, in regards to the Middle East, Trump is threatening Iran, and proposing the evacuation of Gaza—these events may not be directly related to the Kurdish issue, but they suggest that Trump's presidency marks a departure from his predecessors and traditional U.S. policy. However, this attitude has the potential to destabilize both the global order and the Middle East.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the United States has well-established institutions that constrain Trump's ability to implement policies that are unconstitutional or counterproductive. The federal structure of the U.S.—comprising 50 states, each with its own interests and legal frameworks—serve as checks on executive power.

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that constrain the president's ability to implement policies that are unconstitutional or counterproductive. The federal structure of the U.S.—comprising 50 states, each with its own interests and legal frameworks—serves as a check on executive power.

The Kurds in Trump's Policy

Given the complexities outlined above, predicting U.S. policy toward the Kurds under Trump is challenging. The Kurdish question spans four different states (Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran), each presenting a unique case. Accordingly, U.S. policy must be examined separately in different Kurdish regions, particularly South Kurdistan (Iraq) and West Kurdistan (Syria), where the Kurds have established a degree of autonomy.

1. The Trump Administration and the Kurdish Issue in Syria

Analyzing Trump's decisions and behavior is challenging due to his unpredictable and often unconventional approach. This stance toward the Kurds in Syria was inconsistent: at times, he referred them U.S. allies in the fight against ISIS; at other

“The Kurds didn’t help us in Normandy” during World War II. When criticized for withdrawing U.S. forces from Syria, he justified the move by arguing that, “The Kurds are fighting for their land,” effectively giving Turkey the green light to advance into Kurdish-held areas in Syria. This is an obvious indication of the most significant shifts under Trump’s administration which is the prioritization of geoeconomics over geopolitics. Unlike previous U.S. policies, which emphasized long-term strategic influence, Trump focused primarily on immediate economic costs and benefits. This shift led to uncertainty among U.S. allies, who could no longer rely on traditional commitments.

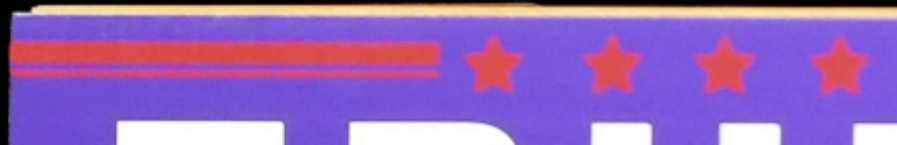
This shift has also affected the reliability of U.S. alliances, creating uncertainty among American partners who could not predict when they might be abandoned. If long-standing NATO allies such as Germany, France, and Britain were uncertain about U.S. support, the Kurdish administration in West Kurdistan was even more uncertain and vulnerable to potential deals between Trump and Erdoğan. Turkey’s ongoing threats and military operations

against the region underscored this precarious position. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have openly expressed their concerns. In an interview with *The Guardian*, the SDF commander warned that a U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria could lead to an ISIS resurgence. He urged the U.S. to maintain its presence in the region, emphasizing the security risks of a hasty departure.

Despite this, U.S. institutions beyond the White House—including the Pentagon, the Jewish lobby, the State Department, and the National Security Council—played a role in pressuring Trump to maintain a limited presence in Syria as a strategic buffer. This internal pushback ensured that, while Trump withdrew some troops, residual U.S. military presence remained in Kurdish-controlled areas.

2. The Trump Administration and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq faced opportunities and threats under Trump’s administration. Unlike the Kurdish issue in Syria, where the Kurds govern a de facto autonomous entity, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq remains politically and economical-





ly tied to the central government in Baghdad. This dependency is further complicated by Trump's confrontational stance toward Iran and its influence in Iraq, where Tehran exerts substantial control through political and military proxies.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the U.S. has viewed the Kurdistan Region as a secure zone for its forces and a reliable ally, particularly in counterterrorism effort. Washington has provided substantial support, especially in efforts to unify the Peshmerga forces. This partnership strengthened further during the fight against ISIS, when the U.S. relied on the Peshmerga as a key force on the ground. Also, the international coalition provided regular financial assistance to the Kurdistan Region. However, Trump's decision to suspend foreign aid for 90 days raised concerns about the future support.

A significant factor affecting the Kurdistan Region is Trump's determination to curb Iran's influence in Iraq. His administration aggressively enforced economic sanctions against Tehran, rejecting exemptions granted by previous administrations. This strategy has been

previously implemented by the U.S. Treasury but pursued more aggressively under Trump. Unlike the Biden administration, which granted Iraq waivers to purchase Iranian electricity and gas, but Trump refused such exemptions. There was even speculation that the U.S. could impose sanctions on Iraq's central financial institutions, such as Rafidain Bank, given that Iraq's access to U.S. dollars is controlled by the U.S. Treasury. Additionally, Washington aimed to prevent the smuggling and stockpiling of Iraqi fuel by Iranian-backed militias and powerful groups. The potential for U.S. and Israeli military actions against Iranian-backed armed groups in Iraq. If these militias refused to disband in accordance with U.S. demands, Iraq could face a scenario similar to Lebanon's Hezbollah crisis—or even the Syrian conflict. The Kurdistan Region could not remain unaffected by such developments, meaning that any instability in Baghdad could directly affect Kurdish autonomy, especially given the Kurdistan Regional Government's current financial dependence on Baghdad. However, if the U.S. and Israel were to launch a large-scale offensive against Iraqi

and Iranian militias, it could create an opportunity for the Kurdistan Region to regain its strength with the U.S. and its allies. Weakening Baghdad could, in turn, strengthen the Kurdistan Region, as the two are often in a power struggle.

However, escalating tensions could also pose a significant threat, exposing Kurdistan to militia attacks or reigniting conflicts between Erbil on one side and Baghdad and Tehran on the other. This could severely undermine Kurdistan Region's interests, particularly given the internal divisions among its political factions both domestic and foreign policy.

Potential Scenarios for U.S. Policy on the Kurdish Issue

In assessing how Trump's administration might approach the Kurdish issue, two possible scenarios emerge:

1- A Shift Toward Major Policy Changes: Based on Trump's unconventional decision-making style and the executive orders he signed on his first day in office, significant geopolitical shifts in the region could occur. Given Trump's unpredictability and willingness to challenge traditional norms, the Kurds across all

parts of Kurdistan must be prepared to navigate these changes strategically, ensuring they reap benefits rather than suffer losses.

2- Continuation of Existing Policies: If Trump's second term followed the precedent set during his first, substantial shifts in U.S. policy toward the Kurds might not materialize. This is largely because key decision-making bodies—including the National Security Council, the Pentagon, and the Jewish lobby—would continue to shape foreign policy, ensuring a degree of stability. Furthermore, Israel's role in Middle Eastern affairs could impact Trump's decisions, potentially aligning U.S. policy in ways that favor Kurdish interests in both Iraq and Syria.

Ultimately, U.S. policy toward the Kurds remains subject to multiple domestic and international influences, making any definitive long-term projection difficult. However, understanding the key dynamics at play provides insight into the evolving relationship between the U.S. and the Kurdish people.

The Strategy of Kurdistan Region for Engaging with Baghdad in the Post- Election Era



Dr. Momen Zellmi

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The latest parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan Region underscore a need for a new approach to managing relations with Baghdad. While electoral results reflect the traditional dominance of major parties, the growing influence of smaller and opposition parties calls for a more unified, strategic stance toward Iraq. This analysis examines the challenges and opportunities ahead for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to strengthen cooperation with Baghdad on budget, resource, and security issues in a way that benefits both regions.

Election Results: Signals of Change in Kurdistan's Political Landscape

The October 20, 2024, parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan Region brought nuanced shifts within the region's political landscape. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) retained leading roles, securing 39 and 23 seats, respectively. However, the election also showcased the growing influence of smaller and opposition parties, such as the New Generation Movement (NGM), which claimed 15 seats, and the Kurdistan Islamic Union, which won seven seats. Other parties, including the National Stance Movement, the Kurdistan Justice Group, and the People's

Front, made strides, indicating a diversifying political environment where a greater variety of voices now influence the direction of the region. This election outcome reflects a growing public desire for political change and accountability, as well as the importance of including multiple perspectives in shaping Kurdistan's future. With increased representation, opposition and smaller parties now have the opportunity to bring fresh ideas to the table, potentially fostering a more strategic and cooperative approach to relations with Baghdad. This political diversity can strengthen the KRG's negotiating power, as it represents a broader spectrum of Kurdish interests and unites its stance in addressing key issues with Baghdad.

The History of Erbil-Baghdad Tensions and Opportunities for Progress

Erbil-Baghdad relations have long been marked by unresolved tensions, primarily centered on budget allocations, oil revenue distribution, and territorial control. These issues reached a peak in 2014 when Baghdad cut the Kurdistan Region's budget share due to unilateral Kurdish oil exports. The situation deteriorated further after the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, prompting Baghdad to reassert control over disputed territories, including the oil-rich Kirkuk region. This tension has often complicated cooperation between the two governments, and despite attempts at reconciliation, mutual distrust lingers.

In recent years, however, some steps have been taken to ease these tensions. Budget agreements, like the 2021 revenue-sharing deal, highlighted a commitment to collaboration on economic issues. Yet, these

efforts often fall short due to unresolved structural issues, and the core challenges—budget distribution, oil management, and security—remain. Given the newly elected Kurdistan parliament, there is an opportunity for the KRG to pursue a fresh approach that prioritizes sustainable solutions, ensuring both regions can work together to promote stability and economic growth.

Challenges in KRG-Baghdad Relations

The relationship between the Kurdistan Region and Baghdad has historically faced numerous challenges at various levels, including interactions with different Iraqi governments and the regional dynamics involving neighboring countries. This relationship is driven by two main principles: a party-based principle, which prioritizes the interests of political parties, and a personal principle, which caters to individual ambitions. Although the current atmosphere may appear calm, the reality is that this relationship relies on mutual interests rather than a foundation of genuine trust.

The upcoming KRG parliamentary elections are set to have a significant impact on the dynamics between Erbil and Baghdad. At present, the political landscape shows a balance of power, with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) holding 39 seats and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) holding 23 seats. This power balance is expected to shape the future of these relations. However, the true effects of the elections will only become clear after the formation of the new cabinet and, ultimately,

following Iraq's parliamentary elections in 2025.

The Call for Unity Amidst Political Divisions

The delayed KRG parliamentary elections, which exceeded the legal deadline by two years, have not succeeded in portraying a united and peaceful image of the Kurdistan Region to Baghdad or its neighbors. The Kurdistan Regional Government has struggled to foster a conducive environment for these elections, leading to concerns about the region's political cohesiveness.

Despite these setbacks, some election campaigns, particularly those spearheaded by the PUK, signal a desire for a more constructive approach in Erbil's relationship with Baghdad. This is especially evident in discussions surrounding critical issues such as salary payments for public employees. However, given the current ideological divides within the Kurdistan Region, there is skepticism regarding Baghdad's ability to leverage the situation further against the KRG.

Diverse Discourses Shaping Future Relations

The forthcoming elections provide a vital opportunity for the people of the Kurdistan Region to reassess the notion of "unity," particularly as they have endured hardships under the pretext of national solidarity. Following the elections, there is an expectation among the populace for a variety of discourses and strategies that reflect their diverse experiences and viewpoints on relations with Baghdad.

As Erbil's concerns are progressively highlighted in Baghdad—such as calls for increased pension payments, salary transfers, and the potential reinstatement of employee promotions—the divided nature of political discourse does not inherently lead to negative ramifications for Erbil-Baghdad relations. Instead, it may allow for tailored negotiations that address specific issues more effectively. Ultimately, the political landscape post-elections will be instrumental in determining how the KRG navigates its complex relationship with the central government in Baghdad.

Iran's Middle East Policy at a Crossroads: The Fallout of Assad's Potential Collapse



Dr. Ardeshir Pashang

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The series of developments that followed the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, which led to Israel's heavy retaliatory actions in Gaza against Hamas and in Lebanon against Hezbollah, as well as direct missile and drone confrontations between Iran and Israel, reached their peak on December 8, 2024, with the fall of Bashar al-Assad. The fall of Assad is not only a significant event for the people of Syria but also a historic turning point for the Middle East and the future of regional competitions and the political alignment of various actors. Bashar al-Assad fell after an 11-day offensive by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group and fled to Russia. In this context, it appears that, in addition to the Ba'ath Party, the Assad family, and the Alawite minority in Syria, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the biggest regional loser in these events and developments. This article examines the importance of Syria for Iran and the consequences of Assad's fall on Tehran's Middle East foreign policy.

1. Why Was Syria So Important for Iran?

1.1. Warm Relations Before the Revolution

Syria's ties with Iranian revolutionaries predate the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Hafez al-Assad, Syria's leader at the time, instructed all Syrian embassies to support Iranian revolutionary forces against the Shah's regime, demonstrating early solidarity.

1.2. Strategic Relations During the Iran-Iraq War

These ties deepened significantly during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Syria stood firmly with Iran against Saddam Hussein, an alliance of strategic importance amid the intense regional and international pressures faced by Iran’s new revolutionary leadership.

1.3. Relations in the Era of the Resistance Front

Following the war and Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, Iran under Ayatollah Khamenei expanded its regional influence by backing Palestinian movements and promoting Shia religious interests. This culminated in the formation of the “Resistance Front” strategy in the early 2000s, through which Iran established proxy forces across the Middle East and North Africa.

1.4. Relations During the Arab Spring

During Bashar al-Assad’s rule, Iran rebranded the Arab Spring as an “Islamic Awakening,” portraying it as inspired by the Iranian Revolution. Iran’s narrative framed the uprisings as aligned with its revolutionary message while doubling down on its support for Assad’s government.

1.5. Diplomatic Importance

Syria functioned as a “Trojan Horse” for Iran within the Arab world, maintaining the closest Arab-Iranian alliance despite sectarian differences. This unique partnership allowed Iran to exert influence in a largely Sunni-dominated region.

1.6. Syria’s Geopolitical Importance

Syria served as Iran’s strategic corridor, linking Iran and Iraq to Lebanon and Palestine. As the Arab Spring spread to Syria, Iran reinforced its support for Assad, preventing his downfall through military and financial backing. By 2015, Iran played a pivotal role in facilitating Russia’s military intervention in Syria, altering the war’s trajectory. However, this collaboration later evolved into competition between Tehran and Moscow over influence in Syria.

2. Consequences of the Weakening of Hezbollah and Hamas and the Fall of Assad for Iran

The potential collapse of Assad’s regime and the weakening of Iran-backed groups like Hamas and Hezbollah have placed Iran in a precarious position. The chain of events beginning with Hamas’s October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, followed by the devastation in

Gaza and setbacks for Hezbollah, has significantly disrupted Iran's regional strategy.

2.1. Shocked Reactions from Iranian Officials

Iranian officials across political factions appear stunned by these rapid changes. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei dismissed the situation as temporary, urging faith in an eventual resurgence of pro-Iranian forces. Similarly, Mohsen Rezaei, a senior advisor, framed the developments as foreign interference rather than an internal Syrian shift.

2.2. The Breaking of the Resistance Ring

Iran's Resistance Front, built over decades in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, and parts of Africa, has suffered major setbacks. The heavy losses of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Assad's regime represent a critical blow to Iran's strategic presence in the Levant.

2.3. Loss of Shia Pilgrimage Sites

Shia religious shrines in Syria, such as Sayyida Zainab's and Ruqayyah's mausoleums, have long been a justification for Iran's involvement in the

country. Tehran's narrative of "Defenders of the Shrine" was used to mobilize support for Assad, and the weakening of Iran's presence in Syria threatens its religious and ideological influence.

2.4. Weakening of Iran's Strategic and Symbolic Position in Lebanon

Israeli strikes on Hezbollah, including the assassination of key figures such as Hassan Nasrallah, have severely weakened Hezbollah's dominance in Lebanon. This shift is evident in Lebanon's evolving political landscape, where newly elected leaders have distanced themselves from Iranian influence. The cancellation of direct Tehran-Beirut flights signals a broader geopolitical shift.

2.5. Declining Geopolitical Influence

Syria was a crucial geopolitical asset for Iran, housing military bases, arms production sites, and economic investments. Its loss disrupts Iran's regional strategy, weakening its direct access to Lebanon and Palestine and limiting its capacity to confront Israel.

2.6. Regional Defeat Against Competitors

Iran has long competed with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt for regional

dominance. The rise of a Turkey-aligned government in Syria represents a serious setback for Iran, shifting the regional balance of power away from Tehran.

2.7. Erosion of Iran's "Balance of Threat" Strategy

Iran's foreign policy has often relied on its ability to create regional instability as leverage. This was exemplified by the 2019 Houthi missile attack on Saudi Aramco. However, with its proxy groups weakened, Iran's bargaining power in regional negotiations has diminished.

2.8. Concerns Over Domestic Repercussions

The weakening of Hamas and Hezbollah, coupled with Assad's uncertain future, could embolden Iran's domestic opposition. Economic hardships and the devaluation of the Iranian rial have already fueled internal discontent. The loss of key allies abroad may further destabilize Iran's political landscape.

3. What Will Iran Do?

Given the recent developments,

it must be said that the weakening of Iran's position in the Mesopotamian and Levant regions of the Middle East has increased Iran's regional challenges in other areas, including the Caucasus and the Persian Gulf. In the Caucasus, Iran is in a sensitive regional position, overshadowed by the alliance between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Israel, and is concerned that Turkey's ambitions may lead to changes in its political borders with Armenia, potentially cutting off or further limiting this border—a matter of great importance to Iran.

On the other hand, in the Persian Gulf region, Iran faces challenges from the United Arab Emirates' claims over the three islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb. In recent years, the UAE has succeeded in gaining not only the support of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) but also the official backing of China and Russia on this issue.

In light of these events and trends, the question arises: How will Iran react to these developments, and what impact will this have on the Islamic Republic of Iran's Middle East strategy? In response, it must be said that

IRAN

Tehran

Isfahan

Shiraz

Persian Gulf

Iran will undertake a series of actions at regional and extra-regional levels, across short-, medium-, and long-term timeframes, as outlined below:

3.1. A New Agreement with the United States

Reducing tensions with the Donald Trump administration is the most important and primary issue that could somewhat mitigate the severity of the regional developments against the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the same time, the lack of an agreement and the escalation of the crisis between Tehran and Washington will further increase multidimensional pressures and crises, leading to an unpredictable and fragile situation against Tehran.

The signing of the maximum pressure decree by Trump, which immediately caused the Iranian rial to plummet against the US dollar, followed by the hardline stance of Iran's Supreme Leader and President toward Trump, indicates that reaching a new agreement between Tehran and Washington will not happen easily. However, the author believes that the current set of conditions will ultimately push both Tehran and Washington, as the first scenario, to show greater flexibility toward reaching a new agreement.

This issue is of critical importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran, and it is predicted that signs of movement toward an agreement will emerge from the beginning of the new Iranian calendar year. Iran is well aware that delaying such a process could create an even more difficult situation for the country.

3.2. Containing Israel

In 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel abandoned their previous approach of indirect and covert conflict and engaged in at least two public attacks, including missile and drone strikes, against each other. Israel, following the events of October 7, 2023, has implemented a significant strategic shift in the Middle East regarding Iran and its allies, including Hamas and Hezbollah. Heavy and unrestricted attacks, along with a change in the previous status quo, have complicated the regional situation against Iran. In the current circumstances, it seems Iran will seek to reduce Israel's offensive phase, both against itself and its regional allies. One of the most important ways to achieve this is through an agreement with the United States. If Iran and the US do not enter a negotiation and agreement process by the first

half of 2024, Israel, with the green light and likely effective cooperation from the US, may be prepared to launch a new direct attack on Iran and strike its nuclear program.

3.3. Preventing the Continued Domino Effect of the Fall and Weakening of Proxy Forces

Although the Houthis in Yemen, after the heavy blows dealt to Hamas and Hezbollah, have carried out several attacks against Israel and some Western targets, the level of responses from Israel and the US suggests that Iran does not want to repeat the experience of Hezbollah and Hamas at this time. Therefore, in the current situation, logic dictates that Iran will reduce the emotional and offensive use of the Houthis to keep them as a tool of regional pressure and power. It should be noted that regional governments such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are trying to advance a shared formula in which the Houthis would hold a portion of power in Yemen, thereby reducing hostility and tension with them and changing the situation in Yemen through financial packages and reconstruction proposals.

3.4. Expanding Relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt

Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, has embarked on ambitious development programs. For the Saudis, maintaining stability and security in this process is of great importance. It seems that after the previous experience of the Houthi attack on Aramco, they do not want such an experience to be repeated. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in its current situation, does not want tensions with Saudi Arabia to escalate again, as Saudi Arabia could use various tools, such as indirect but effective support for Persian-language opposition television channels (e.g., Iran International) or support for some political and armed groups opposed to Iran, to increase problems and crises for Iran. Therefore, at this time, both sides, for different reasons, will seek to maintain and expand stability and improve relations with a gentle and non-emotional slope.

3.5. Strengthening Missile and Drone Capabilities

One of Iran's capabilities, referred to as a deterrent power, is its missile and drone technology. However, this capability faced challenges during the direct conflict and attack on Israel, to the extent that Iran's Supreme Leader

has called for qualitative and quantitative improvements in these missiles. In the current situation, one of Iran's tools for strengthening deterrence and partially reviving the balance of threat and fear in the region is to expand and invest more in the missile industry and enhance the technical capabilities of drones—a focus that has received significant investment in recent years.

3.6. Enhancing Nuclear Capabilities

Iran has always emphasized that it is not seeking nuclear weapons. This has been evident both in the context of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and other commitments Iran has made to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Additionally, Ayatollah Khamenei has issued a fatwa declaring nuclear weapons haram (forbidden) to emphasize to the West, particularly the US, that Iran is not on this path. However, over the past two years, different voices from Tehran have called for a change in Iran's nuclear strategy, even echoed in the press, media, and some public forums. From the perspective of proponents of this view, Iran must acquire nuclear weapons as quickly as possible to restore its primary deterrence and security against its enemies and the numerous

threats it faces. However, such a strategy and movement toward it could risk serious attacks not only from Israel but also from the US and others, pushing Iran into a highly sensitive phase. Therefore, it seems that the voices calling for nuclear weapons are largely part of a propaganda and diplomatic effort to create psychological pressure on opposing parties, and the Islamic Republic's strategy is not currently aligned with this path.

3.7. Reducing Tensions with the New Syrian Government

The interim government of Ahmad al-Sharaa and he himself have taken hardline positions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, to the extent that even the entry of Iranian citizens into Syria has been banned. It is even possible that the issues between the two sides will not only lead to the end of relations but, given Iran's close cooperation with the Bashar al-Assad government, the new Syrian leaders may bring Iran into human rights cases and international courts. However, in recent weeks, as the new Damascus officials have announced, they have received positive messages from Iran. Naturally, Iran, for various reasons, will seek to reduce tensions and conflicts with the new

Syrian government, and this will be one of Iran's foreign policy priorities in the coming months.

3.8. Greater Attention to the Kurdish Element in the Middle East

Paying attention to the Kurdish element will be one of Iran's serious reactions following recent developments, particularly the fall of Bashar al-Assad. However, it seems that Iran has already missed several strategic opportunities in this regard. Notably, Turkey, simultaneously with the developments in Syria, has initiated a peace plan and normalization of relations with the Kurds, centered around the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). If this occurs, it will ultimately lead to the Kurds playing a negative role for Iran as temporary allies and obstacles to the existing processes in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, while playing a positive role for Turkey. If Turkey can resolve the Kurdish issue through Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria will become Turkey's allies, and the Turkish government will succeed in solving one of its biggest national security problems after 100 years, particularly four decades of armed and military struggle, and overcoming this Achilles' heel. However, it seems that the over-

all trend in Iran regarding the Kurdish issue, both domestically and regionally, will involve changes and reforms, potentially reducing tensions with the Kurdish issue, although this may not have significant strategic consequences given past missed opportunities.

3.9. Greater Attention to Alawites in Turkey and Syria

Greater attention to Alawites, both in Turkey, where they form a significant population (many of whom are Kurds), and in Syria, where they have been marginalized after half a century in power, will be among Iran's foreign policy goals in the region to expand influence with the governments of Turkey and Syria. In this regard, it is predicted that Iran will prioritize more propaganda, media, and religious programs.

3.10. Closer Ties with China and Russia

Iran sometimes describes its relations with China and Russia as strategic, but in practice, such relations do not exist at the political, security, or economic levels. Even these two countries have endorsed the UAE's claims over the three islands. However, Iran, following its tradition of the past three decades, intends to expand these rela-

tions by signing 20- and 25-year cooperation agreements with Moscow and Beijing and increasing its presence in regional organizations where Russia, China, and other non-Western powers play a greater role.

4. Summary and Future Outlook

As mentioned, the series of developments that began with Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, during which Israel dealt heavy and sometimes irreparable blows to Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as the fall of Bashar al-Assad in the final month of 2024, have placed Iran's regional position in the Middle East in a very difficult situation.

Direct conflict with Israel, the unresolved nuclear issue with the West and the US, the further weakening of the economy and currency value, rising inflation, and increased pressure from Turkey in Syria and the Caucasus, as well as from the UAE in the southern Persian Gulf, have placed Iran in its most challenging political and regional position. In such a situation, it is predicted that, more than ever, resolving the nuclear issue and reducing Western pressure, led by the US, will be Iran's top priority. At the same time, Iran will seek to improve relations with

Saudi Arabia and Egypt and, alongside strengthening its missile and drone capabilities, will reconsider and enhance relations with other regional elements and actors, including the Kurds in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Syria (Rojava). However, time is not on Iran's side, and the country is experiencing difficult moments and days domestically, regionally, and internationally.

Nevertheless, it is predicted that, despite the hardline positions of Trump and Iran's leaders, 2025 will see signs and movements toward new negotiations aimed at reaching a fresh agreement on the nuclear issue. Such an agreement could provide a vital respite and an opportunity for the Islamic Republic of Iran to regain energy and strength both domestically and beyond its borders. If such an agreement or path toward an agreement does not materialize in the first half of 2025, the possibility of referring Iran's case to the UN Security Council and imposing severe sanctions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, as well as an Israeli military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, will be very high.

Military Security in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (2024–2025): Escalating Proxy Conflicts and Regional Rivalries



Sana Nawzad Othman

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The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has long been a focal point of regional power struggles, particularly between Turkey and Iran. In 2024, Turkey's intensified military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Iran's counterbalancing through proxy groups have exacerbated tensions, creating a complex security landscape. This paper analyzes the historical roots of these conflicts, the military dynamics of 2024–2025, and their implications for regional stability. Drawing on, field reports, and geopolitical analysis, it highlights the risks of direct confrontation between Turkey and Iran, the humanitarian toll on civilians, and the challenges faced by Iraqi Kurdistan in navigating sovereignty amid external interventions.

Introduction

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a semi-autonomous entity since 1991, has historically been a battleground for regional powers seeking to curb Kurdish autonomy while advancing their strategic interests. In 2024, Turkey's military escalation against the PKK and Iran's growing influence through Shia militias have transformed KRI into a proxy conflict zone. This paper examines the interplay of military operations, geopolitical rivalries, and humanitarian crises in KRI, contextualizing recent developments within a historical framework

spanning four decades.

Historical Context

1. The PKK and Turkey's Cross-Border Operations

Turkey, the U.S., and the EU, has operated in Kurdistan Region of Iraq since the 1980s. Turkey's military campaigns, beginning in the 1990s, aimed to dismantle PKK strongholds. From 2017 to 2022, Turkey conducted seven major operations, establishing 64 military bases and controlling 86.2% of the Iraq-Turkey border ². These operations, part of the "Claw" series, sought to create a buffer zone, displacing thousands of civilians and disrupting local economies ¹³.

2. Iran's Influence and Proxy Networks

Iran has leveraged KRI's political fragmentation to expand its influence, backing Shia militias like the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Tehran's strategy counters both Kurdish separatism and Turkish encroachment, particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Iran's support for Iraqi militias, such as Kataib Hezbollah, has enabled cross-border strikes against Turkish positions, framing them as defenses of Iraqi sovereignty ^{8 16}.beside that PMF counter Kurdish forces in 2017 after referendum

and took over the distribute era under Kurdish government. The Peshmerga forces view the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as the most significant challenge to the Kurdistan Region following the defeat of ISIS. According to high-ranking officials in the Ministry of Peshmerga, the Peshmerga forces must prepare to defend the Kurdistan Region against potential threats posed by the PMF (Omer, N., personal communication, 15 June 2024).

3. The KRG's Eroding Autonomy

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has faced mounting pressure from Baghdad since the failed 2017 independence referendum. Judicial rulings since 2022 have curtailed KRG's control over oil revenues and border security, weakening its ability to resist external interventions ⁸. This re-centralization aligns with Turkish and Iranian interests, which seek compliant partners in Erbil and Baghdad.

Military Dynamics in 2024–2025

1. Turkey's Operation Claw-Lock and Strategic Objectives

In 2024, Turkey intensified its "Claw-Lock" operations, targeting PKK strongholds in the Gara and Matin mountain ranges. These areas are critical for PKK logistics, linking Syria's Qandil Mountains to Sinjar. Turkey's strategy com-

bines aerial bombardments, ground incursions, and the construction of forward bases to isolate PKK units. By December 2023, Turkish forces had advanced 15 km into Dohuk Governorate, displacing 162 villages and killing eight civilians in drone strikes [16](#). The data shows that these operations caused Civilian Casualties, Turkish operations caused 344 civilian deaths and 358 injuries in KRI between 2018–2024, accounting for 83% of all conflict-related casualties [13](#). As well as, Displacements, Over 170 villages have been evacuated since 2017, with 602 additional villages at risk [13](#).

2. Iran's Countermeasures and Proxy Warfare

Iran has responded to Turkey's advances by bolstering its proxies. In January 2024, IRGC missiles struck Erbil, allegedly targeting Israeli intelligence sites, killing four civilians [16](#). Iran-backed militias, such as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, have also attacked Turkish bases, framing their actions as resistance to occupation. Tehran's support for the PUK further complicates KRG politics, as the party controls Sulaymaniyah—a PKK transit hub [8](#).

3. The PKK's Evolving Tactics

The PKK has adapted to Turkish pressure by embedding in civilian areas,

such as Sinjar and Sulaymaniyah. This strategy complicates counterinsurgency efforts, as strikes risk civilian casualties and international backlash. The group's presence in Sinjar, established during the 2014 ISIS genocide, provides a corridor to Syria, where it coordinates with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [2](#) [6](#).

Humanitarian and Governance Challenges

1. Civilian Impact

Turkey's "depopulation strategy"—bombarding villages to force displacement—has devastated rural communities. In Gara Mountain, 55 of 94 villages were abandoned after 1996 due to bombardments [2](#). In 2024 alone, Turkish airstrikes killed six civilians in Zalan, including a child en route to a hospital [6](#). Moreover, among the operations, it caused child casualties, 28% of Turkish operation casualties are children (79 killed, 115 injured) [13](#). Thus, Economic Losses, Agricultural land destruction has crippled livelihoods, with 59% of casualties occurring during farming activities [13](#).

2. KRG's Fragmented Governance

The KRG's political divide between the KDP and PUK has paralyzed decision-making. In March 2023, Baghdad relocated Iranian Kurdish dissidents

inland per Tehran's demands, undermining KRG authority [8](#). Meanwhile, the KDP's alignment with Ankara has drawn accusations of collusion, eroding public trust.

Geopolitical Implications

1. Turkey-Iran Rivalry

Turkey and Iran's competition extends beyond counterterrorism. Turkey's proposed \$20 billion "Development Road" project—a trade corridor

linking Basra to Europe—traverses PUK-controlled areas, threatening Iran's hegemony. Tehran has retaliated by supporting militias targeting Turkish infrastructure [8](#).

2. U.S. Withdrawal and Power Vacuums

The planned U.S. troop withdrawal by 2026 risks empowering Iran and Turkey. A residual U.S. force in KRI, proposed to protect Kurds from Ira-



nian proxies, remains contentious [16](#). Meanwhile, Iraq's Prime Minister Sudani faces pressure to balance relations with both rivals, complicating counterterrorism cooperation [8](#).

3. Regional Spillover

The Gaza war has intensified Iran's proxy activities, with Iraqi militias launching 70 attacks on U.S. bases since October 2023 [16](#). This diversion has allowed Turkey to expand operations, testing Tehran's tolerance for Ankara's encroachment near Kirkuk and Mosul [8](#).

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen KRG Institutions: International actors should support KRG's governance reforms to resist external interference.

Humanitarian Protections: The UN must enforce no-strike zones and monitor displacement camps to prevent forced depopulation.

Mediate Turkey-Iran Tensions: Regional dialogues, facilitated by Iraq and the Arab League, could de-escalate proxy conflicts.

Conditional Aid: The U.S. and EU should tie military assistance to compliance with international humanitarian law.

Conclusion

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) stands at the epicenter of a destabilizing rivalry between Turkey and Iran, whose 2024–2025 interventions have turned the region into a proxy battleground. Turkey's intensified "Claw-Lock" operations against the PKK and Iran's countermeasures through proxy militias like the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have exacerbated insecurity, humanitarian crises, and governance collapse. Historically rooted in Kurdish struggles for autonomy, KRI's plight reflects decades of external interference, with Turkey establishing military dominance over 86% of the Iraq-Turkey border and Iran leveraging Shia militias to undermine Kurdish cohesion.

The human cost is devastating: Turkish airstrikes and Iran-backed attacks have displaced over 170 villages since 2017, killed 344 civilians (83% of conflict-related casualties), and crippled agricultural livelihoods. Children account for 28% of casualties, underscoring the conflict's generational toll. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), weakened by Baghdad's post-2017 referendum crackdown and internal KDP-PUK divisions, struggles to mediate external pressures or protect its populace.

Geopolitically, Turkey's \$20 billion "Development Road" project and Iran's retaliatory proxy strikes illustrate how economic and security ambitions fuel regional tensions. The planned U.S. withdrawal by 2026 risks empowering both rivals, while the Gaza war's spillover has diverted attention from KRI, enabling Turkey to expand operations and Iran to escalate militia activities.

To avert permanent destabilization, urgent measures are needed. International actors must bolster KRG institutions to resist external interference, while the UN should enforce no-strike zones to protect civilians. Regional dialogues, mediated by Iraq and the Arab League, could de-escalate Turkey-Iran tensions, and conditional aid from the U.S. and EU must prioritize compliance with humanitarian law.

KRI's future hinges on balancing external pressures with internal unity. Without concerted efforts to empower local governance and curb proxy warfare, the region risks becoming a perpetual conflict zone. Only by prioritizing stability over geopolitical competition can KRI transition from a battleground to a resilient, autonomous entity capable of securing its people's future.

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The Peace Process in Turkey: Fantasy or Reality!

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The rapid and widespread changes occurring in the world and the Middle East are having an impact on the political spectrum and domestic prospects of the countries in general and particularly on the Middle East and Kurdistan.

These ongoing global and regional developments have made Turkish state officials concerned that their country is going to be affected; taking into consideration that Turkey, as a Middle Eastern country, is where the largest part of Kurdistan is located and where the largest Kurdish population live. To prevent chaos inside Turkey leading to ultimately tearing the country up, the Turkish senior officials have started opening the door to a new process to resolve the Kurdish case.

The controversial press statements by Turkish senior officials of ruling parties on one hand and the disputable measures taken by some of the governmental agencies against the Kurds and the opposition on the other hand, have all contributed in putting the peace process, resolving the Kurdish conflict and the future of Turkey at the crossroads between war and peace.

Peace Process Efforts in Turkey

Since 1994, multiple efforts were put forth aiming to resolve the Kurdish issue in Turkey. However, these attempts have still remained unsuccessful.

The war, which launched on 15 August 1984 when the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) simultaneously targeted military barracks in Eruh in Siirt and Shamzinan in Hakkari (Julemerg), has carried on continuously for 40 years so far. However, there have been several ceasefire attempts and peace efforts between the Turkish State and the PKK over the years.

These efforts, which have been intensified since 2005 under the name of (Barış Süreci); the Solution Process, have been effectively shelved since 2015.

The declaration of the first unilateral ceasefire on 20 March 1993 by PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and the decision to extend the ceasefire on 15 April 1993 were then seen as a potential for a possible peace process. However, the suspicious death of Turgut Ozal, the then president of Turkey, on 17 April 1993 has caused the initiative's failure. Whilst the fighting was carried on, Ocalan again declared two sepa-

rate ceasefires on 15 December 1995 and 1 September 1998. The launch of Operation Steel (Harekatı Çelik), on 20 March 1995 attacking the Kurdistan Region in areas where the PKK bases and headquarters were located, lifted the ceasefire. Eventually, the arrest of Ocalan on 15 February 1999 had added fuel to the fire of war(1).

The establishment of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and coming into power of Recep Tayyip Erdogan contributed in expediting the peace process. Limited permission was granted to broadcast in Kurdish on the state channel. Talks began between state officials, Ocalan, Koma Civakên Kurdistan (KCK) administrators, AKP, Democratic Regions Party (DBP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) officials. Eventually, the PKK made ceasefire decisions on various dates. The AKP government took some steps regarding the Kurdish language under the name of the "Human Rights Package/Action Plan". Two separate groups from Europe and Kandil came to Turkey under the name of the "Peace Group" upon Ocalan's call. The "Imrali Delegations" consisting of DBP and HDP politicians held talks with Ocalan in Imrali. Ocalan sent a letter coinciding with Newroz (Kurdish New Year) to millions

during celebrations on 21 March 2013, acting as a form of resistance, declaring that the conflict between Turkey and the PKK has ended. PKK guerrillas began to leave Turkey's borders upon Ocalan's call. A "Solution Commission" was established in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (2).

In addition to the steps taken by the parties towards a solution, some memorable events took place, which all resulted in a renewed period of conflict. For instance, the DBP was unanimously closed by the Constitutional Court and Ahmet Turk and Aysel Tugluk were stripped of their seats in parliament. Mass detentions of Kurdish politicians, elected officials, journalists and civil society representatives, called "KCK operations" were carried out. Arrest warrants were issued for 13 of the 34 members of the "Peace Group" from the camps in Kandil and Mahmur. These are in addition to the opposition from the racist movement of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Republican People's Party (CHP) to the peace process, the declaration of Kurdistan Rojava Cantons and the demonstrations held on 6-8 October 2014 to support Kobani and the People's Defense Unit (YPG) in Rojava, Selahattin Demirtaş's statement against

the Turkish government, AKP and more specifically Erdogan, and the border accelerated developments where new bases began to be established on the border of the North of Kurdistan and Rojava (3).

Erdogan's announcement that he no longer recognises the (Dolmabahce Agreement), which he first embraced and was held between government and AKP officials and members of the Imrali Delegation on 28 February 2015, has been one of the most important turning points of the process. Additionally, Selahattin Demirtaş's statement on 17 March 2015 addressed to Erdogan; "We will not let you become the president" (4) all negatively affected the relations between HDP and the Turkish government.

The bomb attack that took place during the HDP's Diyarbakir rally two days before the 7 June elections in 2015, the ISIS attack in Suruch on 20 July 2015, the killing of two police officers at their homes in the Ceylanpinar district of Urfa on 25 July 2015, and the Ankara Train Station Massacre on 10 October 2015. Additionally, the "self-government declarations" that took place in various Kurdish cities, particularly in Sur, Cizre, Nusaybin,

Yuksekova, Silvan, and Silopi in the fall of 2015, and the subsequent clashes in these cities continued until 2016. The PKK guerrilla's attacked on "Sur/Qalla" district in Diyarbakir resulted in military clashes between the guerrillas and the Turkish security forces. The declaration of autonomy in Rojava and replacing the government's courts with the People's Court(5). Additionally, the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, followed by other events, have all contributed in the peaceful solution's failure.

After nearly ten years, on 1 October 2024, Devlet Bahçeli took the first step towards resuming a new round of peace process. However, it is still in the stage of negotiations and statements by officials of the ruling parties.

Signs of Resumption of Peace Process

During the 1 October 2024 parliamentary opening at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the President, referred to the tensions all over the world and particularly in the Middle East and pointed to the security and military threats to Turkey. Additionally, Erdoğan emphasised on consolidating the domestic front and the country's political forces (6).

At the end of the session, Devlet Bahçeli, chairperson of the MHP, shook hands with members of the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party) and Özgür Özal; the head of the CHP and several of its deputies (7).

These developments attracted the attention of media and public opinion in Turkey and the North of Kurdistan and it was considered as entering a new era in the country's politics.

On 22 October 2024, during his speech at the MHP's Parliamentary group meeting, Bahçeli has called on imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan stating: "Let the terrorist leader step forward and unilaterally declare that terrorism is over and his organisation has been dissolved".

Whilst in accordance with paragraph 2 of Article 107 of the execution law number 5275 of 2004, Öcalan can take advantage of the right that states "anyone sentenced to a heavy life imprisonment, after the completion of 24 or 30 years of imprisonment can apply to the relevant authorities for a review of his case and a conditional release order" (9). Thus, Öcalan should be considered for parole or conditional release.



Response of State Institutions and Political Parties

Bahceli's October 22 remarks caused different reactions where each party responded to it taking their interests into consideration. Erdogan initially chose silence. Darvisoglu Musavat, the leader of Iyi Party; threw a rope at Bahceli and requested him to hang it in his office (10), (11). Umit Ozdag, the leader of Zafer Partisi, which is considered as Turkey's most extreme racist party, criticises Bahceli's remarks harshly, claiming what he was saying has been the result of his party's recent decline.

The Peace Process Became Complicated and Suspicious

Five months after Bahceli's initiative and the readiness of Ocalan, Demirtac, DEM and Kandil for negotiations, the Turkish government has not taken any practical steps to resume the peace process.

On 26 November 2024, Bahceli retracted his previous call for Ocalan to come to parliament, stating: "Let the DEM co-chairs visit Ocalan in prison" (12). This initiative is still being interpreted positively because on one hand, it supports the lifting of Ocalan's

isolation. Contrastingly, Bahceli is now promoting the DEM party by requesting their co-chairs to visit Imrali, whilst he used to call them "terrorists and supporters of terrorism".

Bahceli and Erdogan's Conflict

Bahceli's and Erdogan have repeatedly insisted that they are on the same page. However, since the beginning of Bahceli's campaign, several words and actions of Erdogan indicate the existence of a conflict between these two leaders. Above all, Erdogan's coldness and Bahceli's eagerness has been a clear indication of their differences.

Initially, for more than a week, Erdogan made no statement in support of Bahceli's campaign, and even when he spoke on the issue, he supported Bahceli vaguely, indirectly and hesitantly.

Meanwhile, many measures were taken. For instance, the removal of a number of mayors from the main opposition CHP and the pro-Kurdish DEM Party were replaced by trustees appointed by the government. Furthermore, taking legal actions against DEM Party co-chair Tuncer Bakirhan. Additionally, scheduling trials against several CHP mayors over corruption and economic mismanagement charges

against Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoğlu and Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavaş. Besides Erdogan's continued harsh remarks against Kurdish leaders in Turkey, his breaking silence on MHP officials who were involved in corruption and putting pressure on Bahceli for forceful resign of three MPs from the MHP faction on charges of gold smuggling. Finally, the Presidential High Advisory Board has separated the Kurdish issue in Northern Kurdistan from Western and Southern Kurdistan.

Meanwhile, although Bahceli stressed that "the removal of mayors and the appointment of the trustees is a temporary process," Erdogan insisted on carrying on the process and even expanding it via the isolation of the DEM and CHP and involving their senior officials in Istanbul and Ankara in corruption investigations (13).

Bahceli's insistence on his call for arranging a meeting between the DEM Party's co-chairs and Ocalan was a signal to force Erdogan to follow Bahceli's campaign and to fulfill his duty as a president and an individual who can greenlight the launch of the peace process.

All these tactics and steps indicate the existence of a conflict between

Bahceli and Erdogan, especially in relation to the Kurdish issue and steps towards resuming the peace process.

Erdogan's Disagreement with Bahceli and the Ambiguous US Policy

The process, which Erdogan showed its initial signs during his speech in the Turkish parliament and Bahceli aimed at implementing it via his statements and taking actions towards it, has not only highlighted the differences between Erdogan and Bahceli, but also unveiled the hesitation of the Turkish president and senior officials of the country. Erdogan's hesitation might be due to the US elections. Taking into consideration that although Turkey has four years of experience with Donald Trump, the new Washington administration's potential policy towards the Middle East, Israel, Turkey, Syria and particularly Rojava (West of Kurdistan) is still unclear. This is due to the instability of Trump's policy and the choice of a group of people who can be considered as pro-Israel and backing the officials of YPG and the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The possibility of a conflict between Erdogan and Bahceli is considered one of the reasons for Erdogan's silence on Bahceli's actions and statements,

some experts even interpret his efforts as a pressure card against Erdogan. Less than a month after Bahceli's call, four CHP and DEM mayors were replaced by trustees on Erdogan's direct instructions (14). Ahmed Özer; The mayor of Istanbul's Esenyurt district was arrested by security forces (15).

Perhaps the main reason for Erdogan's hesitation is the results of the US elections and fears of the dissolution of the Republican Coalition. If Erdogan rejects Bahceli's initiative completely, it will lead to a breakdown in relations between the AKP and the MHP and the eventual dissolution of the Republican Coalition. If this happens, Erdogan will pay the price in the elections and will not win without an alliance with the MHP. At the same time, due to the election of Donald Trump as a US president, Erdogan is unclear how Trump and the United States will pursue a policy towards the Middle East and Turkey, particularly towards the possible launch of the peace process. This view was expressed in Erdogan's remarks on Wednesday 27 November 2024 at a meeting of the AKP faction in the Turkish parliament. Erdogan declared that "we are thinking about the international dimension of Devlet Bahceli's campaign" (16). This remark clearly indicates the Turkish president's fears

and hesitation about international reactions to the resumption of the peace process in Turkey.

The Kurd's Position

Although Kurdish representatives have always expressed their readiness to negotiate and resolve the issue, the recent controversial and ambiguous statements of Bahceli and Erdogan have made the Kurds feel unclear about what Bahceli and Erdogan are exactly expecting from the Kurds.

The Kurds have usually been enthusiastic about any initiative taken by Bahceli and the Turkish government to resolve the Kurdish issue in the country. However, the Kurds have started being silent due to uncertainty about who will respond to their demands.

Although the 22 October attack on Ankara has been interpreted as Kandil's negative response to Bahceli's initiative, the KCK statement, which states that "the decision and plan of the attack was made long before Bahceli's statements", (17) indicates a misinterpretation of the explosion. However, since Kandil is now divided into several wings, the KCK's statement cannot be read as the pure opinion of the entire Kandil and the PKK.



However on 23 October 2024, Abdullah Ocalan sent a message via his nephew, Omar Ocalan, declaring: “I have the theoretical and practical power to pull this process from the ground of conflict and violence to the ground of law and politics” (18). On the one hand, this statement indicates Ocalan’s positive view of Bahceli’s initiative and his ability to convince DEM officials, Kandil and Kurdish public opinion in Turkey to resolve the issue, but the extent to which all Kandil officials will obey Ocalan is questionable.

DEM officials have expressed their willingness to negotiate. Even a few hours after Bahceli’s statement on 26 November about the meeting between the DEM party’s co-chairs and Ocalan, Tuncar Bakrhan and Tulay Hatimoğlu quickly reached the Justice Ministry promptly and requested to see Ocalan.

In fact, the Kurdish question has been divided and conflicted throughout history, and unfortunately this situation is felt in this new development in Turkey. While everyone was waiting for Kandil to respond after Bahceli’s initiative, an armed attack in Ankara was about to turn the tide again. A few hours after the attack; the DEM condemned the incident and called for talks and

negotiations (19). At the same time, although Bahceli kept Demirtas out of the solution of the Kurdish problem in his speech, Demirtas issued a statement strongly condemning Ankara’s attack and calling for the silence of his weapons (20). This has been interpreted as a kind of conflict between Kurdish officials.

Incentives and Obstacles to the Peace Process

Apart from a series of vague statements, there is currently no incentive to support resuming the peace process.

The exclusion of Demirtas and Kandil from the process since Bahceli’s initiative, the hidden and perceived conflict between Bahceli and Erdogan, the rivalry between the Constitutional Court and the Judiciary Council and the president’s support for the judiciary council, economic crisis and inflation, neglecting Kurdish provinces in terms of economic development, providing about 10% of the annual budget for war and defence industry, deepening conflicts between the ruling authority versus opposition and government versus municipalities, replacing the DEM and CHP’s mayors by trustees, arresting activists and journalists, taking legal

actions against Kurdish politicians and DEM's officials, the rise of nationalism and racism, Turkey's military and security attacks on South and West Kurdistan, the continued conflicts between Ankara and Sulaymaniyah, the division of the Kurdish national movement into several wings and the continuation of armed struggle by the PKK. These are all obstacles that preventing creating a fundamental incentive for negotiations. Therefore, it is essential for Turkey and the Kurds to overcome these obstacles and resume the negotiations for peace talks.

Rojava (West of Kurdistan) “the Gordian Knot” or a Solution?

Whilst the Turkish officials claim resolving the Kurdish issue inside Turkey, air strikes against Rojava still carries on and a military operation is an open possibility at any time. In return, the DEM officials and Kandil will not give up supporting Rojava, as stated in the announcement of the DEM's Political Bureau that they “will not give up the gains in northern and eastern Syria” (21).

The only solution here is for Ankara to deal with Rojava similarly to the Iraqi Region of Kurdistan because the existence of Rojava cantons has gone

above a decade so far and is treated as a de facto. Thus, the situation in West Kurdistan, instead of being the cause of the problems which remain ongoing, can become a solution. At the same time, the Kurds of the north do not need to link the Kurdish issue in Turkey to the situation in Rojava and Turkey's attitude towards it.

Contradiction and Separation of the Kurdish Issue

Whilst Bahceli advocates a solution to the Kurdish issue which involves Ocalan's speech in parliament and the possibility of his release, Bahceli threatens journalists and media outlets that criticise his party (22). Conversely, he harshly criticises Ahmet Davutoglu, Leader of the Future Party, for paying a visit to Erbil in November 2024. Furthermore, Bahceli still believes that there is no place called Kurdistan.

It is definitely not only Bahceli who thinks this way. Mehmet Ucum, Turkish presidential advisor, stated: “we do not have a Kurdish problem at home, but we have a Kurdish problem abroad” (23). Speaking at a meeting of his party's faction, Erdogan announced that “next year we will create a peaceful zone from Iran's borders to the Medi-

terranean Sea” (24). This means that Ankara will create the peace zone in southern Kurdistan, which borders Turkey and Iran, and in western Kurdistan, which borders the White Sea and Turkey.

Iraqi Kurdistan’s Position in the Peace Process

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region’s geographical location is such that it has a wide border with Turkey and Iran, and the PKK guerrillas are now in this border, so the solution of the Kurdish problem in Turkey needs the support of the Kurdistan Regional Government and particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

It is obvious that Turkey’s relations with Erbil (KDP) and Sulaymaniyah (PUK) are not at the same level. Thus, Turkey deals with the officials of these two cities differently. Therefore, the senior officials of these two cities should review their policies towards the Kurdish issue in Turkey and towards Ankara and Kandil, aiming to maintain the balance between the national interests of the Kurdistan Region and Kurds in the other parts, taking into consideration the political, diplomatic and security relations of Turkey as a re-

gional force.

Conclusion: Kurds Positioned for Strategic Power Play

After Turkey’s municipal elections, recent developments in the Middle East and the world, Turkey’s financial crisis and efforts to amend the constitution and the upcoming elections in Turkey, the Kurds are once again given the chance to play a role. It is of a paramount importance that the Kurds should play their cards correctly and use it at the right time and place.

Now, apart from the international and regional perspectives, Erdogan and the Republican Coalition have well understood the role played by the Kurds. Bahceli’s initiatives and campaigns for a solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey stem from the same perspective. It is crucial that the Kurds and DEM party’s officials should perceive the hidden signals in the statements made by the senior officials of AKP and Republican Coalition. These can be represented by the constitutional amendments, creating radical changes in articles representing Turkish racism and providing the Kurds with a national, political and administrative identity in the framework of an amended constitution.

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China's Peaceful Rise: How Strategic Growth and U.S. Focus on Global Conflicts Are Shaping a New Power Dynamic

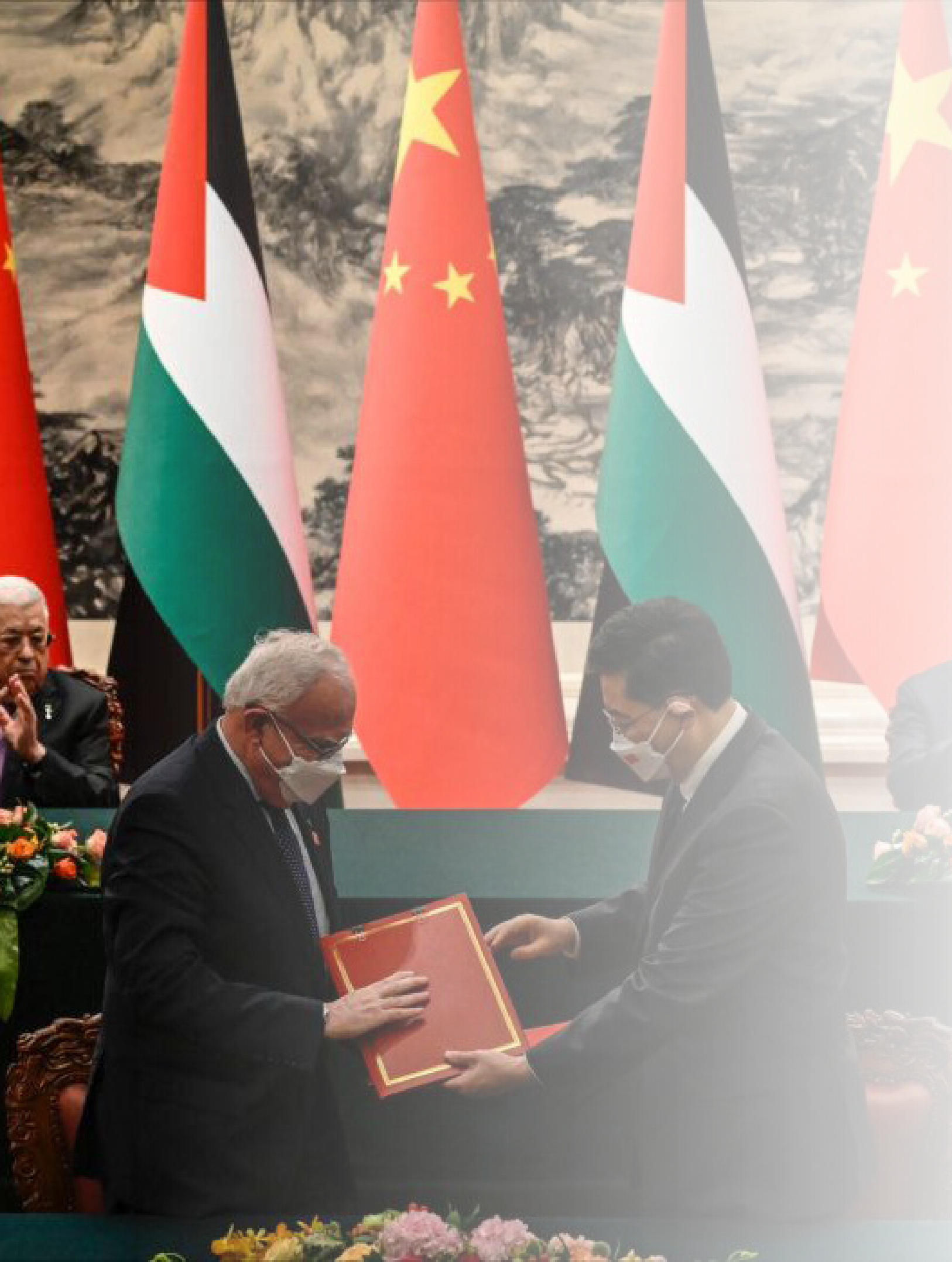


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Since 2010, the U.S. has viewed China as a rising power threatening its global dominance. However, unlike Russia, China has not adopted a confrontational stance against the U.S., focusing instead on peaceful development. Since the late 1970s, China has emphasized a strategy of peaceful growth, prioritizing state sovereignty, maintaining its political system, and ensuring economic and social progress. While U.S. attention shifted towards China in 2009 and 2010, under both Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, China reaffirmed its commitment to peaceful development. At the same time, China clarified its strategic goals, including preventing separatism in Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, defending its maritime rights in disputed areas like the East and South China Seas, and modernizing its defense forces.

China has maintained its peaceful development stance, claiming no interest in competing for global or regional dominance with the U.S. Despite this, China has increasingly modernized its military and adopted more assertive behavior in the Indo-Pacific region, raising tensions with nations such as Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Australia. For example, China's navy, now



the largest in the world, has seen significant growth, with its fleet expected to expand from 370 ships in 2023 to 435 by 2030. China's ship-building capacity far exceeds that of the U.S., providing a strategic advantage in any future conflict.

China's economy has also grown rapidly. Its GDP increased from \$6 trillion in 2010 to \$18.5 trillion in 2024, and it is projected to reach \$25 trillion by 2029. China is one of the world's fastest-growing economies and has become the main trading partner for many nations. In Sub-Saharan Africa, China is now the largest bilateral trading partner. In 2023, trade with Russia reached a new high of \$241 billion, spurred by the fallout from the Ukraine war. China has also increased its economic ties with Middle Eastern nations, particularly those in the Gulf Cooperation Council, becoming a key trading partner for major Arab economies. In 2022, it received more than half of its oil imports from the Gulf region. Chinese exports to Saudi Arabia alone amounted to \$36.5 billion, while in the same year, U.S. exports to Saudi Arabia amounted to \$21.6

billion.

Despite trade tensions with the U.S., China remains a key trading partner, with U.S. imports from China reaching \$448 billion in 2023. China has also deepened its economic relationships with Latin America, where it is now South America's largest trading partner and Latin America's second-largest overall, after the U.S. For instance, in 2000, the Chinese market accounted for less than 2% of Latin America's exports, but trade grew at an average annual rate of 31%, reaching \$180 billion in 2010. By 2021, total trade reached a record \$450 billion, a figure that remained largely unchanged in 2022, and some economists predict it could surpass \$700 billion by 2035.

China appears to benefit from U.S. involvement in the costly conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. While these interventions are unlikely to end soon, particularly in the Middle East due to the U.S. commitment to Israel's security, China has capitalized on America's focus elsewhere to further its strategic and economic goals.

Russian Soft Power in Middle East: Iraq as a Case Study



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Soft power, a term formulated by Joseph Nye, has become an influential concept in modern international politics. Unlike hard power, which relies on military force and economic pressure, soft power refers to a nation's ability to attract and influence other countries through cultural, educational, and humanitarian initiatives. For Russia, which is striving to enhance its global standing, soft power has become a vital tool in its foreign policy arsenal.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union—and particularly at the start of the 21st century—Russia has made significant efforts to wield soft power in various regions, including the Middle East. A key example of this is Iraq, where Russia has been actively fostering cultural, economic, and humanitarian relations.

This paper aims to explore the primary aspects of Russia's soft power in Iraq, including its cultural and educational programs, economic cooperation, military-technical partnerships, and humanitarian aid. By examining these factors, we can gain a clearer understanding of how Russia leverages soft power to achieve its broader strategic goals, both globally and specifically within Iraq.

The Concept of Soft Power

The concept of soft power (referred to as “мягкая сила” in Russian) was introduced by American scholar Joseph Nye in the 1980s and 1990s. It refers to a state’s ability to achieve its strategic goals through cultural, ideological, informational, and economic interactions with foreign societies, without resorting to force—such as military intervention or economic coercion. According to Nye, soft power enables a country to shape public opinion in other nations and cultivate an attractive national image, fostering goodwill toward the state employing this strategy.

In the past, it was commonly believed that military force and economic sanctions were the only ways to resolve international conflicts. Today, however, soft power—grounded in empathy, idealism, and positive perceptions—plays a pivotal role. While the economic and military resources of any state are finite and can be depleted through the use of “hard power,” soft power allows a country to avoid the economic and social disruptions that come with military action, thus preserving its long-term capacity in these critical areas.

Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century

Historically, Russia has contributed immensely to global civilization through its rich cultural heritage in art and literature. However, the use of soft power and public diplomacy in international relations was not a significant focus for the country. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia faced a profound economic and social crisis, leaving soft power on the back burner for the nation’s leadership. While some Soviet-era institutions related to soft power continued to operate in the Russian Federation during this period, they remained underfunded, ineffective, and largely unproductive.

The process of institutionalizing soft power in Russia began before the concept officially entered the state’s political culture. A pivotal step in this direction was the creation of the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation by President Vladimir Putin. “Russkiy Mir” is a public organization founded by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Science, with the primary goal of promoting the Russian language and culture abroad, as well as exporting and supporting Russian educational initiatives.

The turning point in Russia's use of soft power occurred in July 2012 when presidential candidate Vladimir Putin acknowledged at a meeting of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives that Russia was falling behind international competitors who had already developed and implemented effective soft power strategies. He stated, "We have not created an image of Russia abroad, so it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country, nor does it reflect our contribution to world civilization, culture, and science. Our country's position in international affairs is viewed from one perspective. We are guilty of not explaining our positions and views properly." In this context, Joseph Nye believes that Putin has recognized the interdependence of soft and hard power; however, he seems to struggle with effectively utilizing soft power at this stage.

Another significant development in Russia's soft power strategy was the establishment of a dedicated department for soft power issues within the Russian Foreign Ministry in 2021. This department was created due to the absence of a centralized body within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to oversee cultural and humanitarian coop-


eration at the international level. The responsibilities of this department include formulating Russia's overarching soft power policy, setting priorities, monitoring the implementation of government programs in this area, and providing advisory support and practical assistance to both relevant government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Russian Soft Power Strategies and Directions

Russia's soft power strategy operates in multiple directions, targeting specific regions or groups. By leveraging its historical, cultural, and political characteristics, Russia strategically selects particular areas and demographics it aims to attract and influence through soft power initiatives. Below, we discuss two primary directions of Russian soft power.

1.2.1 Russian History and Culture

The first direction of Russian soft power is grounded in its history and culture, aiming to foster a shared sense of belonging among the Russian minority abroad, often referred to as the "Russian world." This strategy seeks to influence the Russian diaspora through two main avenues:

A photograph of Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, seated and shaking hands with another man. Putin is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie with small white dots. He is looking down at the handshake. The Russian flag is visible in the background. The other man's hand and part of his arm are visible on the right side of the frame. A small bouquet of blue flowers is on a table in the foreground.

First, it encourages the return of these citizens to Russia under a state plan initiated in 2007, which has thus far benefitted approximately 900,000 people. Second, it provides support to Russian immigrants abroad, allowing them to maintain connections with their homeland while receiving cultural and, at times, political backing from Russia. The objectives differ based on the location of Rus-

sians living in Europe, North America, and Israel. Due to their limited cultural presence and daily interaction with Russia, these communities are often motivated to preserve their Russian identity, participate in cultural events, and promote a positive image of Russia abroad while also investing in their home country. “Ros Sotrudnichestvo” and, to a lesser

extent, the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation serve as the primary institutional and financial conduits in this regard.

The second tier of this first direction focuses on nurturing a sense of religious brotherhood to influence Orthodox countries, particularly in the Balkans, with Cyprus and Greece being

key targets. In the Middle East, the Russian Orthodox Church engages in para-diplomatic activities among Eastern Christians, assisting the Russian state in its spiritual and civil endeavors as it seeks to re-establish its politi-



cal presence in the region. The Church plays a significant role in attracting influential pro-Russian business and political circles in Lebanon and, more broadly, throughout the Christian world, which is deeply affected by religious dynamics in the Middle East. Thus, it can be argued that the Russian Orthodox Church has become a vital strategic asset for the Kremlin in the unfolding events in Syria and its neighboring areas.

1.2.2 Ideology and State Management

Another significant direction in Russia's soft power strategy revolves around ideology and governance, encompassing three main areas: conservative morality, illiberal values, and sovereignty.

Conservative Morality: Russia positions itself as a defender of "traditional family values," which resonates with those who oppose movements advocating for sexual minorities and women's rights, not only in Europe but also in Africa and the Middle East. Russian representatives play a notable role in international platforms such as the World Congress of Families, and they have established communication channels with the Vatican through the

Orthodox Church. Examples of this Russian "moral conservatism" can be seen in its alliances with conservative Catholics and the American right-wing Christian movement.

Illiberal Governance: The spread of illiberal governance, which extends from Turkey and Israel to Brazil and the Philippines, is often discussed in political literature as a manifestation of Russian soft power. However, this perspective is more controversial and cannot be directly interpreted as a result of Russian influence. The emergence of illiberal governments in specific countries is primarily linked to their unique political and domestic circumstances.

Sovereignty: The challenge posed by the modern world order and U.S. hegemony is another area where Russia seeks to establish itself as a leader and advocate for sovereignty. The concept of sovereignty underscores the importance of protecting national integrity, serving as a cornerstone of both domestic and foreign policy. Moscow promotes sovereignty across three domains: political, cultural, and economic, which we will briefly outline here.

For Russia, political legitimacy is vested solely in nation-states, allowing

citizens to express their will through elections. Consequently, powers should not be delegated to unelected supranational institutions. Russia aims to restore a world order that acknowledges the spheres of influence of great powers, a principle emphasized since the Yalta Conference.

In the economic realm, Russia stresses the importance of safeguarding its national economy from the adverse effects of globalization. It advocates for the preservation and development of domestic industrial production and labor while opposing the authoritarian tendencies of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

National sovereignty is also defined by the composition of a nation. This raises questions about who belongs to that nation and its fundamental, unchangeable cultural characteristics. In this context, the dominant nation within each nation-state is afforded the right to cultivate its culture, while foreigners, immigrants, and minorities are expected to accept the prevailing culture, as is reflected in the practical realities within Russia itself.

1.3 Russian Soft Power Tools

Russia employs various soft power tools to achieve its foreign policy objectives and attract attention internationally. Among these, education stands out as one of the most effective tools in Russia's soft power arsenal. Russian universities offer high-quality education, which plays a central role in this strategy. According to the 2018 ranking by QS (a British company specializing in higher education and research), Russia ranked 15th out of 50 countries in international research rankings, reflecting the progress of Russian education.

A key aspect of Russia's soft power in education is the provision of free educational opportunities to foreign students. As they study in Russia, these students not only acquire knowledge but also become familiar with the Russian language, scientific achievements, and cultural heritage. Upon returning home, they often act as informal ambassadors of Russian culture. The number of international students in Russia has been growing steadily, and this trend shows no signs of slowing down. In 2020, the Russian government increased the quota for foreign students from 15,000 to 18,000

for the year 2021. This number was further increased to 23,000 in 2022 and to 30,000 in 2023. Moreover, Russia encourages continued collaboration with its graduates abroad, supporting initiatives aimed at maintaining ties with foreign alumni associations. By 2022, these associations were active in 68 countries, further integrating Russian-educated professionals into Russia's soft power framework.

Language also plays a vital role in Russia's soft power strategy. The Pushkin Institute, a state institution, is responsible for training Russian language instructors and developing effective methods for teaching Russian as a foreign language. The institute also organizes annual Russian Language Olympiads for both children and adults, particularly in Russia and post-Soviet countries.

Additionally, Russia leverages its cultural and historical heritage as a soft power tool. The literary works of renowned Russian authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Pushkin have been translated into numerous languages, while composers like Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov enjoy global recognition.

To implement its soft power programs, Russia relies on several key institutions, including:

Rossotrudnichestvo: Established in 2008, this Federal Agency oversees numerous Russian cultural and scientific centres abroad. It operates 90 representative offices in 75 countries. Rossotrudnichestvo's responsibilities include supporting Russian citizens abroad, promoting the Russian language and culture, fostering youth cooperation, and advancing public diplomacy. The agency also manages the promotion of Russian education abroad and selects foreign students to study in Russia, all with the goal of creating a positive and objective image of Russia internationally.

The Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy Support: Founded in 2010, this institution promotes public diplomacy, intellectual and cultural exchange, and scientific cooperation, aiming to enhance Russia's influence abroad and foster favourable political, social, and commercial conditions.

Additionally, the International Council of Russian Citizens works to unite the Russian diaspora, creating a cultural, informational, and educational space to strengthen ties with Russians

living abroad.

Despite having a well-developed institutional network for soft power, the activities and initiatives of these institutions sometimes suffer from a lack of coordination. This disorganization, particularly in the division of responsibilities, can lead to inefficiencies, reducing the overall effectiveness of Russia's soft power efforts.

Russian Soft Power in Iraq

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Russia began to re-establish its relationship with Iraq, gradually revealing both the strengths and weaknesses of its soft power approach in the region. To understand this dynamic, it is essential to first examine the core principles guiding Russian foreign policy and identify the unique characteristics that differentiate Russian diplomacy from that of other nations.

Russian Diplomatic Approach and Principles in Relations with Iraq

Russia's diplomatic approach to Iraq can be categorized into three main groups:

1. General principles governing Rus-

sia's relations with foreign states.

2. Specific principles for Russia's relations with Islamic states.

3. Distinct approaches and principles unique to Iraq.

1. General Methods and Principles

The foundation of Russia's general diplomatic approach includes respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, adherence to international law, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Additionally, Moscow focuses on strengthening international security, combating terrorism, resolving conflicts through peaceful means, and fostering bilateral relationships based on mutual and equal interests.

2. Principles Governing Relations with Islamic States

Islam is a significant factor in both Russia's domestic and foreign policy, which has led Russian diplomacy to develop specific principles for engaging with Islamic nations. The foremost principle is respect for Islam, both within and outside of Russia. While this is primarily a domestic policy, the way Russia treats its Muslim citizens

has implications for its relations with Islamic countries. This was evident in the response of Russian Muslims to the violence against Myanmar's Muslim minority, showcasing the sensitivity of the global Muslim community toward the treatment of their co-religionists.

The second principle is engaging with different branches of Islam. According to Russian scholar S.V. Kortunov, Iraq's political landscape is shaped by two major Islamic influences: moderate Islam and Iranian Islam. Moderate Islam, a secular version of political Islam that once enjoyed support from the Soviet Union, is now in decline. In contrast, Iran's version of Islam is not seen as a threat to Russian interests, and its growing influence in Iraq does not pose a challenge to Russia's regional ambitions.

3. Unique Approaches and Principles for Iraq

Russia's foreign policy toward Iraq must account for the country's unique characteristics, most notably the Kurdish separatist factor. While the Kurdistan Region has its own autonomous government and military, it remains part of Iraq, with ongoing tensions between Erbil and Baghdad, particularly

over energy resources and disputed territories.

Russia's policy here is clear: it maintains a non-interference stance in Iraq's internal affairs. Moscow believes that any changes within Iraq, including those related to the Kurdish issue, must be achieved through negotiations between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil. Russia seeks to balance its relations with both Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region. To this end, in addition to its embassy in Baghdad, Russia has established a Consulate General in Erbil, and the Kurdistan Regional Government has opened a representation office in Russia. This balanced approach reflects Russia's commitment to maintaining positive relations with all key actors in Iraq.

Areas of Russian Soft Power in Iraq

Over the past two decades, as Russian-Iraqi relations have strengthened—particularly in the areas of energy and military cooperation, and in light of developments in Syria—Iraqi society has become increasingly familiar with Russia and its culture. This section explores Russia's soft power influence in Iraq in practice.

Language and Education

Russia has been actively working to promote and strengthen the position of the Russian language among Iraqi students and intellectuals through various departments and centers. One of the key institutions in this effort is the Department of Russian Language and Literature at the University of Baghdad. This department, which currently employs 50 faculty members—including three professors and several lecturers with master's and doctoral degrees—teaches 310 students across 39 different subjects, such as grammar, writing, reading, Russian literature, and translation.

In addition to the University of Baghdad, Dar al-Ma'omen, a Russian language research and development center supervised by the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, plays a significant role in translating Russian literature, especially children's books, into Arabic. Moreover, in 2018, a Russian Language Department was opened at the University of Samarra in Salahaddin Province, where 20 students are currently enrolled and taught by six faculty members. A similar department was established at Wasit University, although it was later suspended due to a shortage of staff. Meanwhile, the University of

Sulaimani in the Kurdistan Region has also expressed interest in launching a Russian language program.

In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of Iraqi students seeking to study in Russia. For example, in 2017, approximately 1,900 students applied, representing a 10% increase from the previous year. In the same year, 167 Iraqi students were granted scholarships to study in Russia, provided by the Russian Federal Ministry of Science and Higher Education. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, during his visit to Iraq in February 2023, the number of Iraqi students studying in Russian universities had reached 4,200. Plans are underway to increase the number of free seats available to Iraqi students in Russian universities, with an additional 60 Iraqi Foreign Ministry employees admitted to the Russian Foreign Ministry's Diplomatic Academy. Engineering and medical studies are particularly popular among Iraqi students.

While the presence of Russian language departments in Iraqi universities is growing and the demand for Russian language skills is increasing, there are still challenges hindering the broader spread of Russian language education in Iraq. These challenges include

a lack of e-dictionaries, visual learning resources, and qualified instructors. In some cases, teaching staff lack formal experience in Russian studies. Additionally, there are no Russian-Iraqi cultural centers similar to Rossotrudnichestvo that would promote Russian language and culture through organized activities. These deficiencies, combined with financial and technical constraints, limit the full potential of Russia's soft power in Iraq.

Despite these obstacles, Russia has continued to leverage education and language as effective soft power tools. The country's increasing influence in global energy markets, as well as its military and economic presence in the region—particularly after the Syrian conflict—has fueled a growing desire among Iraqi students to study Russian and pursue higher education in Russia. Through these avenues, Russia aims to create a positive and objective image of itself among Iraq's elites and broader society.

Commerce and Energy

Despite the strong presence and influence of the United States, Iraqi authorities have consistently expressed a desire to strengthen trade and economic ties with Russia. Over the past decade, these relations have seen

steady growth, with the volume of trade reaching \$150 million in 2011. However, this figure fell short of the aspirations of both nations' leadership.

Historically, the core areas of trade and economic cooperation between Iraq and Russia have been centered on the military-technical sector and energy, a relationship that dates back to the Soviet era. Both Moscow and Baghdad have prioritized the expansion of ties in these fields. For example, in October 2012, the two countries signed several contracts for the supply of Russian military equipment to Iraq, amounting to \$4.2 billion.

In the energy sector, Russian companies have found favorable conditions to operate within Iraq. With its relatively low operating costs, Iraq's oil fields have become a major focus for Russian energy giants such as Lukoil, Bashneft, and Rosneft, all of which have invested heavily in developing these fields. Both Lukoil and Gazprom have secured multiple contracts for the exploration and development of oil fields in Iraq, including in the Kurdistan Region.

A significant step forward in the energy relationship between the two countries is the participation of Russian oil and gas companies in geolog-

ical exploration and natural gas development projects in Iraq. Recently, Iraq's leadership has undertaken key initiatives to develop natural gas fields, particularly by attracting Gazprom Neft to oversee the geological exploration, development, and production of gas at the Mansoura field.

Beyond energy, Iraq is eager to develop bilateral relations with Russia in several other sectors, notably electricity, transportation, and social infrastructure. Additionally, Iraq has expressed interest in increasing the volume of Russian agricultural and food product imports, which include sunflower oil, flour, wheat, and barley. Iraqi demand for Russian agricultural products is on the rise, especially for animal feed and poultry meat.

According to the Russian Federal Customs Agency, Russian exports of timber and related products to Iraq grew by 15%, from \$26.5 million in 2019 to \$31 million in 2020. Iron ore exports saw an even greater increase, rising by 43%, from \$14.9 million to \$21.4 million. Exports of electrical appliances and equipment, including medical devices and materials for the oil and gas industry, surged by 35%.

Recently, Iraq has intensified efforts to develop its domestic capacity for

processing agricultural products, such as grains, vegetable oils, and raw sugar. Russia could play a pivotal role in supporting this initiative, particularly through the construction of large silos, provision of equipment, and development of agricultural infrastructure.

The electricity sector represents a vital area of cooperation between Iraq and Russia, particularly regarding the resumption of work on several unfinished power generation facilities that are strategically important for Iraq. These include the Al-Kharta Thermal Power Plant, Aliusfiya Thermal Power Plant, Dibis Thermal Power Plant, and the Al-Adaim Hydropower Plant. For both Russia and Iraq, completing these projects is a priority. However, previous contracts with Russian companies working on these projects were canceled, and no new agreements have been signed. As a result, the future of these power plants remains uncertain.

In the realm of medicine and pharmaceuticals, Russia has proven to be an essential partner for Iraq. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian vaccines were registered in Iraq, and Russia expressed its readiness to provide Iraq with the necessary vaccines. Beyond vaccines, Iraq is interested in developing partnerships with Russian

manufacturers to supply medicines and medical devices. Russian private companies have also shown willingness to invest in Iraq's medical sector, particularly following the removal of pandemic-related barriers. This sector holds great promise for future collaboration.

Another promising avenue for cooperation is the financial and banking sector. Given Iraq's national currency reform plans, Iraqi authorities are open to considering the involvement of the Russian company Goznak JSC in the issuance of new currency. To further strengthen Russian-Iraqi trade and economic relations, it is crucial to implement more robust financial and non-financial export support mechanisms. In addition, under current global circumstances, developing alternative financial and banking systems—especially those bypassing SWIFT and avoiding reliance on the U.S. banking system—has become increasingly important for facilitating contracts between the two nations.

As previously mentioned, Russia is heavily involved in Iraq's oil and gas sector. Russian companies have secured major contracts to develop Iraq's oil and gas fields, and they are also playing a critical role in rebuilding and modernizing the country's energy

infrastructure. This includes the construction of pipelines, refineries, and other essential facilities, all of which help bolster Iraq's energy industry while also increasing Russia's influence in this key sector.

In agriculture, Russia is a significant supplier of grain and other agricultural products to Iraq, helping to enhance the country's food security. This trade fosters a positive image of Russia as a reliable partner. Furthermore, Russia is also a key player in supporting the development of Iraq's domestic agricultural sector.

Russia's approach to Iraq is multi-faceted, covering areas such as language and education, energy, trade, and agriculture, all while adhering to the principle of non-interference in Iraq's internal affairs. Through these areas of cooperation, Russia aims to increase its influence in Iraq, foster a positive image, and challenge the perception that Iraq falls under the exclusive influence of the United States. In the coming years, we anticipate that Russian-Iraqi relations will continue to expand, with Russia's growing political and military presence in the region paving the way for deeper cultural and economic engagement in Iraq.

Conclusion

1. Russia is significantly trying to strengthen its influence in Iraq and is developing bilateral relations primarily through investments in the energy, agriculture, trade, and technical-military sectors.

2. Through soft power, Russia aims to create a positive image of itself in the eyes of the Iraqi elite by employing various cultural and media tools.

3. In education and language, Russia is actively promoting its culture and enhancing the position of the Russian language in Iraq. The presence of several Russian language departments in Iraqi universities and the annual awarding of scholarships to Iraqi students are testaments to this commitment.

4. Russia has sought to establish equal and balanced diplomatic relations with both Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, adhering to the principle of non-interference in Iraqi internal affairs.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. In developing future relations, Iraq can leverage Russia's capabilities across various fields. As a world power and a leader in military, economic, and agricultural domains, Iraq stands to

benefit from Russian expertise, technology, and increased trade opportunities.

2. The success of Russian cultural and educational programs in Iraq, such as attracting Iraqi students to study in Russian universities, will foster a positive attitude towards Russia among Iraqi youth. This aligns with one of the goals of Russia's soft power strategy. The Russian side should prioritize this area by providing more opportunities for Iraqi students, including streamlining visa issuance and residency procedures to attract a larger student body.

3. To enhance its cultural and educational influence in Iraq, Russia should consider opening branches of renowned Russian universities in developed Iraqi cities, such as the American University in Sulaymaniyah and Duhok. Additionally, establishing cultural centers to promote Russian culture in Iraq is essential. It is particularly important now to initiate the opening of branches of Ross Satrudnichestve and Russkiy Mir in Iraq.

4. Another vital aspect is the development of the tourism sector. Russia is perceived as a closed country by many Iraqis. While there is considerable demand among Iraqi citizens to visit Russia for tourism, restrictive visa policies

hinder the growth of this sector. The Russian government should review its laws regarding tourist visas. Currently, direct flights between the two countries are limited, operating only a few times a week from Baghdad to Moscow.

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The Future

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National Standardized Testing in Kurdistan Region: An Ambiguous Gamble and a Complex Puzzle



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This article examines the complex landscape of national standardized testing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), with a particular focus on the 12th-grade Baccalaureate examination. Through a critical analysis of both benefits and drawbacks, the discussion moves from examining the traditional justifications for standardized testing—including benchmarking, accountability, and merit-based advancement—to exploring its fundamental limitations and societal impacts. The article then delves into the specific challenges faced within the KRI context, where high-stakes testing has become deeply embedded in the educational framework. Finally, it proposes concrete solutions to reduce the outsized influence of standardized testing, advocating for a more holistic and nuanced approach to student assessment and university admissions. Throughout, the article maintains that while standardized testing serves important regulatory functions, its current implementation requires significant reform to better serve educational and societal goals.

Standardized national tests, such as the 9th- and 12th-grade Ministerial exams (also known as Baccalaureate exams) in the KRI, are crucial as they significantly influence one's social trajectory within the modern educational system. The

12th-grade Baccalaureate examination marks a pivotal moment for many students, shaping not only their future but also that of their families.

Critically analyzing standardized national testing intersects with broader conversations on the modern educational system as these tests are integral components that help define its framework. While these exams present certain advantages, they also bring complex disadvantages.

Advantages of National Standardized Tests

Discussing the advantages of national tests means highlighting the goals and intents behind this educational assessment tool. Some of the key goals and intents associated with these tests include:

1. Benchmarking

National standardized tests serve as benchmarks for comparing the performance of students from diverse communities, backgrounds, and social levels. This comparison helps decision-makers identify successful educational practices and strategies nationwide.

2. Standardization of Measures

These national tests provide a uniform yardstick for assessing large groups of students with diverse educational, cultural, and social backgrounds. All students are evaluated based on the same criteria, ensuring fairness and consistency.

3. Holistic Assessment

Standardized national testing typically encompasses a wide range of subjects, allowing for a holistic evaluation of a student's knowledge and skills.

4. Accountability and Monitoring

Standardized national tests serve as tools for holding schools and teachers accountable while monitoring their performance. The range of student scores on these tests reflects how effectively schools and teachers have met educational standards, goals, and achievement indicators.

5. Data-Driven Decision-Making

Standardized tests generate measurable data, enabling a clear assessment of student achievement, identification of gaps and weaknesses, and provi-

sion of insights for shaping educational policies. This data-driven approach also guides the allocation of financial and human resources.

6. University Readiness Indicator

Standardized testing ensures that students are prepared for the demands of higher education. The expectations embedded in national examinations often align closely with the requirements of the national higher education institutions.

7. Merit-Based Admissions

Standardized tests support a fair, merit-based selection system for university admissions, reducing opportunities for interference, favoritism, and nepotism.

8. Predicting Academic Success

Standardized tests serve as predictors of future success in tertiary education, as they reveal students' knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

Challenges and Criticisms of Standardized National Tests

When considering the downside of

these national tests, we must critically engage with the assumptions and objectives underpinning this system of evaluation and decision-making. These goals deserve careful examination and skepticism. The rise of standardized testing systems is rooted in the historical development and entrenchment of modern educational management. The political, economic, and ideological objectives embedded in these aspirations need to be scrutinized.

Several key points are essential when discussing the disadvantages of national standardized testing:

1. Limiting Education

Focusing on a narrow set of exams can disadvantage students with strengths in other areas or those who learn differently. What these exams do not cover becomes sidelined, as aspects of knowledge, skills, or character deemed irrelevant to test performance lose their value.

2. Narrowing the Curriculum

Standardized national tests often narrow the curriculum toward exam preparation rather than fostering a



broad, cognitively enriching educational experience. The process centers on training students to answer specific questions—or test coaching—rather than equipping them with diverse knowledges and skills.

3. Increasing Stress and Anxiety

Standardized, high-stakes exams carry significant weight in educational and social decision-making, as the results determine students' educational and economic futures. This high-stakes nature places substantial pressure on students and their families, generating considerable worry and stress that often negatively impact students' skills and well-being.

4. Increasing Inequities

Standardized tests typically overlook students' diverse backgrounds and learning styles, disproportionately affecting those from marginalized and disadvantaged communities who may struggle with standardized methods of evaluation.

1. Exacerbating Social and Economic Inequality

Students from wealthier families typi-

cally have greater access to resources and more test preparation opportunities, creating an uneven playing field from the outset. For low-income students, exam outcomes bear heavier consequences, while students from wealthy families with social and political status often have alternative opportunities.

Reflecting on nationwide standardized tests, we must critically examine the foundations of this testing system and its entrenchment within educational philosophy, policy, and discourse. It is crucial to question the historical and political forces that have maintained the dominance of these exams, often reducing educational reform initiatives to cosmetic changes rather than robust discussions and actions on alternative directions. This lack of transformation reflects a troubling level of compliance with the educational status quo in the Kurdistan Region. The following argument, presented through connected themes, highlights the need to reevaluate the national standardized testing in the KRI.

Simplifying Education Threatens Its Essence

Three main objectives of the national,

high-stakes, standardized testing are (a) benchmarking, (b) standardizing the measures, and (c) facilitating data-driven decision-making. When making decisions, the degree to which they align with consistent metrics across different times and places affects their validity. Therefore, standardized educational metrics (i.e., educational standards) are essential for effective policymaking in education.

At first glance, this argument seems straightforward and agreeable. However, the topic is quite complex. What do we really mean by “educational metrics or standards”? For some, upholding educational standards means covering the content of school textbooks and retaining information, while for others, it means increasing literacy and developing human resources in society. For some, student actions and behaviors reflect educational standards, while for others, elevated economic conditions and livelihoods, increased cultural understandings, and strong political and legal institutions in society are educational standards.

Within these social, political, cultural, and economic frameworks that reflect various educational objectives, there are numerous directions, inter-

ests, and aims that vary based on the historical and political experiences of different peoples and societies. Educational leaders and decision-makers eventually seek frameworks that are simple, direct, and objective that yield concrete, measurable interpretations.

- *Distortion of Education*

Since national standardized tests in the KRI are primarily measured numerically, a basic question is: What do these numbers reveal about the actual educational objectives? A grade 12 examination score of 95 compared to scores of 90 or 87 does not provide much insight into the educational standards we value. It merely indicates that the first score is higher than the second, and the second is in turn higher than the third. This comparison reflects only the quantity of correct answers in the test, not the level of literacy, depth of critical thinking, quality of student behavior, or breadth of cultural and political awareness.

Grading simplifies discussions and eliminates complexity. While simplification can be beneficial for certain decisions—allowing for quicker conclusions—it becomes detrimental when applied to a complex subject like education. To pervert education, one

need only reduce it to decision-making processes, bureaucratic procedures, mandating, technical issue-free exams, and following “tried-and-true” routines. However, all these processes rely mainly on numerical data, and standardized tests provide the easiest route to obtain it.

Since grading is a questionable criterion, standardizing this criterion stifles our ability to explore the diverse meanings and dynamic nature of education and its standards. The entire educational process has become strict adherence to the dictates of decision-makers and bureaucrats. When pressured to meet standards, educators spend every effort to achieve the standardized criterion, often at the expense of community ideals, interests, and experiences.

- *Corruption of Benchmarks*

When establishing and standardizing benchmarks, we must be aware that the benchmarks often become the objective rather than a means to an objective. The British economist Charles Goodhart’s law explains this: “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.” This means that when excessive emphasis is placed on measuring, people and institutions will

go to great lengths to manipulate the system to meet the expected results. For instance, when a passing rate in a test is set at a minimum 55% of students to deem the testing process valid or to avoid undesired scrutiny for the educational system, decision-makers can achieve this even before the testing process begins. They can do so by awarding students points to align the overall results with the bell curve, designating certain years as no-failure years (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic), or employing various other legal or even illegal tactics. In doing so, the real objective—being educated—is sidelined.

Consequently, the educational standard, represented by the numerical value that ostensibly reflects an educational value, becomes meaningless. Instead of focusing on improving the system, decision-makers become fixated on inflating or deflating scores, which only reflect a superficial aspect of the educational standard. This fixation can also corrupt the benchmarks themselves, since what can be measured can be corrupted.

- *Numbers Often Corrupt*

Let us consider two grade 12 students: one achieved a score of 85 in the year

2000, and another scored 85 in 2024. Are these two scores truly equal? Do they measure the same level of educational achievement? Here, the numerical criterion for assessing the level of education becomes problematic because the curricula and the types and methods of assessment have changed over time. A score of 85 does not hold the same value within the university admissions system in the KRI, as its significance varies depending on the cohort of students who scored above or below it.

The reality is that standardized national test scores fail to provide a clear picture of student knowledge, abilities, or skills, especially since many educational goals are not adequately represented numerically. Attributes such as artistic sensibility, cultural depth, critical thinking, creativity, academic literacies, the capacity for dialogue and cognitive engagement, open-mindedness, love of learning, and adhering to ethical principles are challenging to quantify. When the testing system attempts to assess these goals by relying solely on regurgitating textbook content, these valuable objectives become trivialized and perverted. Conversely, since certain educational objectives cannot be quantified, testing will inevitably focus

on the quantifiable, measurable aspects, such as rote memorization and information recall. This ultimately relegates textbook content to the core of formal education.

Implementing a nationwide standardized testing system may streamline educational decision-making by presenting the educational process as straightforward. However, this simplification creates significant problems and perverts education, ultimately paving the way for flawed and incomplete decision-making. It is crucial for education experts to highlight this blind spot and offer clarity to educational decision-makers. I emphasize the importance of expertise across various fields related to education, including educational policy, sociology of education, political economy, history of education, political science, philosophy of education, and educational management and leadership. If we perceive national standardized testing as a technical process or believe that political will alone (through laws and guidelines) can resolve its issues, the complexities of this topic will remain obscured and increasingly distant from viable solutions.

- *The Stakes of National Standardized*

Tests in the KRI are Very High

The challenge of addressing the problems associated with national standardized tests is compounded by the high stakes of the test results. The high-stakes nature of these tests hinges on the notion that students' test scores ultimately dictate their educational routes and the broader socio-political outcomes of these routes. The fluctuations in scores determine which post-secondary programs a student can enter, thus shaping the future of their entire formal educational journey. Once a student achieves a certain score in high school, they become firmly anchored in that educational path, making it challenging to explore other venues. The stakes are alarmingly high; with a single incorrect answer, a student's future can be irrevocably decided, determining whether they will become a doctor, engineer, laboratory technician, or language teacher for the rest of their life.

- *Test Scores and the Margins for Student Decision-Making*

When determining their field of study, students' interests, plans, compatibility, experience, and abilities are often overshadowed by their test scores. Those who achieve higher scores en-

joy a greater margin of freedom in decision-making compared to their peers with lower scores. In other words, the higher the score, the broader the student's range of choices, as scores increasingly dictate the decision-making process. This critical role of scores within the formal educational system makes them a highly sensitive issue. Consequently, changing the grading process becomes a complex challenge. The sensitivity surrounding scores contributes to the deterioration of the testing system and hampers any efforts for reform.

- *Students Have No Alternative to High Scores*

The high stakes and sensitivity of the national standardized test in grade 12 have transformed the test into the ultimate goal of the entire pre-university educational system. Now, the primary focus of formal education, particularly in high school, is to achieve high scores on the tests. As a result, other educational objectives that do not directly translate into high scores are increasingly marginalized. Central educational values and goals, such as collaboration, creative and critical thinking, adherence to ethical principles, social participation and activism, and holis-

tic well-being, are often sidelined. If a teacher or school emphasizes these principles and values but their grade 12 students end up with low scores, they are unlikely to be regarded as successful educators or institutions. They are likely scrutinized for failing to reach the benchmarks.

Opening the Tangled Knot of High-Stakes Testing

Critically examining the issues of high-stakes national standardized testing in the KRI entails proposing solutions to its challenges. What this article proposes is the following: To alleviate the issues associated with the grade 12 standardized exam, we must diminish its perceived importance so that students, parents, and decision-makers do not place excessive stakes on it, and their futures are not solely contingent upon it.

Here are some ways to lower the stakes of the grade 12 standardized exam in the university admission processes:

1. Holistic Evaluation Criteria

Universities, colleges, and various higher educational programs can establish holistic criteria for evaluating

and admitting students that align with their vision, values, mission, capabilities, and opportunities. Admission criteria could encompass a combination of three years of high school performance (high school GPA), grade 12 test results, extracurricular activities, and prior experiences (including work history, qualifications, achievements, and indicators of success in relevant fields). For example, written statements could demonstrate students' intentions, perspectives, experiences, and future plans, supported by letters from teachers, school principals, business managers, and other professionals.

2. Portfolio Assessments

Academic programs and colleges can evaluate students' portfolios by requiring submission of work samples, projects, and products that showcase their skills and demonstrate that the chosen department and program are well-suited for them.

3. Student Interviews

Academic departments can conduct interviews with students to assess how well they align with the expectations

and needs of the program in terms of personality, communication skills, and motivation.

4. Performance-Based Assessment

5. Academic programs can assess students based on their performance and ability to demonstrate skills and character through assignments and projects that reflect their capacity to tackle real-world challenges within their chosen fields.

6. General Skills Testing

University admissions processes can include evaluating students' general skills in critical and creative thinking, reading, writing, and comprehension, language proficiency, teamwork, perseverance, general knowledge, and technological proficiency.

Conclusion

The complexities of national standardized testing in the KRI necessitate a reexamination of its role in education. Only by moving beyond a narrow focus on high-stakes scores can we pursue a more holistic, equitable approach to evaluating students. For meaningful reform, universities and academic insti-

tutions must be empowered to define and implement criteria that align with their specific goals and societal contributions. Alternative criteria for assessing students' academic performance can support more nuanced, transparent, and informed decision-making. Ultimately, the responsibility for the admissions process lies with colleges and universities. Since these institutions are entrusted to produce qualified professionals—doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, accountants, and others—they must also have the autonomy to admit grade 12 graduates based on their own general and unique criteria. If doubts arise regarding the capabilities, intentions, and integrity of universities and academic departments in making such decisions—or for fear of nepotism and other forms of unfair treatment of students—then the entire educational processes and system in the KRI will be in serious trouble.

Towards a Deeper Understanding of Mosque Education and Modern Education in Kurdistan



Araz Mohammed Salih

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As Muslims arrived in Kurdistan, mosques were constructed as essential to Islam, and the study of the new religion's sources began within them, as it is impossible to be religious without understanding Islam's principles and commandments. This was the primary motivation for the beginning of education in Islamic history.

In Kurdistan, learning Arabic became a crucial necessity alongside learning the new religion, as Kurds were among the foreigners familiar with the language and its foundational principles. Consequently, the Arabic language department, encompassing the three branches of grammar, morphology, and rhetoric, holds the lion's share of the mosque curriculum.

The identity of those who first arrived in Kurdistan and established the initial schools, along with the foundations for teaching Arabic and the Islamic alphabet, remains unclear. The exact locations of the first mosque and religious school in Kurdistan are also uncertain, as there is no definitive historical evidence to confirm them. However, based on certain criteria, it can be noted that Sharazoor was conquered after Jaloula in 18 AH, making it one of the earliest regions in Kurdistan to be conquered. Consequently, the titles of the scholars from Sharazoor were soon recognized; it is believed that the first Islamic



mosque and school were situated in Sharazoor and Xwrmal.

The schools and scholars from Sharazoor, Dinwari, Amadi, Erbil, Shinoi, and other areas quickly gained fame across the Islamic world. There is no doubt that many great scholars emerged in Kurdistan after the arrival of Islam. "Education and literacy came to Kurdistan because of Islam, which created a new religious need to prioritize literacy," states Kurdish historian Dr. Kamal Mazhar Ahmad.

Throughout the history of education in the mosques of Kurdistan, several strong reasons have helped keep the process going and productive. Based on the criteria, level, and understanding of the time, these reasons can be summarized as follows:

1. Passion for Science and Learning: A deep love for science, driven by faith and the hope for rewards from Allah, has inspired teachers and Faqihs to selflessly dedicate themselves to education, serving mosques and the community tirelessly.

2. Serving for Free in the Way of God: Mosque teachers often devote themselves to teaching hundreds of

students without seeking any compensation. They embrace a simple lifestyle, aiming solely for Allah's pleasure and the rewards of the Hereafter.

3. Satisfaction with a Simple Life: Religious teachers and Faqihs enter the education field without expecting financial gain, positions, or salaries. Their motivation stems from faith and the desire for divine rewards, rather than the pursuit of employment or a better lifestyle.

4. Traveling and Selflessness: Since childhood, Faqihs of Islamic sciences have traveled from village to village within their countries. At times, they have spent years away from their families, continuing their studies with complete dedication.

5. Choice of Teachers: Faqihs had the freedom to select their own teachers, seeking out the best instructors in various subjects. Whenever they heard of a highly regarded teacher, they would ask their own teacher for permission to study with them. If granted permission, they would seek out the recommended teacher.

6. Studying the Mustaid Sukhta: After completing the Sukhta stage, the Faqih became the teacher for

the next group of students. This practice helped reinforce the knowledge he had gained. Although he did not expect to take on a teaching role after finishing his studies, this step ensured that the Faqih Mustaid retained his knowledge and taught it daily.

7. Studying Arabic Language and Rhetoric: Learning Arabic through paired study between teachers and students has been vital for grasping the language. The Faqih was actively involved in this learning process and found it enjoyable.

8. Theological and Scriptural Sciences: The combination of scriptural sciences, such as the Qur'an and Sunnah, with theological subjects derived from human reasoning has broadened the perspectives of Kurdish Faqihs and preachers.

9. Studying Arabic, Persian, and Turkish: Focusing on the Persian and Turkish languages has helped Kurdish Faqihs connect with the cultures and literatures of these nations, especially in Persian literature.

10. Focus on Spirituality and Knowledge: Religious schools' focus on both knowledge and spirituality has been a strength, helping

to fill the spiritual and mental gaps that can occur in religious settings.

Although the religious education process in Kurdistan has numerous strengths, it also has some weaknesses that have caused setbacks in the modern era. The most significant weaknesses are:

1. Lack of Focus on Key Islamic Sources: The Hujra (study circle) program hasn't emphasized key Islamic sources like the Quran and the Prophet's (pbuh) Sunnah. Tajweed (recitation rules) and Tafseer (interpretation) were mostly ignored, and there was no study of hadith (sayings) and its teachings. This has weakened sermons, with preachers often sharing unproven stories instead of using Quranic verses and hadiths.

2. Neglect of the Humanities: The lack of focus on subjects like literacy, history, geography, and other humanities has resulted in Kurdish preachers being unaware of their nation's past and the geography of their homeland. Although a handful of preachers may have produced some writings during the 1400s, it remains true that no Kurdish preacher has documented their memoirs in the last fourteen centuries, high-

lighting deficiencies in the educational programs they experienced.

3. Neglect of Kurdish Language and Culture: One major criticism of mosque education is the disregard for the Kurdish language. Why did Kurdish preachers prioritize Persian, despite it not being the language of the Qur'an? Why didn't they focus on the Kurdish language?

4. Disconnection from Social Reality: Kurdish preachers pursued theology and philosophical topics that were often unnecessary at the time. Once the Faqih graduated, he typically became the preacher for a village or town, often an illiterate agricultural society.

5. Stagnation and Lack of Renewal: The primary reason for the decline of mosque education has been its inability to renew itself and keep up with the changing times. This stagnation has contributed to the weakening of religious education as modern educational systems have emerged.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, numerous military and civilian schools were established in various cities and towns throughout the

Ottoman Empire. These institutions attracted many students, leading to the rapid emergence of diverse intellectual groups shaped by their educational programs. In Kurdistan, graduates of these schools formed a new wave of intellectuals, initially in Istanbul and later returning to Kurdistan following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Notable figures among them include Mohammed Amin Zaki Beg, Piramird, and Rafiq.

These intellectuals introduced a cultural movement, journalism, and new ideas to Kurdistan. Once government institutions were established, they took leadership roles within them. This raises the question: Why were the graduates of mosque education unable to contribute to the cultural movement and the advancements of the new era?

Some might argue: Isn't the study of Haji Qadir Koyi, Piramird, and a few others similar to this? While it is true that they began their education in the mosque, their perspectives shifted significantly after they moved to Istanbul and engaged with the modern world, becoming influenced by new developments occur-

ring there.

It is indisputable that mosque education has not been able to renew itself and move forward with the times to include the necessary subjects of the day in its curriculum. As a result, it has weakened in comparison to modern education. Hujra education has not been able to renew itself to develop culture and politics at a level appropriate for its time.

The Strengths of Modern Education

1. Education for Everyone: Modern education and schools attracted many students, while in the old religious system, usually only one person in a village became a Faqih. In the new system, everyone is required to go to school. This wide approach will change society faster and strongly impact people's lives.

2. Diversity of Educational Methods: In Hujra education, only religious topics and Arabic were taught, but in modern education, a variety of subjects are included. This broader learning greatly helps improve everyday life.

3. Wide Accessibility of Education:

Thousands of students join schools regardless of their understanding level or learning ability. Anyone with a certificate can become a teacher, whether competent or not; those who lack competence in Hujra cannot become a Faqih or teacher.

4. Curriculum Renewal: Modern education continually updates its curriculum and teaching methods, while religious education has limited capacity to adapt.

5. Inclusivity: Modern schools welcome both boys and girls, while Hujra education is mostly reserved for boys, though it is evolving to address everyday needs and keep pace with life's demands.

* **Faqih:** An Islamic scholar specializing in interpreting Islamic law.

The Halabja Massacre: An Enduring Legacy of Chemical Warfare

○ *Editor in Chief*

On March 16, 1988, Iraqi warplanes unleashed chemical weapons on the Kurdish city of Halabja, killing approximately 5,000 civilians and injuring thousands more. This genocidal attack, one of the worst chemical weapons assaults since World War I, created a humanitarian crisis that persists decades later, with missing children, chronic health issues, and psychological trauma still plaguing survivors and their families.

The Day Death Fell from the Sky: A Firsthand Account

The morning of March 16, 1988, began like any other in Halabja, a Kurdish city of about 70,000 inhabitants near the Iranian border. The air was cool and crisp with the promise of spring. Children were preparing for school, shopkeepers opening their stores, and families going about their morning routines. Then, shortly after 11:00 AM, Iraqi warplanes appeared in the sky.

“I remember the sound of the aircraft,” recounts Kamaran Abdullah, who was 12 years old at the time. “We were used to bombings in the area due to the Iran-Iraq war, but this was different. The explosions didn’t sound the same. There was a strange apple-like smell in the air.”



What followed was an orchestrated chemical attack that would last for five hours. Iraqi forces dropped mustard gas and a combination of nerve agents including sarin, tabun, and VX. The attack was methodical—first conventional bombs to break windows and building structures, then chemical weapons to maximize casualties.

“People were running in panic,” says Narmin Othman, another survivor. “I saw people falling, their bodies convulsing. Some were vomiting, others simply dropped dead where they stood. My father tried to wet cloths for us to breathe through, but it was too late for many.”

The chemicals were heavier than air and sank into basements where many residents had taken shelter, turning safe havens into death chambers. Entire families were found later, huddled together in death. Others died in the streets as they attempted to flee, their bodies frozen in time—mothers clutching babies, children holding hands, the elderly collapsed mid-step.

By nightfall, an estimated 5,000 people lay dead. The streets were littered with bodies, many with no visible injuries but contorted faces that spoke of agonizing deaths. Birds had fallen from trees, livestock lay dead in fields, and

even insects had perished. Halabja had become a city of the dead.

Operation Anfal and the Political Context

The Halabja massacre was not an isolated incident but rather the most notorious episode of a larger genocidal campaign known as Operation Anfal. Directed by Ali Hassan al-Majid, infamously known as “Chemical Ali,” this systematic campaign against Iraq’s Kurdish population was authorized by Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime.

Between 1987 and 1989, the Iraqi government sought to crush Kurdish resistance and punish communities suspected of sympathizing with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. Anfal—named after a chapter in the Quran meaning “spoils of war”—involved the destruction of thousands of villages, mass deportations, and indiscriminate killing of civilians.

The timing of the Halabja attack was strategically significant. Kurdish forces, aligned with Iran, had recently gained control of the city. The chemical bombardment served multiple purposes: to punish the Kurds for their alliance with Iran, to demonstrate Iraq’s chemical warfare capabilities as a deterrent, and to eliminate a Kurdish

stronghold.

The international context cannot be ignored. The attack occurred during the final months of the Iran-Iraq War, a brutal eight-year conflict that had claimed over a million lives. Western powers, particularly the United States, had largely backed Iraq as a counterbalance to Iran's post-revolutionary regime. This support included intelligence sharing, economic assistance, and diplomatic cover that emboldened Saddam Hussein's regime.

Perhaps most crucially, Iraq had developed its chemical weapons program with technology and materials sourced from Western companies. German firms had provided equipment for chemical weapons facilities, while precursor chemicals came from companies in the United States, Netherlands, Singapore, and India. This web of international complicity created the conditions that made the Halabja attack possible.

Despite the scale of the atrocity, the international response was muted. Initial reports by some Western media outlets even attempted to blame Iran for the attack, reflecting the geopolitical alignments of the time. It would take years before full recognition of Iraq's culpability became universal, and de-

cades before any form of justice would be pursued against the perpetrators.

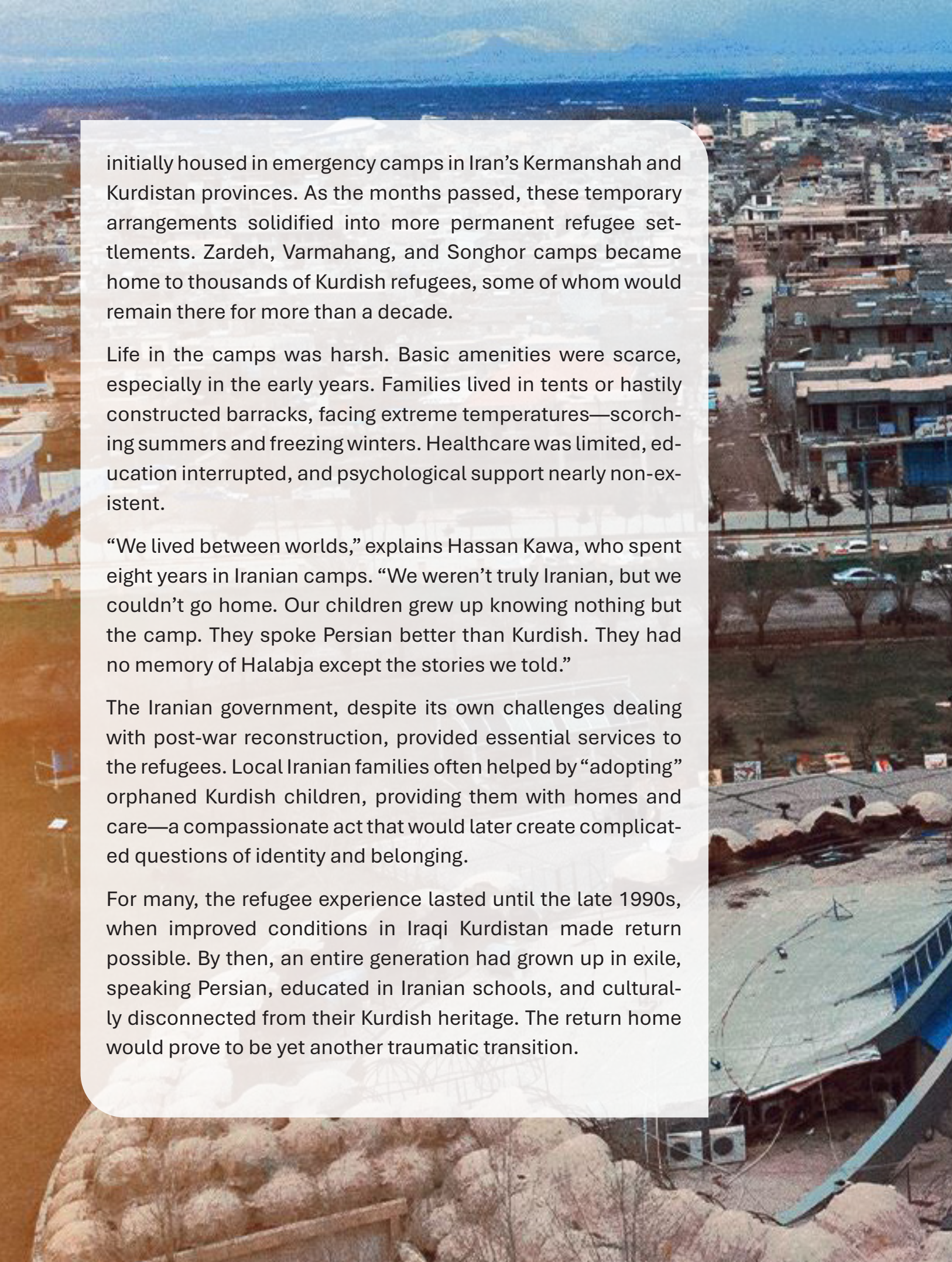
Exodus: The Flight to Iran and Life in Refugee Camps

In the immediate aftermath of the chemical attack, those who survived faced a desperate situation. With no immediate international assistance and fearing further attacks, tens of thousands fled toward the Iranian border, just 12 kilometers east of Halabja.

"We walked for hours, carrying nothing but the clothes on our backs," remembers Fatima Mahmoud, who was pregnant when she fled. "People were dying along the way, still suffering from the chemicals. We crossed mountains without food or water. Many didn't make it."

Iranian border guards, witnessing the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding, opened the borders. Iranian medical teams were quickly dispatched to the border areas to treat the injured, but they were overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster and the specific challenges of treating chemical weapons victims without proper equipment or training.

Approximately 10,000 survivors were

An aerial photograph of a city, likely in Iran, showing a dense urban area with various buildings and a road. In the background, there are mountains under a clear blue sky. The image is used as a background for the text overlay.

initially housed in emergency camps in Iran's Kermanshah and Kurdistan provinces. As the months passed, these temporary arrangements solidified into more permanent refugee settlements. Zardeh, Varmahang, and Songhor camps became home to thousands of Kurdish refugees, some of whom would remain there for more than a decade.

Life in the camps was harsh. Basic amenities were scarce, especially in the early years. Families lived in tents or hastily constructed barracks, facing extreme temperatures—scorching summers and freezing winters. Healthcare was limited, education interrupted, and psychological support nearly non-existent.

“We lived between worlds,” explains Hassan Kawa, who spent eight years in Iranian camps. “We weren’t truly Iranian, but we couldn’t go home. Our children grew up knowing nothing but the camp. They spoke Persian better than Kurdish. They had no memory of Halabja except the stories we told.”

The Iranian government, despite its own challenges dealing with post-war reconstruction, provided essential services to the refugees. Local Iranian families often helped by “adopting” orphaned Kurdish children, providing them with homes and care—a compassionate act that would later create complicated questions of identity and belonging.

For many, the refugee experience lasted until the late 1990s, when improved conditions in Iraqi Kurdistan made return possible. By then, an entire generation had grown up in exile, speaking Persian, educated in Iranian schools, and culturally disconnected from their Kurdish heritage. The return home would prove to be yet another traumatic transition.



The Missing Children: Separated Families and Ongoing Search

Among the most heart-wrenching legacies of the Halabja massacre is the story of the missing children—hundreds of young survivors separated from their families in the chaos of evacuation and refugee relocation. Many were taken in by Iranian families who found them wandering alone or rescued them from overcrowded hospitals and orphanages.

“I lost my daughter Shilan in the panic,” says Nasreen Hakim, her voice breaking even after decades. “She was only four years old. Someone told me they saw her being picked up by an Iranian soldier. For thirty years, I’ve been searching for her. I still keep her clothes.”

The exact number of missing children remains unknown, with estimates ranging from several hundred to over a thousand. The circumstances of their disappearance vary—some were genuinely orphaned by the attack, others separated from unconscious parents, and some simply lost in the massive exodus.

In Iranian homes, these children were often given new names, new identities, and raised as Iranians. Many adoptive families acted out of genuine compassion, believing the children to be orphans. Others deliberately obscured the children’s origins, fearing they might be taken away.

As relations between Iraq and Iran improved in the 2000s, efforts to locate and reunite these missing children intensified. DNA matching programs were established, and television programs broadcast appeals from searching families. Gradually, reunions began to occur.

Karwan Abdulrahman was eight when he was separated from his family. Raised by an Iranian family in Tehran, he discovered his Kurdish origins when he was 22. “I had dreams in a language I didn’t understand,” he recalls. “When I finally met my biological family in 2010, I couldn’t communicate with them. We needed translators. My mother recognized me by a scar on my elbow.”

These reunions, while joyful, are often complicated by cultural and

linguistic barriers. Children raised in Iran struggle to reintegrate with Kurdish families they barely remember. Many feel caught between two worlds, two families, and two identities.

Most heartbreaking are the families still waiting. In Halabja today, dozens of elderly parents maintain shrines to missing children in their homes—photographs, toys, and clothing preserved for decades in the hope of a reunion that grows less likely with each passing year.

The Persistent Wounds: Long-term Health Effects

The chemical agents used in Halabja—particularly mustard gas and nerve agents—continue to claim victims decades after the attack. Survivors suffer from a constellation of chronic health problems that have transformed the city into an open-air laboratory for studying the long-term effects of chemical warfare.

Dr. Mohammad Ali Mohammadi, who has treated Halabja survivors for over twenty years, explains: “We see respiratory diseases, eye problems, skin conditions, and neuro-

logical disorders that are directly attributable to chemical exposure. The genetic damage is also evident—birth defects among children born to survivors occur at rates far higher than the general population.”

The most common conditions include chronic bronchitis, asthma, pulmonary fibrosis, and other respiratory ailments that make breathing a daily struggle. Eye problems include corneal damage and chronic conjunctivitis, while skin disorders range from persistent rashes to unusual pigmentation and precancerous lesions.

Cancer rates in Halabja have soared in the decades following the attack. Studies indicate incidences of colon, lung, and thyroid cancers at rates 3-5 times higher than comparable populations. Leukemia and lymphoma are particularly prevalent among those who were children during the attack.

“I cannot breathe properly for even one day,” says Aras Hussein, who was exposed to the chemicals as a teenager. “My skin burns when I sweat. My eyes water constantly. Every day I am reminded of what

happened.”

Psychological trauma compounds the physical suffering. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and suicide rates are significantly elevated among survivors. The sound of aircraft overhead can still trigger panic attacks among residents decades later.

Medical care for these specific conditions remains inadequate. Despite international aid efforts and the construction of specialized treatment centers, Halabja’s healthcare infrastructure struggles to meet the needs of survivors. Many must travel to Iran or Europe for specialized treatments, an option available only to those with financial means.

Most troubling is the intergenerational impact. Studies suggest genetic damage from chemical exposure affects not only survivors but their offspring. Children born to survivors show elevated rates of congenital malformations, developmental delays, and susceptibility to certain diseases—a genocide that continues to claim victims who weren’t even born when the attacks

occurred.

Return and Reintegration: The Challenge of Coming Home

When Kurdistan achieved semi-autonomous status in the late 1990s under international protection, many Halabja refugees began returning from Iran. For those who had spent a decade in exile, homecoming proved bittersweet.

The physical city they returned to was a shadow of the one they had fled. Much of Halabja remained in ruins, with limited reconstruction. Infrastructure was minimal, job opportunities scarce, and basic services unreliable. Many families returned to find their homes occupied by others or reduced to rubble.

For children and young adults who had grown up in Iran, the challenges were particularly acute. Language formed the most immediate barrier—many spoke only Persian or heavily accented Kurdish, making them outsiders in their own homeland.

“When I came back, I couldn’t attend school because I couldn’t understand the lessons,” explains Ro-

jin Azad, who returned from Iran at age 14. “The other students called me ‘Ajami’ [foreigner]. I had to start at a much lower grade despite being older. Many of my friends simply gave up.”

Educational systems proved inflexible in accommodating these returning students. Few transitional programs existed to help them adjust linguistically or academically. School dropout rates among returnee children reached alarming levels, creating a generation with limited education and poor job prospects.

Cultural reintegration presented another layer of challenges. Young returnees had absorbed Iranian customs, religious practices, and social norms that sometimes clashed with local Kurdish traditions. Young women who had grown accustomed to certain freedoms in Iran sometimes found themselves restricted by more conservative local practices. Young men struggled to find their place in traditional family structures after years of independence.

Family reunifications, while emo-

tionally powerful, often revealed unbridgeable gaps. Parents and children who had spent formative years apart struggled to connect. Authority structures within families were challenged as returnees brought different expectations about family dynamics.

“My parents were strangers to me,” admits Heval Karim, who returned after twelve years in Iran. “They expected me to be the son they lost, but I had become someone else. It took years before we could truly talk to each other.”

Economic reintegration proved equally difficult. Skills and education acquired in Iran were often not recognized in Kurdistan. Many returnees found themselves unemployable or relegated to menial jobs despite professional qualifications. This economic marginalization contributed to a sense of perpetual displacement—no longer refugees, but not fully integrated either.

Despite these challenges, Halabja has slowly rebuilt. Memorial museums preserve the memory of the massacre, while international recognition has brought resources for

reconstruction. In 2014, the Iraqi government officially recognized the Halabja massacre as genocide, providing victims with some measure of acknowledgment, if not justice.

For many survivors, however, full reintegration remains elusive. They exist in a liminal space—physically present in their homeland but permanently altered by experiences of exile. Their story represents the often-overlooked long tail of atrocity—how a single day of violence creates ripples that continue to disrupt lives for generations.

Conclusion

The Halabja massacre stands alongside Hiroshima and Nagasaki as one of history's most devastating examples of weapons of mass destruction used against civilian populations. While the immediate death toll of approximately 5,000 is horrific enough, the true human cost extends far beyond that day in March 1988.

Physical ailments continue to plague survivors, missing children remain separated from their families, and the psychological scars

have left an indelible mark on an entire community. The experience of displacement—both the physical exodus to Iran and the cultural displacement of return—demonstrates how genocide fractures not just bodies but identities.

As the world continues to grapple with chemical weapons use in more recent conflicts, Halabja serves as a stark reminder of both the immediate and long-term consequences of these prohibited weapons. It stands as testimony to humanity's capacity for cruelty but also resilience—a community that, despite unimaginable suffering, continues to rebuild, remember, and demand recognition of their story.

The children of Halabja—those who died, those who survived, those still missing, and those born into the aftermath—embody both the tragedy of what happened and the ongoing struggle for healing and justice. Their story is not merely historical but contemporary, not simply Kurdish but universal—a reminder that the effects of genocide persist long after the chemical clouds have dissipated.

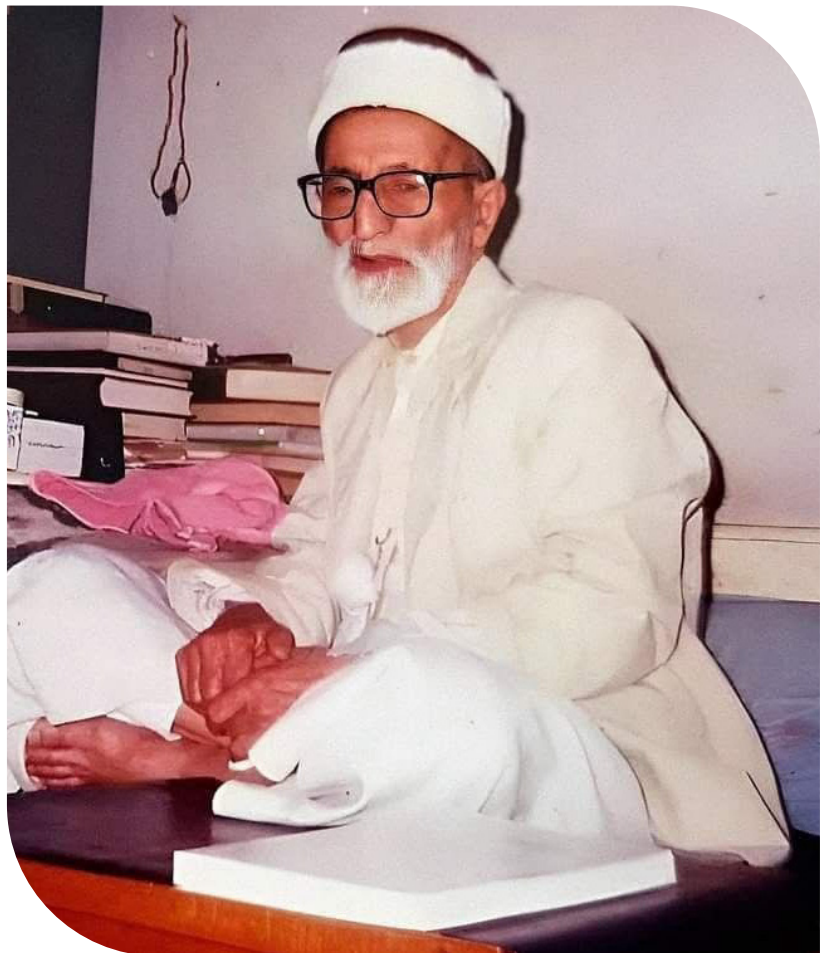
Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis: Contributions to Kurdish Education, Scholarship, and Islamic Sciences

○ Dr. Abdulla Ahmedawaiay

Following the death of Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis, scholars and researchers have explored the life, personality, and various works of this distinguished teacher. Although his contributions are not always highlighted or fully appreciated, they deserve more attention.

Place of Birth of Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis

The exact birthplace of Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis remains uncertain. However, the most widely accepted view is that he



was born in the village of Goeza Kuera in Marivan, Iranian Kurdistan. In his book *Rojgari Zyan (Days of Life)*, page 31, Muderis mentions being sent to school at the age of five due to his father's desire for him to study. He recalls Mullah Abdulwahid, the village mullah, and notes that Abdulwahid received a license (Ejazah) from Biyara in 1331 AH and subsequently became the teacher and imam of Goe-

za Kuera. This provides clear evidence that Muderis was born in this village.

A closer examination of *Rojgari Zyan* and the regions where Muderis lived and studied, especially during his early childhood and middle age in Marivan, including villages such as Bayala, Asrawa, Lanjava, Balk, and Kani Sanan, reveals detailed insights into the region's beauty and characteristics. Muderis extensively discussed Marivan under various aspects, including its water, air, natural conditions, economy, and administration, providing valuable information that reflects his deep connection to the region.

It should be noted that Muderis might not have openly stated his birthplace due to the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein, which targeted scholars and intellectuals. Revealing his true origins could have led to severe consequences for him and his family, as many scholars were persecuted or killed for such disclosures.

Muderis, born in 1898, studied in both Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. He received his mullah's license from the renowned Kurdish scholar Sheikh Omar Ibn al-Qaradaghi in Sulaimani. Throughout his life, he published more than 75 religious, historical, and literary works, including a commentary on

the Qur'an in Kurdish and Arabic. He passed away in 2005, having also analyzed several masterpieces of classical Kurdish poetry.

Muderis and the First Friday Sermon in Kurdish

One of Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis's notable achievements was delivering the Friday sermon in Kurdish for the first time. Prior to this, sermons were given in Arabic, which many listeners did not understand. For twelve years as a jurist and about ten years as a mullah in Kurdistan mosques, religious teachers would deliver sermons in Arabic from a book called Ibn al-Nabat's sermons, which did not cater to the Kurdish-speaking audience.

Shaykh Muderis recounted that during the autumn season, Shaykh 'Ala'uddin (may Allah have mercy on him) visited Shaways and Baways for a month. He later wrote a letter instructing that Friday sermons be delivered in Kurdish to ensure that Muslims could understand their meaning. This practice was established in Halabja and other areas.

It is noteworthy that Sheikh Aladdin, after endorsing this historic decision with his seal and signature, emphasized its importance. Although the honor of this decision is attributed to

Sheikh Aladdin, the credit for delivering Friday sermons in Kurdish goes to Sheikh Muderis, particularly in sacred places such as mosques, madrasas, and monasteries.

Personality and Skills of Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis

Genealogy: Sheikh Muderis demonstrated exceptional skill in genealogy. In *Rojgari Zyan*, he meticulously documented the genealogy of numerous Kurdish families, especially scholars. He meticulously traced his own family lineage, including notable names such as Ahmad, Mahmoud, Hassan, Hussein, Ali, Arif, Fathullah, Qadir, and Marf, showcasing his extraordinary genealogical knowledge.

Religious Figures and Cultural Insights:

Mullahs and religious figures in our country have often faced criticism for their indulgence in alcohol and for certain aspects of their personal lives, such as the poems attributed to Sheikh Reza Talabani or various stories. However, it is not Islam itself but rather those with a dry and cowardly disposition who have suppressed such discussions. Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis, who recounted his trip to Baghdad in 1929, said: “We often went to

Baghdad to serve Sheikh Baba Rasul and Mullah Mohammed Qazalji. For entertainment, Mullah Mohammad Qazalji would make us take boats and cross the Tigris River. Indeed, this journey was safer than many districts.”

One day, while we were sitting in a shop buying clothes, a woman came and called out to Sheikh Baba Rasul. He responded in Kurdish: “My sister, my daughter, you are still a little far from me.” My friend Mullah Kamal Amin Gulpi told me: “After 2000, when I was a student at the Sharia College in Baghdad, we used to visit Sheikh Muderis to benefit from his wisdom and often read his poems to him. He enjoyed it immensely. On one occasion, he said: ‘This time, when you return to Hawramabad, bring me a cassette of Osman Hawrami’s songs, including those from Siachemana, Sheikhana, and others.’”

During his time in Baghdad, Sheikh Muderis welcomed all Kurdish people, regardless of their intellectual background, without discrimination. The media from various Kurdish movements, whether national, secular, or Islamic, extensively covered the personality and contributions of this distinguished scholar to acknowledge and secure his place among different communities.

Muderis and the Science of Hadith

Another significant contribution of Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis is the revival of the science of hadith in Kurdistan. This field, which had been neglected and ignored for centuries despite its importance, was revitalized through his efforts. Muderis wrote the book *The Way of the Leader* in Kurdish for the first time, bringing a renewed focus on this sacred science to Kurdistan's classrooms and schools. It is noteworthy that the first scholar to develop this science in Arabic was also of Kurdish origin. In the introduction to his book, Sheikh Muderis states: "Most of this treatise is derived from the book *Sciences of Hadith*, published by Shaykh al-Muhaddith Abu 'Amr 'Uthman, also known as Ibn Salah, who authored numerous works in the science of hadith. This is my own testimony."

Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis and the Promotion of Kurdish Writing Over Arabic

Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis, despite his profound expertise in Arabic and Islamic sciences, is noted for his significant contributions to Kurdish literature. Although Muderis was well-versed in Arabic, as evidenced by his seven-volume work *Mawahib al-Rahman Fi Taf-sir al-Quran* and his commentary on

Rumi's *Al-Fadila* in the book *Al-Was-ila*, he wrote over 45 books in Kurdish compared to about 30 in Arabic.

Had he chosen to write more extensively in Arabic, his works might have reached a broader audience beyond Kurdish borders. Nonetheless, Muderis remained deeply committed to his Kurdish heritage. He played a crucial role in preserving and promoting Kurdish literature, including the works of numerous prominent Kurdish poets. His efforts extended to safeguarding manuscripts of Kurdish scholars and documenting the biographies of hundreds of Kurdish mullahs and scholars, culminating in the publication of two volumes detailing their contributions.

Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis's Method and Program for Islamic Classrooms, Institutes, and Universities in Kurdistan

Since his appointment as a teacher in Biara in the late 1920s, Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis has been deeply committed to establishing an educational program for Kurdish jurists. He worked tirelessly to encourage students and scholars to study local texts within the classrooms of his time.

1. Preserving Kurdish Scholarship: Muderis made significant efforts to

keep alive the names and works of Kurdish scholars. He incorporated many Kurdish texts into his curriculum, teaching his students these works and integrating them into his educational program.

2.Adapting Curriculum to Local Needs: Muderis recognized the importance of books and programs tailored to the Kurdish context. He believed that incorporating local texts into the curriculum would better align with Kurdish intellectual traditions and protect students from ideas that might not suit the Kurdish context.

Muderis's method and program for Kurdistan's schools covered all twelve traditional Islamic sciences, which he detailed in the final pages of his book, *Al-Wardah al-Anbariya fi Sira Hazra Khair al-Bariya*.

• **First Science: Tafsir (Exegesis):** Muderis included the study of *Nasafi's Commentary* (Madarik al-Tanzil wa Haqa'iq al-Tawil) and *Tafsir al-Bayzawi* (Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Tawil). He also authored *Tafsir Nami* in seven volumes and a Kurdish summary of it. Additionally, he wrote *Nuri Qur'an*, a text on the sciences of the Holy Qur'an, which is related to Tafsir.

• **Second Science: Hadith:** In this

field, Muderis emphasized the study and research of hadith literature broadly, without focusing on any specific books. His works on hadith included two volumes titled *Sources of Religion*. For higher education, he considered all major hadith sources, from Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim to Riyadh al-Saliheen and others.

• **Third Science: Sarf (Morphology):** Muderis's program covered the study of *Tasrifi Zanjani*, which he explained and published in Kurdish, and *Clear Sarf*, a book of his own. He also assigned *Tasrif* by Mullah Ali Shinoyi for reading.

• **Fourth Science: Grammar:** His program included the study of *Awami Jurjani*, *Al-Muqaddamah al-Ajrumiyah*, *Muftah al-Adab* (a work of his own), *Qatr al-Nadi*, *Commentary of Mullah Jami*, *Shuzur al-Dhahab*, and *Al-Mawahib al-Hamidah*. He also provided a commentary on *Al-Manzuma al-Faridah* (Alfiyah al-Imam al-Siw) in two volumes.

• **Fifth Science: Rhetoric (Balagha):** Muderis's program included the study of *Mukhtasar al-Ma'ani* and *Sharh al-Mutawwal* by Sa'addin Taftazani. He also authored *Al-Khulasah fi al-Wad' wa al-Bayan* and *Al-Tibyan fi al-Wad' wa al-Bayan*.

• **Sixth Science: Logic:** His curriculum featured the study of *Al-Miftah*, *Al-Waraqat*, *Al-Azizah*, and *Al-Wujjah*, all authored by Shaykh Mudarris, as well as works by Taftazani, Hashiya Abdullah Yazdi, Sharh Shamsiya, and Galanbawi Burhan.

• **Seventh Science: Hadith:** In this area, Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis emphasized the study of works by Al-Hafiz al-Iraqi and Ibn Salah al-Sharazuri's *Muqadimah*. His efforts represented a revival of the science of hadith in Kurdistan, a field that had been neglected for centuries despite its importance. Muderis's work included writing the first Kurdish book on hadith, marking a significant contribution to this field. It is noteworthy that the science of hadith was initially developed by a Kurdish scholar, Peshawar (Ibn Salah of Sharazouri), who systematically compiled and organized the scattered elements of this science into a cohesive framework, achieving a historic milestone in the field.

• **Eighth Science: Islamic Belief:** In this section, he referenced books such as *Sharh al-Aqa'id* by Taftazani, along with commentaries by Khayali and Abdul Hakim, and works like *Sharh al-Mawaqif* and *Taqreeb al-Maram fi Sharh Tahrir al-Kalam* by Mullah Abdul

Qadir Takhti Sana'i – Muhajir. He also included *Al-Wasilah*, which is Sheikh Muderis's own interpretation of Rumi's poem *Al-Fadhilah*, as well as books like *Noor al-Islam*, *Noor al-Iman*, *Guidance of Names*, and *Jawahir al-Kalam fi Aqa'id Ahl al-Islam*. The latter is an excellent book on Islamic beliefs, composed and interpreted by Muderis himself, published in 1956.

• **Eighth Science: Islamic Belief:** In this area, Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis referred to several important works, including Taftazani's *Sharh al-Aqa'id* with annotations by Khayali and Abdul Hakim, *Sharh al-Mawaqif*, and *Taqrib al-Maram fi Sharh Tahdhib al-Kalam* by Mullah Abdul Qadir Takhti Sana'i – Muhajir. He also highlighted his own interpretation of Rumi's *Al-Fazilah* in his book *Al-Wasilah*. Additional recommended readings include *Noor al-Islam*, *Noor al-Iman*, *Guidance of Names*, and *Jawahir al-Kalam fi Aqa'id Ahl al-Islam*. The latter, published in 1956, is a notable work of beliefs authored and interpreted by Muderis himself.

• **Ninth Science: Islamic Shari'ah:** In this field, Muderis guided the study and research of Imam Shafi'i's jurisprudence through texts such as *Mughni al-Muhtaj*, *Tuhfat al-Muhtaj*, and *Niha-*

yat al-Muhtaj, among others. He assembled prominent Kurdish scholars and offered his own fatwas. Muderis also authored a book on Islamic law in Kurdish, praised by Hemni Shair about forty years ago. The book was lauded as a masterful and intense work, and even after forty years, it remains unparalleled in Kurdish literature on Imam Shafi'i's jurisprudence.

• **Tenth Science: Principles of Jurisprudence:** Muderis's curriculum included the study of *Jama' al-Jawam*, *Lub al-Asul*, and *Mukhtar al-Muntahi* by Ibn Hajib al-Mustafi Ghazali. He also authored *Safwat al-Lali*, which delves into the principles of jurisprudence.

• **Eleventh Science: The Life of the Prophet (pbuh) and Islamic History:** In this area, Muderis emphasized the study of the Prophet Muhammad's biography and Islamic history. He particularly recommended Ibn Khalqan's history and his own work, *Al-Ma'una fi Khidmat al-'Ilm wa al-Din*, which covers the history and biographies of scholars and notable mullahs from Kurdistan.

• **Twelfth Science: Mathematics, Geography, and Modern Sciences:** Muderis also encouraged the study of ancient texts such as *Tashrih al-Aflak* and

its commentary, *Idrak fi Sharh Tashrih al-Aflak* by Mullah Hussein Pishderi. He advocated for the inclusion of modern sciences in the curriculum, emphasizing the need to study and stay abreast of advancements in mathematics, astronomy, geography, chemistry, physics, computer science, and even English.

Dr. Mustafa Zalmi and Abdul Fattah Abu Ghudda's Views on Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis

Dr. Mustafa Zalmi frequently praises Sheikh Muderis's expertise and knowledge in his memoirs. He recounts an instance when he was asked to write an article about Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis for a magazine. To gather information for the article, Zalmi visited Muderis and asked him about his scholarly approach:

"I asked, 'Master, you are well-versed in Islamic sciences. Why do you not provide answers based on your own ijtihad, but rather adhere to the names of Shafi'i, Hanafi, or Maliki schools?' I explained that Imam Shafi'i had specialized in just four sciences at that time: the Qur'an, Hadith, principles of jurisprudence, and rhetoric, as other sciences had not yet been translated into Arabic. You have taught these sub-

jects for over seventy years, and countless students have studied under you and received your permission. Why don't you engage in ijtihad yourself, as they did?' He replied, 'You are right! But do you know what some people would say if I did that?'"

Many teachers have considered Zalmi's praise of Muderis to be exaggerated. However, during the discussion of my doctoral thesis, Sheikh Abdul Fattah Abu Ghudda, a prominent hadith scholar, remarked that Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis was even more knowledgeable in his time.

Conclusion

1.This brief research confirms that Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis was born in the village of Gozakuera in the Marivan region of East Kurdistan, and not in any other village, a detail which has been clarified according to historical needs.

2.Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis demonstrated a profound commitment not only to his religion but also to the Kurdish language, literature, and his country. This dedication is evident in the Kurdish works he authored.

3.Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis was the first Kurdish mullah to deliver Friday

sermons in Kurdish at a major religious and academic center, such as the Bi-ara monastery.

4.Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis created specialized and independent texts on the twelve traditional sciences of the Kurdish region, ensuring that Kurdish scholars could study these subjects without reliance on foreign Kurdish interpretations.

5.Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis maintained an open-minded religious perspective and fostered amicable relationships with all classes and ideologies within the Kurdish community.

6.Just as the esteemed scholar Ibn Salah of Sharazoor is credited with founding the science of hadith in Arabic, Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis is recognized as the pioneer of hadith studies in Kurdish.

7.The high praise from contemporary scholar Dr. Mustafa Zalmi regarding Mullah Abdulkarim Muderis's scholarly achievements underscores the extraordinary nature of his knowledge, which was a primary factor in his esteemed position.

Uncovering Shanidar Cave in Kurdistan: A Comprehensive Guide to the Latest Archaeological Find

○ *The Future Magazine*

Recent archaeological excavations at Abric Pizarro in Spain and Shanidar Cave in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have uncovered groundbreaking insights into Neanderthal behavior, challenging long-standing perceptions of these ancient humans. At Abric Pizarro, researchers found evidence of a diverse diet and sophisticated tool-making skills, while the discovery of the 75,000-year-old Neanderthal woman, Shanidar Z, has ignited discussions on Neanderthal burial practices and their possible cultural significance. These findings are reshaping our understanding of Neanderthal life and their eventual disappearance around 40,000 years ago.

A New Look at Neanderthal Behavior at Abric Pizarro

The archaeological site of Abric Pizarro, nestled in the southern Pyrenees of Spain, has revealed surprising details about Neanderthal life, challenging previous assumptions. This site, dating back between 100,000 to 65,000 years ago, offers a rare glimpse into the Middle Paleolithic period, specifically during the Marine Isotope Stage 4 (MIS 4). Researchers from the Australian National University (ANU) have discovered a treasure trove of artifacts, including stone tools and animal bones, providing significant data on how Neanderthals adapted to their environment.

Contrary to the outdated stereotype of Neanderthals as slow-moving, primitive beings, the evidence from Abric Pizarro suggests they were highly adaptable and



resourceful. Dr. Sofia Samper Carro, the lead archaeologist on the project, explains that Neanderthals were not only resilient in harsh climatic conditions but also adept at exploiting their surroundings. The variety of tools and the diversity in diet found at the site indicate a level of sophistication previously underestimated.

One of the most striking discoveries at Abric Pizarro is the evidence of Neanderthal dietary flexibility. The animal bones found at the site reveal that Neanderthals hunted a range of animals, from large game like red deer and bison to smaller prey such as freshwater turtles and rabbits. The presence of cut marks on the bones provides direct evidence of their hunting and processing skills, showcasing their ability to plan and adapt to different food sources. This challenges the widely held belief that Neanderthals primarily hunted large mammals and suggests they had a more varied diet than previously thought.

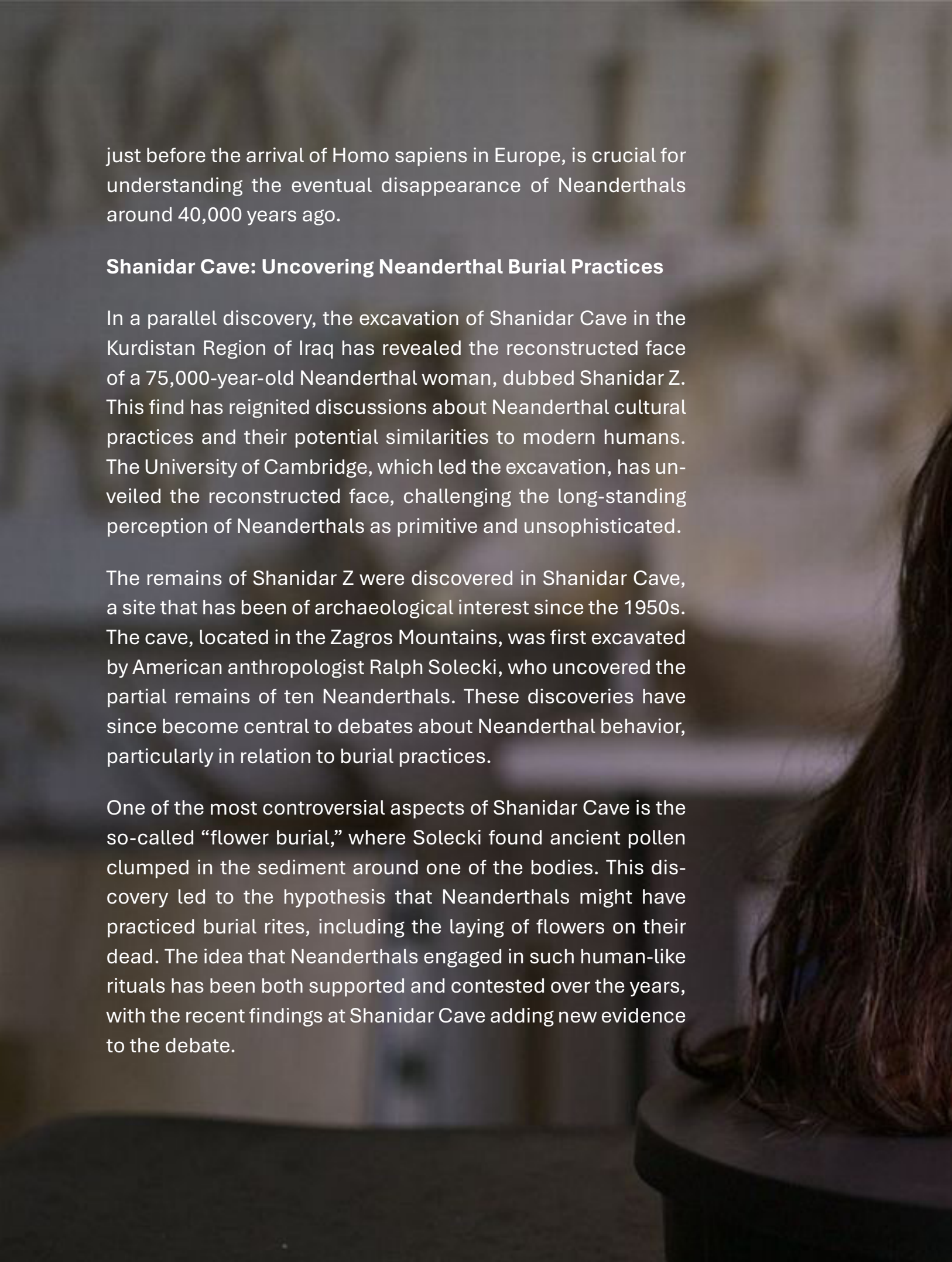
Sophisticated Tool Use and Environmental Adaptation

The stone tools uncovered at Abric Pizarro further emphasize the Neanderthals' ability to adapt to their environment. The tools exhibit a range of

types and uses, indicating that Neanderthals were capable of making and using different tools depending on the available resources. This versatility in tool-making challenges the notion that Neanderthals were less capable than modern humans in utilizing their environment to its full potential.

The precise excavation techniques employed at Abric Pizarro have allowed researchers to gather exceptionally accurate data. Each artifact, whether stone tools, bones, or hearths, is meticulously plotted in 3D, providing a detailed record of the site. This approach not only helps in understanding how Neanderthals lived but also offers insights into how long they stayed in a particular area. By analyzing the spatial relationships between different types of artifacts, the researchers can piece together the daily lives of Neanderthals, from their hunting strategies to their settlement patterns.

The research conducted at Abric Pizarro is part of a broader effort to understand Neanderthal behavior across Europe. The findings from this site are particularly significant because they provide evidence of how Neanderthals lived in a region where modern humans had not yet arrived. This period,



just before the arrival of Homo sapiens in Europe, is crucial for understanding the eventual disappearance of Neanderthals around 40,000 years ago.

Shanidar Cave: Uncovering Neanderthal Burial Practices

In a parallel discovery, the excavation of Shanidar Cave in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has revealed the reconstructed face of a 75,000-year-old Neanderthal woman, dubbed Shanidar Z. This find has reignited discussions about Neanderthal cultural practices and their potential similarities to modern humans. The University of Cambridge, which led the excavation, has unveiled the reconstructed face, challenging the long-standing perception of Neanderthals as primitive and unsophisticated.

The remains of Shanidar Z were discovered in Shanidar Cave, a site that has been of archaeological interest since the 1950s. The cave, located in the Zagros Mountains, was first excavated by American anthropologist Ralph Solecki, who uncovered the partial remains of ten Neanderthals. These discoveries have since become central to debates about Neanderthal behavior, particularly in relation to burial practices.

One of the most controversial aspects of Shanidar Cave is the so-called “flower burial,” where Solecki found ancient pollen clumped in the sediment around one of the bodies. This discovery led to the hypothesis that Neanderthals might have practiced burial rites, including the laying of flowers on their dead. The idea that Neanderthals engaged in such human-like rituals has been both supported and contested over the years, with the recent findings at Shanidar Cave adding new evidence to the debate.



Reconstructing Shanidar Z: New Technologies, New Insights

The reconstruction of Shanidar Z's face was made possible through advanced scientific techniques, including CT scanning and 3D modeling. The University of Cambridge team pieced together the skull, which was found flattened by thousands of years of sediment. This meticulous work has allowed researchers to create a digital reconstruction of Shanidar Z, offering a vivid glimpse into what Neanderthals might have looked like.

The reconstruction has also provided new insights into the physical characteristics of Neanderthals. Shanidar Z was an older adult, with teeth worn down from years of use. The skull's petrous bone, a dense part of the skull behind the ear, was found to be intact, preserving potential ancient DNA. This discovery is particularly exciting because it could provide genetic data from a region where Neanderthal DNA is rare, offering new information on their relationship with modern humans.

The potential for extracting ancient

DNA from Shanidar Z could help answer some of the lingering questions about Neanderthal extinction. While theories range from competition with modern humans to climate change, having genetic data from Neanderthals in Southwest Asia could shed light on the role interbreeding played in their disappearance. It is already known that all non-African humans carry a small percentage of Neanderthal DNA, and new evidence could reveal more about how these interactions occurred.

The Cultural Significance of Shanidar Cave

The significance of Shanidar Cave extends beyond its archaeological value; it holds cultural importance for the Kurdish people and has the potential to become a UNESCO World Heritage site. Graeme Barker, a professor of archaeology at the University of Cambridge, emphasizes that the discovery of Shanidar Z has brought renewed attention to the deep heritage of the Kurdish region. Barker and his team hope that their findings will support the case for Shanidar Cave to be recognized as a world heritage site, highlighting

its importance not just to the scientific community but also to the local population.

The excavations at Shanidar Cave are part of a broader effort to understand Neanderthal behavior and their eventual extinction. By reopening the trenches first excavated by Solecki, the team has been able to gather new evidence that was previously unattainable due to the limitations of mid-20th-century technology. The discovery of Shanidar Z, along with the new data collected from the site, is helping to paint a more nuanced picture of Neanderthal life.

Redefining Our Understanding of Neanderthals

The discoveries at Abric Pizarro and Shanidar Cave are reshaping our understanding of Neanderthals, challenging the long-held view of them as primitive and unsophisticated. The evidence of dietary flexibility, sophisticated tool use, and potential burial practices suggests that Neanderthals were far more similar to modern humans than previously thought. These findings not only pro-

vide new insights into Neanderthal behavior but also raise important questions about their interactions with early Homo sapiens and their eventual disappearance.

As researchers continue to analyze the data from these sites, our understanding of Neanderthals is likely to evolve further. The work being done at Abric Pizarro and Shanidar Cave is not just about uncovering the past; it is about redefining what it means to be human and understanding the complex history of our ancestors. The meticulous excavation techniques and advanced technologies used in these studies are opening new doors to the past, offering a deeper and more nuanced view of Neanderthal life.

These findings remind us that the story of human evolution is far from complete. With each new discovery, we come closer to understanding the rich and complex history of our species, and the role that Neanderthals played in shaping it.

The Future

Submission Guidelines

The Future is a quarterly policy magazine published by the Center for Future Studies (CFS), focusing on analytical perspectives on Kurdish affairs and the political dynamics of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. We seek thoughtful, forward-looking policy papers that offer deep insights while remaining accessible to a broad audience of decision-makers and engaged citizens.

Article Requirements

Topics

We welcome submissions that analyze current and emerging issues related to:

- Kurdish political, economic, and social developments.
- Regional dynamics in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria with relevance to Kurdish affairs.
- Security challenges and strategic considerations.
- Governance and institutional development.
- Economic policies and opportunities.
- Cultural and identity politics.
- International relations affecting the Kurdish regions.

Format

- Length: 2,500-3,000 words.
- Language: English (clear, concise, and accessible to non-academic readers).
- Style: Analytical rather than purely descriptive, with an emphasis on policy implications.
- Originality: Content must be exclusive to The Future and not previously published elsewhere.

Submission Process

Initial Pitch

Submit a 250-word proposal that includes:

- Working title.
- Central thesis and key arguments.
- Policy relevance and significance.

- Methodology and sources (if applicable).
- Your expertise on the topic.

Full Submissions

If your pitch is accepted, your final submission should include:

- Complete manuscript (properly formatted and proofread).
- 2-3 sentence author biography.
- Professional headshot.

Required Elements

All submissions must include:

- Clear thesis statement and policy recommendations.
- Evidence-based analysis with proper citations.
- References to all facts and data with hyperlinks to credible sources.
- If using data, provide raw data in Excel format with proper attribution.
- At least one original insight or perspective not commonly found in mainstream analysis.

Editorial Standards

- Factual accuracy is paramount; all claims must be verifiable.
- Analysis should be balanced and nuanced, avoiding partisan rhetoric.
- Forward-looking perspectives are encouraged, with attention to future implications.
- Avoid slander, defamation, and unsubstantiated allegations.
- Citations should follow Chicago Manual of Style format.

Visual Elements

We encourage authors to suggest:

- Infographics that illustrate key points.
- Maps relevant to the analysis.
- Charts or graphs that present data effectively.
- High-quality images (with proper permissions/credits).

Review Process

- Initial review: 2-3 weeks from submission.
- If accepted: Editorial feedback provided with revision requests.
- Final review: 1-2 weeks after receiving revisions.
- Publication: In the next available quarterly issue.

Contact Information

Submit your pitches via email to: editor@kfuture.media

Uncovering Shanidar Cave in Kurdistan Region;
A Comprehensive Guide to the Latest Archaeological Findings



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