


Strategies and Behavioral Patterns of Iraqi Kurdistan in the Iran-Israel Confrontation

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Abstract

Iraqi Kurdistan has adopted an independent foreign policy from the Iraqi central government in the past two decades. This foreign policy is based on a different model and strategy that aims at independence. In this regard, considering the importance and determinant nature of Iran's regional policy in the face of regional developments such as the disintegration of neighboring countries along with Tehran's position on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil is leveraging a strategic model of balance of threat towards the confrontation between Tehran and Tel Aviv. Accordingly, the present study seeks to explain why and how this strategy is adopted by the Iraqi Kurdistan towards the confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist regime. Therefore, the main question is, "What is the rationale for Iraqi Kurdistan to understand the Iranian threat?" The hypothesis is that due to its historical components, different organizational and social identities, differences in power levels, and personal factors (mindsets of the leaders), the Iraqi Kurdistan sees the Islamic Republic of Iran as an obstacle in the way of realization of its independence. Therefore, Iraqi Kurdistan, in the Zionism-Iranian confrontation, pursues a unique strategy based on the balance of threats. This essay is an analytical-explanatory study that has been done using a combination of theoretical frameworks of balance of threat and constructivism. Furthermore, the research method in this essay is based on trend analysis.

Keywords: Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, Israeli regime, strategy, balance of threat.

Introduction

In recent decades, the confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist regime has become one of the components affecting relations between Iran and its neighbors. Accordingly, one of the relations that the Zionist regime has tried to penetrate into is the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan region. An examination of the relationship between the Kurds and Zionism reveals the historical background of their ties. However, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent domestic developments in Iraq, as well as under the influence of other regional and international developments, new relations were formed between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Zionist regime. The evolution of such new bilateral relations was influenced by some regional and international factors, one of which was certainly the calculations of the two sides regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The issue of Kurdish identity, on the other hand, is one of the most complicated identity issues in Southwest Asia. The ethnic dispersion of the Kurds in at least four countries-including Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran-on the one hand and their historic efforts to form an independent state, on the other, have created opportunistic policies for international powers and other regional actors to exploit the Kurdish issue in their rivalries with the countries involved. This has given the Kurds a special position in the conflicts in Southwest Asia. In this regard, the Kurds have taken advantage of this special position to add to the complexity of the region.

At present, among the four main countries comprising the Kurdish population, only Iran does not face a dire problem of Kurdish separatism. In other words, although Ankara has been able to prevent the secession of the Kurdish-populated regions of Turkey in various ways, the Kurdish issue is still the most critical domestic challenge in the country. It should be noted that the weakening of the central governments of Iraq and Syria as a result of the rise of ISIS in the past years has significantly increased the dynamism of their respective Kurdish populations.

In Iraq, with the formation of a federal system of governance, the Kurds have relatively more autonomy and, by adopting an independent foreign policy, seem to be pursuing specific Kurdish historical goals. Collaborating with the world powers, including the United States, Russia, and even Europe, using the potential of the Zionist regime and increasing its domestic military capabilities, are the key ingredients of Iraqi Kurdistan's behavior in order to make use of the existing conditions to reach its historical goals.

The conflicting relationship of the Iraqi Kurdistan with Iran, on the one hand, and the Zionist regime, on the other, can be examined in several ways:

- 1- What are the reasons and motives of the Iraqi Kurdistan for establishing closer relations with Iran's regional rivals?
- 2- What components have shaped the perception of the Iraqi Kurdistan about the threat posed by Iran?
- 3- What strategic model does the Iraqi Kurdistan use to take advantage of the confrontation between the Islamic Republic and the Zionist regime?
- 4- What can be the maximum amount of Iraqi Kurdistan's exploitation of the capacities of the Zionist regime against Iran?

This research is based on several assumptions: First, the existence of a sense of Iranian threat in the worldview of the Kurdish leaders has led to the expansion of Kurdish-Zionism relations. Secondly, the political influence and financial capital of the Zionist lobby can serve the goal of Kurdish independence. At the same time, this relationship can serve the anti-Iranian goals of Tel Aviv. Therefore, the type of interaction between the Zionist regime and the Kurdish issue, along with the regional goals of Tel Aviv, will have a significant impact on the nature of Tehran's management of the Kurdish issue.

Based on the examinable aspects of Erbil's contradictory relations with Tehran and Tel Aviv, this study focuses on the basic question of what components shape the perception of the Iraqi Kurdistan towards the existence of an Iranian threat. The hypothesis is that the Iraqi Kurdistan, due to its historical components, different organizational and social identities, differences in power levels, and personal factors (perception of leaders), considers Iran as an obstacle on the way to its independence. Hence, it seeks to balance the Iranian threat through the Zionist regime. By combining the theoretical framework of constructivism and the balance of threat, this essay is analytical-explanatory and tries to explain the components affecting the foreign policy of Iraqi Kurdistan and its behavioral and strategic pattern amid the confrontation between Iran and the Zionist regime.

1. Theoretical Framework

The unusual and growing relationship of the Iraqi Kurdistan region with the Zionist regime, despite its proximity to the Islamic Republic of Iran, suggests its use of a balance of power strategy in a simultaneous relationship with Tehran and Tel Aviv. This strategy

can be explained in the framework of the theory of balance of threat. But understanding exactly why the Kurdish region feels threatened by Iran requires careful consideration of the intersubjective components through the lense of constructivist theory:

1- Following the Cold War and the limitations of the balance of power theory in explaining states' power-seeking behavior, Stephen Walt, a neo-realist theorist, introduced a significant shift in focus from power to threat, thereby opening a new avenue for the scientific analysis of states' foreign policies. Walt argued that the concept of threat possesses greater explanatory power in elucidating the proactive and reactive behaviors of international actors in their pursuit of power and engagement in confrontations. The primary propositions that underpinned Walt's shift from power to threat are:

- Small states also engage in balancing behavior.
- States perceive the power of other actors as a potential threat to their security (Walt, 1987).

These propositions enhanced the theory's applicability, making it more inclusive and relevant to a broader range of global actors.

Another difference between the balance of power and the balance of threat is that the latter relies more on intersubjective ideas and components such as threat perception and aggressive intentions. Walt, however, seeks to design his complex understanding of balancing in a way that is less in conflict with the neo-realism; in this line, he considers the theory of balance of power to be incomplete. According to Stephen Walt's theory of balance of threat, small actors, unlike powerful actors, turn to bandwagoning and alliance making in order to provide themselves with security. In other words, they do not see themselves as able as great powers to pursue balancing strategy. Walt sees no contradiction between this strategy and the principle of self-help.

According to Walt's theory, a number of parameters, such as power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions, influence the action of governments for balancing a threat. In this view, the bilateral relationship between geographical distance and feeling a threat can be described as an inverse proportion. But there is a linear relationship between military power and feeling a threat. In other words, from the perspective of a small state, the shorter the geographical distance of a stronger power, the greater the threat (Walt, 2005).

2- Analyzing the role of intersubjective features on the threat feeling: The emphasis of balance of threat theory on subjective

factors, especially leaders' perception of threat, brings this theory closer to theories such as constructivism and neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism, with its sub-branches of aggressive realism and defensive realism, is also able to explain the reasons for the alliance formation between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Zionist regime in order to balance Iran; furthermore, constructivism is another theory in this study that helps to understand the development of different perceptions of the Kurdish leaders towards the Zionism-Iranian confrontation.

The use of constructivism provides a conceptual-theoretical understanding of the different roles of the social and organizational identity of Iraqi Kurdistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Zionist regime. Indeed, it is possible to cite, with reference to the components emphasized by constructivist theory on international relations, why Iraqi Kurdistan is concerned about the existence of aggressive intentions in Iran and feels threatened by this country, while Erbil feels no similar understanding from the Zionist regime at the same time.

In the constructivist analysis of foreign policy, attention is paid to the role of identity in actors' definitions of "self" and "other"; it can be said that these definitions form peace and hostility. According to constructivists, the ideas of "self" and "other" are formed in the social context; in other words, in the pre-interaction state, there is no knowledge of "self" or "other" (Mercer, 1995, p. 325).

According to the constructivist theory, in addition to identity, attention is also paid to the interaction between history, geography, culture, and leaders in shaping the social and organizational identity of the actors and, consequently, foreign policy. From the constructivist point of view, foreign policy behavior is the outcome of the interaction between organizational identity (domestic level) and social identity (international level) (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998, p. 265). In fact, foreign policy actions and reactions are largely subject to the cognition, understanding, and expectation that each actor has of himself as a special identity at home and abroad. But at the same time, historical trends also cause actors to have certain perceptions of their relationships with others, which may be completely unrealistic. Alexander Wendt believes that states construct each other as enemies, rivals, or partners and act according to each other's expectations (Wendt, 1999). The combination of the theoretical framework of constructivism and balance of threat explains the factors influencing the formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's foreign policy.

2. The Foreign Policy of Iraqi Kurdistan and Its Developmental Identity

The Kurdish regions have undergone many changes over the past century, but in no period has the Kurdish issue been as influential in the geopolitical and security dynamics throughout Southwest Asia as in recent years. However, what has so far delayed the formation of a Kurdish state in the region is that although the Kurds make up a significant portion of the region's population, because of another important identity component, they are unable to form an organizational identity. Whether the Kurds have a great deal of divergence in leadership, ideology, and methodology, or whether Kurdish movements in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey follow different paths to independence and recruitment are of secondary importance.

For the past one hundred years, the atmosphere in the Iraqi Kurdistan region has been such that the greatest motivation, readiness, and desire to create a formal, separate, and independent Kurdish political entity has been in the minds of the political parties of that region, but the same organizational identity formed after gaining autonomy cannot still be developed into an independent state because Iraqi Kurdistan is still not able to shape its social identity.

3. The Foreign Policy of Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraqi Kurdistan's foreign policy can be broadly categorized into two distinct phases: before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, given the significant influence of key regional developments following Saddam's fall on shaping the state identity of the Kurdistan Region, a more nuanced analysis divides Iraqi Kurdistan's foreign policy into four distinct periods:

3-1. Prior to the Fall of Sadam

Until 2003 and the fall of Saddam, in the political and security dilemma and under pressure from the then Baghdad government, the Iraqi Kurds were known as nothing but a mere non-political ethnic actor. Therefore, the group's asymmetric foreign relations with foreign actors were mainly aimed at gaining political legitimacy, but those efforts were always unsuccessful and were mostly abused by regional and international powers. The last and most important opportunity for Iraqi Kurdistan before the fall of Saddam dates back to the second World War, which provided a good platform for the Kurds to take action. Therefore, taking advantage of the chaotic situation in the region and with the support of the Soviet Union and Britain, on July 22, 1946, the Republic of

Mahabad was established with the aim of realizing the dream of a great and independent Kurdistan. The move, led by Ghazi Mohammad and Mullah Mustafa Barzani, ultimately failed under an Iran-Soviet agreement (Zoghi, 1988, p. 262).

3-2. After the Fall of Saddam

The official foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region was formed after the US invasion of Iraq. Kurdish forces participated in the US war against the Ba'athist government. Subsequently, after the formation of a new government in Iraq and the drafting of the Iraqi constitution in 2005 and the establishment of a federal system of governance in the country, the Kurds gained more independence than before thanks to gaining the key ministries with American support. Iraqi Kurdistan began to shape independent foreign relations with other regional and trans-regional government actors (Rajabi, 2019, p. 31).

3-3. Rise of ISIL

The emergence of the ISIL terrorist group and the subsequent weakening of the central governments of both Iraq and Syria were like a historic opportunity for the Kurds-especially the Iraqi Kurdistan region-to approach the goal of independence by expanding its territory and increasing its powers. At this time, the Kurds had a vague and multi-layered foreign policy. The Kurds, on the one hand, with the initial passivity against ISIS, went to expect the brink of the fall of Erbil and, on the other hand, introduced themselves as the key players in the war on terrorism to attract the help of regional actors such as Iran on the one hand and Western countries on the other. The increase in opportunities and privileges of the Iraqi Kurdistan region during the war against ISIL and the expansion of its foreign relations were so significant that scenarios were raised about possible Kurdish cooperation with ISIL (Mostafavi Ardebil & Others, 2020, pp. 162-163).

3-4. After the End of the War with ISIS

The expansion of official relations between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Israeli regime can be considered one of Erbil's opportunities since the war with ISIS. The weakness of the Iraqi government has led to the expansion of Iraqi Kurdistan's regional relations with international powers and regional actors such as the Zionist regime. The domination of the Kurdistan over Kirkuk, the increase in oil revenues, and the increase in the demand for independence have leveraged the region's pressure on Baghdad, and as a result, the

foreign policy of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has become more independent and even expanded to include actors in conflict with Baghdad.

4. The Evolution of Organizational Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan

Basically, the title of Iraqi Kurdistan also reflects the existence of an ethnic identity basis for this structure. Culture, language, centralized geography, and even the existence of natural resources such as oil in this region can be considered as the advantages of the Kurdistan region to form an independent identity. The Barzani family, leading the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, has a long family history of fighting for Kurdish independence since the 1930s, and Masoud Barzani appears to have made every effort to bring the case to a positive outcome during his political and personal life (Khosravi & Asadi, 2019, p. 94).

Although there are serious differences between the various Kurdish political parties in Iraq with their nationalist, leftist, Islamist, and Social Democratic approaches on various issues and interests, there is still a consensus on the need to dismantle the Sykes-Picot legacy and establish an independent Kurdish state in Iraq; therefore, if there are some differences, they are related to methods, not goals (Barzani: My plan is to change the Sykes-Picot agreement, 2014).

The Kurds consider all the aspects of their social structure—including ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and racial—to be different from those of the Arabs'. After the US invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, followed by the formation of a new Iraqi governmental structure and the adoption of a constitution that recognized federalism to run the country, the Kurds, with American support, gained more autonomy than before. In addition to promoting their political role at the national level, they were able to gain important political positions in the political structure of Iraq (Rajabi, 2019: 32). Thus, the role of Kurdish identity increased not only in the political and social structure of the Kurdistan region but also in the entirety of the new Iraqi state.

5. Challenges and Obstacles in Shaping the Social Identity of the Kurdistan Region

During nearly 90- years of struggle for independence, the Kurds have always sought to use external factors to counter the Iraqi central government and advance the goal of independence (Natali, 2005). During the Iraqi constitutional negotiations, the Kurds

worked hard to establish a position of superiority for themselves in the hierarchy of the central government of Iraq, which could also enhance their international prestige. These efforts led to the Kurds' right to have the presidential office for themselves. At the same time, a closer look at Iraq's foreign policy from that date onwards shows that Iraqi presidents have always used part of their political capacity regarding Baghdad's foreign relations on providing benefits and opportunities for the Kurdish region. For example, many foreign officials, especially the United States, have begun their visits to Iraq from the Kurdistan Region in the last two decades. Thus, in all these years, the relations of the Iraqi Kurdistan region with the United States have dramatically expanded, which has ultimately helped to strengthen the foreign relations of the Kurds.

This policy can be considered a hidden and step-by-step Kurdish independence strategy. In fact, one can divide the task of providing more opportunities and benefits for the Iraqi Kurdistan region between the two major ruling parties-the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The Patriotic Union Party is mainly responsible for the foreign relations of the Kurdistan Region with the regional resistance groups, while the Kurdish Democratic Party is responsible for pursuing relations with the opposition faction.

Although Masoud Barzani was born in the Iranian city of Mahabad-when his family sought refuge-and now leads the Iraqi Kurdish nationalist ideology, nonetheless, he is known for his good ties with Turkey and Russia rather than with Iran. Meanwhile, there are ambiguities about the possible cooperation of Barzani and the Zionist regime during the emergence of ISIS in Iraq-an issue that fueled disputes between Iraqi Kurdistan and the PKK. Only a few days after the occupation of the Sinjar and the massacre of thousands of Yazidis by ISIS forces, a spokesman for the PKK's foreign relations department told KurdPress that if the PKK had not intervened, Erbil would have fallen to ISIS (Salehi, 2015).

But in general, with the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 and, more importantly, the emergence of the phenomenon of ISIS, the Kurdish issue in Southwest Asia has found a new opportunity for political maneuvering. By becoming an active and prominent force against ISIS, the Kurds have not only gained a great deal of international recognition but also sought to consolidate their position as a force independent from both the Iraqi and Syrian central governments through establishing regional and extra-regional alliances. They also tried to create irreversible conditions for themselves. In particular, due

to its experience of independent internationally recognized performance, Iraq Kurdistan has now taken advantage of this historic opportunity to hold an independence referendum, which is considered another step forward towards secession.

However, despite the efforts of the Iraqi Kurds in recent years to improve their social status internationally and the achievements they have made for themselves, their social identity is still linked to three issues:

- First, whether or not the Kurds' foreign policy efforts to achieve independence are successful, a number of actors, including regional countries and influential trans-regional powers, are playing a role that may differ in their views on Kurdish independence.
- Second, all four countries of Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria oppose the formation of an independent Kurdish state and its subsequent geopolitical changes in the region.
- And third, the nature of the Iraqi Kurdistan's dealing with the geopolitical determinism of those four countries and its strategy in the face of subsequent difficulties should be noticed.

6. Perceptions of Iran and Influential Factors in Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraqi Kurdistan is a western neighbor of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Meanwhile, the Kurds of Iran also live mainly in the vicinity of this region. Iran also had the Kurdish-inhabited region of Iraq under its control up until the Battle of Chaldoran between the Safavids and the Ottomans in 1514. As a result, despite the influence of competing cultural patterns, there are still many cultural similarities between Iranians and Kurds. Nonetheless, the political relations between the Kurds of Iraq and Iran have always had many ups and downs. The relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kurds of Iraq can be divided into three general periods:

- 1- The period prior to the Islamic Revolution;
- 2- The period after the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war;
- 3- The period after the establishment of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, which continues to this day.

Analysis of the trends, goals, and motives of the two sides shows that relations between Iran and the Iraqi Kurds have always been tactical. Even though the motives and goals of Iran and the Kurds to establish relations were different in the periods before and after the Islamic Revolution, there has been no change in its tactical nature. During the Pahlavi era, Iran, as an ally of the United States in

Southwest Asia, played part of the West's strategy to weaken Iraq as a Soviet ally. Hence, Tehran sought to contribute to US policy towards Baghdad through its relationship with the Iraqi Kurds (Bishku, 2018, p. 53). Meanwhile, the Shah of Iran's relationship with the Iraqi Kurds was also seen as a retaliatory measure against the Iranian Kurds. On the other hand, being in the Western bloc during the Cold War was another factor in the convergence of Tehran and Tel Aviv's positions along with their cooperation with the Kurds. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, Iran played a facilitating role in establishing and developing relations between the Zionist regime and Kurdish separatist leaders (Gibson, 2019).

Relations between Tehran and the Iraqi Kurds continued after the Islamic Revolution of Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Kurds split into two main factions: pro-Tehran and pro-Baghdad. During this time, Iran's relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, led by Jalal Talabani, were closer than those with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Masoud Barzani. Even before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the common motivation and goal of Iran and the Iraqi Kurds was to confront Saddam Hussein's regime, except that this time Tehran's goal was not to serve the US interests in weakening Baghdad. Therefore, due to the conflict of goals and motives of the Islamic Republic and the Iraqi Kurds in relation to the United States and the Zionist regime, the Kurds started a double-dealing strategy towards Tehran and Tel Aviv. The US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent fall of the Ba'athist regime, followed by the granting of autonomy to the Kurdish region, was another factor in increasing the role of the identity component in the Tehran-Erbil relationship.

However, Iraqi Kurdistan feels threatened by the Islamic Republic of Iran in two ways:

- 1- Feeling threatened by Iran's influence in Baghdad and its influence throughout the Iraqi Kurdish community;
- 2- Feeling threatened by Iran's strict regional policy against the disintegration of neighboring countries, especially Iraq. Accordingly, despite Iran's support for the Iraqi Kurds during the ISIS attacks, the region does not see Iran's supportive measures and Iranian influence in the region in line with its long-term goal of independence. In addition, another important factor affecting the relationship between Erbil and Tehran is Iran's confrontation with terrorist groups such as PJAK, PKK, and Komouleh on Iran's western borders, which, by exploiting Kurdish nationalist sentiments, play a proxy role in favor of Iran's regional rivals (Ghasemi Heydari, Azhdari, & Majid, 2020, pp. 98-102).

These groups, with foreign support, pursue two main goals against Iran: first, to create insecurity on Iran's borders and to expand it into the Iranian territory; and second, to provoke Iranian ethnic minorities-especially Kurds-to pursue secession from Iran. For this reason, the Islamic Republic, while confronting the activities of these groups within its borders, also confronts the conspiracies of terrorist groups in neighboring countries. In Iran's view, the independence of the Iraqi Kurdish region is part of the American-Zionist ideal of the Greater Middle East. If Iraq disintegrates, its neighbors involved in the Kurdish issue, including Iran, will face a separatist security threat. This development will also weaken Iran's regional policy.

7. Factors Influencing Iraqi Kurdistan's Approach to the Israeli Regime

The current relations between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Zionist regime can be analyzed in terms of the similarity of their identity goals on the one hand and in the context of the historical developments in Southwest Asia, the regional rivalries of great powers, and ethnic-religious nationalism on the other. The relations between the Kurds and the Zionists are as old as the formation of the idea of Zionism and the plan to form a Zionist state in the occupied Palestinian Territories. When Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish spiritual leader and father of Masoud Barzani-the head of Iraqi Kurdistan-returned to Iraq from exile in the 1960s, David bin Gurion, the founder of the Jewish Agency and the first prime minister of the Zionist regime, was quoted as saying, "This is the beginning of turning our dream into reality. An official Zionist delegation is now stationed in Mullah Mustafa Barzani's camp" (Bar-Zohar & Mishal, 2010, p. 160). There is also a quote from Barzani, who, in an effort to attract more US support-possibly similar to US support for the Zionist regime-told the New York Times in 1964 that in exchange for overt and covert US aid, the Kurds would be their loyal allies in Southwest Asia (Adams Schmidt, 1974, p. 54). It can be said that this promise was a project similar to supporting the existence of the Zionist regime in order to attract the support of the United States for the Kurdish independence (M. Gunter, 1992, p. 26).

The main root of this relationship was the Kurds' attempt to shape a social identity in the international system. The desire for this identity can be considered another reason for their enmity with the Arabs. The Kurds needed foreign aid to fight the Iraqi

government. The Jewish lobby was able to provide Kurds with such aid. At the same time, the hostility between the Kurds and the Arabs also contributed to the Zionists' peripheral strategy. Another component that simultaneously strengthened the will of the Kurds and the Zionists to establish a relationship was the common goal of establishing an independent state. In other words, while the Zionists were trying to establish a state in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Kurds were also fighting for autonomy and independence, especially in Iraq. These two components led to the expansion of cooperation between the Zionists and the Kurds in the wars between the Arabs and the Zionist regime. For this reason, the Kurdish government has been referred to as the Second Zionism since the 1960s (Column, 2019).

Intelligence and strategic cooperation were the initial forms of cooperation between the Iraqi Kurds and the Zionist regime. The intelligence cooperation between Erbil and Tel Aviv was not just against the Arabs. This cooperation was in the form of consultation and synergy in shaping the governmental structure of both sides. In order to achieve the goal of the Kurds for the formation of an independent Kurdistan, the Zionist regime took measures such as inciting the Kurds to buy the lands of the Arab inhabitants of the region and granting financial facilities to the Kurds for that purpose. The Kurds also collaborated in the transfer of Arab and Jewish Kurds to the occupied territories (Amit, 2002, p. 110).

The military training of Kurdish Peshmerga's and other militias, which was apparently aimed at strengthening the military arm of Iraqi Kurdistan, was originally intended to provide the Zionist regime with necessary forces in order to pursue its proxy war against Iraq and other neighboring countries. The arms cooperation between the Kurdistan Region and the Zionist regime also expanded after the 1967 Arab-Zionism war, and in this line, part of the advanced Russian weapons that were confiscated by the Zionists during the war were handed over to the Kurds (Bengio, 2012, pp. 77-81).

The role of the Barzani family in the formation and strengthening of Kurdish-Zionism relations is not negligible. In 2005, while there was much debate in the Iraqi political scene about the country's relationship with the Zionist regime, Masoud Barzani, the head of the Iraqi Kurdistan Autonomous Region, said in an interview that if the Iraqi government establishes diplomatic relations with Zionists and allows it to open an embassy in Baghdad, a consulate will also be established in Erbil. But the evidence shows that there is an inner desire among the Kurds to take

advantage of Zionist support. Citing the Iraqi constitution, "Fallah Mustafa Bakr," the former foreign minister of the Iraqi Kurdistan said in 2006 that there was no reason why Arab-Zionism hostility should prevent Erbil from having formal relations with Tel Aviv. In 2008, Jalal Talabani, then the President of Iraq, met with Ehud Barak, the then Zionist Minister of Defense, on the sidelines of the international socialist congress (Al-Ansary, 2008).

The Jewish Kurdish diaspora in the occupied territories can also be considered as another factor in maintaining and expanding relations between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Zionist regime. Although the Jewish Kurds were among the first group of immigrants moving in the occupied territories, studies show that they faced more discrimination in Zionist society. Indeed, the effort of the Jewish Kurdish diaspora to gain more support for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan is a strategy for their return to the new country (Baser & Atlas, 2021, p. 316).

8. Motivations Behind Iraqi Kurdistan's Relations with the Israeli Regime

As mentioned earlier, the areas of attention of the Iraqi Kurdistan to the Zionist regime can be enumerated as follows:

- 1- The historical presence of Jews in Iraq and their relationship with the Kurds in the region;
- 2- The common hostility of the Kurds and the Zionists towards the Arabs;
- 3- Economic, technical, and military needs of Iraqi Kurdistan;
- 4- The long-standing desire for independence and the need to expand the network of regional and trans-regional supporters;
- 5- Balancing both the power and threat of the opponents of Kurdish independence.

The benefits that the relationship with the Zionist regime provides for Iraqi Kurdistan include:

- 1- Balancing the threat of the neighboring countries that are involved in the Kurdish issue and are opposed to geopolitical change in the regional dynamics. These countries include Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the central government of Iraq.
- 2- Balancing the power of the mentioned neighboring countries is another goal that will be achieved for Iraqi Kurdistan by expanding its relations with the Zionist regime. The Kurdistan Region is in a weak position in many areas vis-à-vis the central government of Iraq and other neighboring countries. The provision of the necessary scientific, economic, and military

technologies by the Zionist regime can lead to the development of Iraqi Kurdistan and a subsequent shift of regional balance of power to the detriment of neighboring countries opposing any Kurdish independence.

- 3- The influence of the Zionist lobby in the allied countries of this regime is another benefit that the relationship with Tel Aviv provides for Erbil. This influence can be exploited in the political and military aspects for supporting the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan.

9. The Motives Behind the Israeli Regime's Relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan

Historical evidence suggests that prior to announcing the official establishment of the Zionist regime, the Jewish Agency had established a branch in Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate the migration of Iraqi Jews to the occupied territories and to spy on the Arabs (Gunter, 1992).

But the most important reason and motivation of the Zionist regime for its relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan is to advance its peripheral strategy. In other words, after the establishment of the Zionist regime and the formulation of a peripheral strategy aimed at uniting non-Muslim ethnic and religious minorities and non-Arab countries in West Asia, the idea of forming a "Greater Kurdistan" became very clear among the Zionist regime's priorities. It should be noted that most of the information about the secret relations between the Kurds and Tel Aviv in military, financial, and intelligence aspects has always been revealed by the Zionists (Morris, 1980).

The reason for the Zionist regime's focus on the Kurds in Iraq is that the history of the Iraqi Kurds' struggle for independence is longer than that of the Kurds in other countries in the region. The Iraqi Kurdistan, unlike the Kurds of other countries, has more internal cohesion to form a government. This cohesion increased after the US invasion of Iraq and the formation of a federal structure of governance in that country. Accordingly, since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the presence of the Zionist regime in the Kurdistan region of this country has increased. The expansion of the Zionism presence in this period was through increased activities and economic relations with Kurdistan, but Tel Aviv still has its own intelligence, military, and security priorities regarding the Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2005, Zionism sources reported the transfer of several tons of Zionist military equipment to Iraqi Kurdistan (Abdelhadi,

2006). After the rise of ISIS, the cooperation between the Kurdistan Region and the Zionist regime, along with military training for the Kurds, consisted of espionage operations against the Iranian military presence in Iraq and Syria.

Another reason for the Zionist regime's focus on Iraqi Kurdistan is the strategic position of this region among the four countries involved in the Kurdish issue—namely Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. In other words, the disintegration of Iraq could lead to a domino effect of separatism in other countries. At the same time, as much as the Kurdish issue has brought the positions of the four countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey closer against the Kurdish independence, the formation of an independent Kurdistan could lead to divergence. The secession of the Kurds from countries related to the Kurdish issue provokes the debate on the secession of other ethnicities as well. In fact, the Zionists see geopolitical change as the only way to resolve their security crisis in the region. This means that the formation of small and weak states with a degree of internal cohesion will provide the regime with more security.

In addition to military and intelligence cooperation, the economic activities of the Zionist regime in the Kurdistan region are another important aspect of the bilateral relations between the Kurds and the Zionists. These activities are carried out in the presence of Zionism trading companies and investments in industrial factories, oil industries, transportation infrastructure, and agriculture. The Zionist regime is one of the suppliers of commercial and consumer goods to the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

The oil factor is another strategic goal for the Zionist regime in Iraqi Kurdistan. Tel Aviv supplies its oil needs through close relations with the Iraqi Kurdistan region because most of Iraq's oil reserves are located in the northern regions of the country, especially in the Kurdish cities of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah. In the last two decades, there has been much disagreement between the Iraqi central government and the Kurds over the control of Kirkuk. This region is one of the richest cities in Iraq, which is estimated to have a 40% share of Iraq's oil exports. Many international observers also acknowledge the existence of cooperation between the Iraqi Kurdistan and the Zionist regime to remove Kirkuk from the control of the Iraqi central government (Rose, 2017).

When the Iraqi Kurdistan region held an independence referendum in 2017, some in the region raised the flag of the Zionist regime alongside the flag of the Iraqi Kurdistan (Rose, 2017). Among the regional political units, the Zionist regime was the only

one that declared its support of the independence of the region. Former Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu put a lot of pressure on world leaders to support the Kurdish independence referendum, and when the Iraqi army along with the al-Hashd al-Shabi forces attacked Kirkuk, Netanyahu said he had ordered support for Kurdish forces and talked with other influential powers in order to prevent the Kurdish forces from being forced to withdraw from the region (Liga, 2017).

10. Evaluation and Analysis of the Strategic Model of Iraqi Kurdistan

The Iraqi Kurdistan sees the Islamic Republic as an obstacle to its identity-building project in both social and organizational dimensions. Therefore, since the experience of war with ISIS has proven that Iraqi Kurdistan is incapable of waging war with Iran, by adopting a balance of threat strategy, it is trying to address the challenges that the Islamic Republic poses to the Kurdish independence. As there is a popular interpretation of the balance of threat, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The confrontation between the religious-political identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist regime has become an opportunity for weak regional actors, including Iraqi Kurdistan, to balance the Iranian threat. On the other hand, the Zionist regime is trying to use the political, economic, and technical motivations of these actors to find a chance to get closer to Iran geographically. Using the geographical advantage of Iran's neighbors and pursuing destructive actions against Iran's national security while destroying relations between Tehran and its neighbors, Tel Aviv seeks to counter the growing power and influence of Tehran (Navon, 2020, p. 161).

The conflict between the organizational and social identity of the Iraqi Kurdistan region and the Islamic Republic of Iran stems from the Iranian regional role and its strict opposition to the disintegration of Iraq. As one of the countries involved in the Kurdish issue, Iran considers the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan to be in contradiction to its national security. When the United States imposed a federalist system of governance on Iraq, Iran saw it as another step by the West in completing the project of disintegrating Iraq and achieving the implicit goals of the Sykes-Picot agreement in the twentieth century and the Greater Middle East in the twenty-first century. In addition, another historical component that affects the perception of the Iraqi Kurdish threat by the Islamic Republic is the geographical coverage of Iran in these areas during the Safavid era.

In fact, as constructivist theory states, actors' sense of hostility and "otherness" is measured by a variety of indicators such as historical and cultural background, organizational and social identity conflict, differences in power levels, and personal factors (leaders' policies). There are indications at every level for Iran to be an enemy in the minds of the Iraqi Kurds. The Iraqi Kurdistan sees Iran as a major obstacle to its strategic goal of independence.

As a result, the Iraqi Kurdistan is trying to take advantage of similar motives of the Zionist regime in balancing the Iranian. The emergence of ISIS in Iraq in 2014 and the fact that Erbil was on the verge of collapse can be related to the postponement of the referendum on independence this year due to the opposition of Iraq and Iran. In fact, one of the strategies of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region for independence is to welcome the crises that weaken the Iraqi central government and Iraq's powerful neighbors, including Iran. The geopolitical weakening of the Axis of Resistance is one of the common goals of the Kurdistan Region and the Zionist regime, which is created by the weakening of the central governments of Iraq and Syria and the creation of a security threat on the borders of Iran.

Conclusion

The Kurds have always been influenced by the rivalry of regional actors, which stems from their misperception of the requirements for the development of the social and organizational identity of state actors. Balancing the threat of the Iraqi central government and Iraq's neighbors, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, can also be defined as a continuation of the Kurds' historical misperception. The Zionist regime is the only actor that explicitly supports the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, but this support is only to transfer the security threats from the geographical proximity of the occupied Palestinian territories to Iranian borders. The Iraqi Kurdistan region faces many limitations in its existing geopolitical determinism. The independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, among the four most powerful countries, will confront the region with deprivations and security problems and will impose eroding political, social, and security challenges on it, while on the other hand, in a safe distance, the Zionist regime will supervise the conflicts and their subsequent consequences.

Examining the goals and mutual motives of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and the Zionist regime in cooperating to balance the Iranian threat is also a proof of the Islamic Republic's macro-strategy, which considers geopolitical change in the region and the

disintegration of regional countries as an unacceptable Western-Zionist scenario. Indeed, analysis of recent trends shows that if a new Sykes-Picot American-Western "roadmap" is in place, the Kurds will have a central role in it.

In this regard, it should be noted that the Zionist regime's relationship with the Kurds-especially in Iraq-is a multifaceted threat to the countries of the region. But the plan for Kurdish independence, whether in Turkey, Iraq, or Syria, cannot be in line with Iran's long-term domestic, regional, and international considerations because the Kurdish issue is one of the first national security priorities of the Islamic Republic, and for this reason, Tehran has a more conservative policy towards the Kurds. Despite Iran's border security and internal strength, the Iranians believe that the disintegration of any of Southwest Asia could be the beginning of a domino effect that exacerbates the regional security crisis.

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