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THESIS

**PUSH AND PULL: IRANIAN POLICY TOWARD
KURDISH NATIONALISM AS A MATTER OF
BOTH FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY**

by

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June 2023

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AS A MATTER OF BOTH FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY**

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ABSTRACT

Both Iran and the Kurds are entities with which American Middle Eastern policy frequently interact. Despite the high volume of literature that has been published about each entity individually, very little has been written about their overlap. For Iran, Kurdish nationalism presents both foreign and domestic aspects. Rather than cohesively tackle both elements simultaneously, Iran treats them as unique policy problems. Abroad, Kurds' minority status has been an opportunity for Iran to build leverage against its neighbors. At home, Kurdish nationalism agitates Persian nationalism by undermining its three core pillars: religion, ethnicity, and territory. Although Iran does not follow a coherent Kurdish policy, its various Kurdish policies are consistent with its approaches to its security policies in both the foreign and domestic spheres.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

IS	The Islamic State
KDP	The Kurdish Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDPI	The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran
KRG	The Kurdistan Regional Government
PJAK	The Kurdistan Free Life Party, The PKK's Iranian affiliate
PKK	The Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party, The PKK's Syrian affiliate

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

What factors shape Iranian policy towards Kurdish nationalism? Iran itself is home to between 8 and 12 million Kurds. Certainly then, domestic considerations loom large. However, Iran does not have a monopoly on Kurds. Neighboring states such as Iraq and Türkiye, as well as somewhat more distant Syria, also contain a significant number of Kurds in areas contiguous to each other. This makes Kurdish nationalism a foreign policy issue for Iran, too. Untangling the threads of Iranian foreign and domestic policy is a complex task. Abroad, Iran has frequently supported Kurdish political and military activism as leverage in their favor. But this is a doubled edged sword. Iranian Kurds have received their share of international support, too. Kurdish issues have at times been a defining feature of Turkish-Iranian and Iraqi-Iranian relations, especially in the latter case. At the heart of this tangled web lies the transnational nature of Kurdish demography compounded by the porous nature of the border geography. Domestically, Kurdish nationalism has been suppressed, often violently, as thoroughly as the central government in Tehran could accomplish. The Kurds status as an ethnic and religious minority contradict the self-images of the Islamic Republic and its predecessor, the Pahlavi monarchy, as a theocratic and Persian state, respectively. Overall, Iran's Kurdish policy is shaped abroad by the factors of its relation to the individual states with Kurdish minorities, transnationalism, and its own tactical approach to foreign policy; and it is shaped at home by the factors of religion and ethnicity. While currently not a pressing issue within Iran, this dilemma of Kurdish policy remains unresolved.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The Kurds represent one of the largest ethnic groups of the Middle East. They are spread primarily over four different countries. Yet, they are a minority in each. Despite how important nationalism has been to 20th century politics, none of these Kurdish minorities have successfully integrated into any of their respective countries. Predictably, calls for cultural recognition or autonomy of Kurdish regions have been viewed by

national governments as separatism. This in turn leads to violent repression of Kurdish nationalism. Nonetheless, Kurdish populations have proven too large and too resilient to be exterminated or culturally eradicated. Consequently, all four of the countries with a significant Kurdish population, Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, all have an outstanding Kurdish problem. Furthermore, the Kurds themselves have agency. Particularly when conflict arises, they have proven opportunistic in furthering their own agenda through active political and military means. Indeed, Kurdish issues have proven to be one of the most constant friction points in the northern Levant for over the last half century.

In the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, Iran has become the most activist power resident within the region. This status seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Signifying its status within the region, Iran continues to be called out as one of the United States' principal adversaries in its National Security Strategy, despite the noticeable attempt to shift away from the Middle East towards more serious threats from China and Russia.¹ American and Iranian interests have ended up on opposing sides of most conflicts in the region since the rise of the Islamic Republic. In particular, Iran has pursued its policy goals through destabilizing American regional projects, often through proxy groups. Especially in Iraq, American goals have been opposed by Iranian efforts. But other American allies, too, are threatened. Israel is the frequent target of Iranian propaganda. Sectarian concerns based on the Islamic Republic's overtly Shi'ite identity threaten Sunni monarchies across the Gulf. Iran's nuclear program also keeps American policy makers up at night. The Islamic Republic's status as one of the five primary threats to American interests abroad is well earned.

The Kurds have also forced their way into American policy discussions, but for opposite reasons. After Desert Storm, Iraqi Kurds were both the beneficiaries and supporters the United States' anti-Saddam policy. When the Bush administration decided to topple him in 2003, the Kurds rendered as much military aid as they could and were early supporters of the new American backed government. In turn, the Kurds received

¹ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 25, <https://permaent.fdlp.gov/lps90878/2017/NSSFinal121820170905.pdf>. Whether or not Iran is a malign actor as called out in American policy is not the point of this work. Rather, it merely serves to highlight that understanding Iran is critical to a full understanding of the Middle East region.

meaningful representation in the Iraqi government and a high degree of local autonomy. The ensuing Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) presided over what has since been the most stable region of Iraq. Kurdish-American ties were further solidified and expanded into Syria during the fight against the Islamic State (IS). Furthermore, there has been the thought in American policy circles, albeit muted, of supporting Kurdish nationalists as a way of applying pressure to Iran.² On the other hand, Türkiye's reflexively anti-Kurdish sentiment and status as a NATO member have dampened American support for Kurdish groups. Regardless, the Kurds remain a central piece of American Middle Eastern policy. Given the continued saliency of both Iran and Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East, the relevancy of an intersectional study of these two topics speaks for itself.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a couple of categories of literature that tackle Kurdish nationalism within Iran. Looking into the origins of nationalist sentiment is central to one category. For these authors, several sub-questions form important points. Despite Kurdish nationalist narratives that argue otherwise, academic analysts tend to view the Mahabad Republic as the first truly nationalist movement within Iran, its predecessors being labeled as tribal movements.³ Closely related to this is the task of distinguishing Kurdish nationalism in Iran from other countries.⁴ Given the transnational nature of Kurdish nationalism, these are muddy waters. Iraqi Kurdish political organizations in particular are given a lot of credit for the rise and fall of the Iranian movement. Further compounding this complexity, scholars spend a good deal of time articulating all the splinters of intra-Iranian Kurdish politics. Another important sub-question is establishing

² Lionel Beehner, *Iran's Ethnic Groups*, backgrounder (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/irans-ethnic-groups>.

³ Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris & Company, 2011), 1–2. Part of the mythbuilding inherent in any nationalist movement is identifying the thread of a given group's identity and political activism as far back as possible. Hardcore Kurdish nationalists like to like Agha Simko's and Sheikh Said's revolts in the 1920s, or even further back to Sheikh Ubaydallah's rebellion in the 1880s, as the first Kurdish nationalist political activity. However, Vali's implicit argument, echoed more explicitly by others, is that these episodes' causes and conduct mirror tribal politics more than national politics.

⁴ Alan Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran: Crossborder Interactions and Mobilisation Since 1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3.

the veracity of the claim that Iranian Kurds are an under privileged group within Iran.⁵ Here, academics and Kurdish nationalists agree. Generally speaking, this canon of literature falls into the discipline of political science. There are also numerous works that fall into the historical narrative category. These works of history tend to put Iranian Kurdish nationalism in a much broader transnational, international, and domestic context.⁶ The former group of writing tends to focus heavily on analyzing the political narrative while the latter emphasizes a factual recounting of events. Both mirror the discourse on Kurdish nationalism in other countries.

Extensive ink has been spilled in other literature studying Iranian foreign policy. Since Kurdish issues have featured extensively in Iranian foreign affairs, these works cover this paper's question tangentially.⁷ However, these studies address Iran's relations to state actors, thereby often giving Kurdish aspects of the given case only passing analysis. Iran-Iraq relations are covered extensively. Most of this work addresses relatively recent history.⁸ It begins with the run-up to the 1975 Algiers Agreement as a precursor to the Iran-Iraq War, which looms large. Within the works on this war from the Iranian perspective, emphasis is placed on Sunni-Shia dynamics and Ba'athist ideological concerns about the Islamic Republic.⁹ This leads to an emphasis on the southern front of the war in the military history while the Kurdish theater is treated more as a sideshow. Literature that takes a more Iraqi or third-party observer lens do discuss the Kurdish theater but tend to treat Iran as a third wheel.¹⁰ Literature covering the more recent American presence in Iraq and ensuing tensions with Iran suffers from a similar lack of

⁵ Farideh Koochi-Kamali, *The Political Development of Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 126–164.

⁶ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris & Company, 2004).

⁷ Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 133–141.

⁸ Faleh Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 225–226.

⁹ Efraim Karsh, "Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War" in *The Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (Spring, 1990): 256–268.

¹⁰ Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliot (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2015).

focus on Kurdish dimensions.¹¹ Considering its recent timeframe and ongoing nature, it also lacks in depth and precision of historical analysis. While there is a relative wealth of writing on relations between Iran and Iraq, there is a relative dearth of work on relations between Iran and Türkiye for the last century.

There is also a collection of writings that address Iran's relation to its minorities. Authors distinguish religious and ethnic minorities.¹² Although religion is given somewhat more attention in works focusing on the post-Pahlavi years, generally, more weight is given to ethnicity.¹³ As the second largest ethnic minority in Iran, and a religious minority as well, the Kurds are covered by this literature. This body of work mirrors much of the scholarship on Kurdish nationalism, albeit from a different angle. Kurds are not unique; the same force that engendered the groundswell for their nationalist awakening created Persian nationalism too, as well as driving national self-awareness among other Iranian minorities. Among the Iranian ethnic milieu, the Kurds hold a prominent position with the most activist nationalist agenda. Scholarship attributes this to a combination of demographic size and the transnationalism of the Kurds.¹⁴ With respect to the element of religion, scholarly literature is relatively shallow. Authors writing on Iran and its minorities do little more than acknowledge the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide with respect to the Kurds. However, a more nuanced take on the role of religion between the Iran and the Kurds can be found in the body scholarship on Kurdish nationalism.¹⁵

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS

There are a number of distinct factors to Iranian Kurdish policy. On the foreign policy front, the most obvious is Iran's relations to its neighbors. Kurds have been the focal point of Turkish-Iranian interactions since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

¹¹ Nicholas Heras, *Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network, 2017–02* (Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 2017).

¹² Axworthy, *A History of Iran*, 125–148.

¹³ Lois Beck, "Iran's Ethnic, Religious, and Tribal Minorities" in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 249–324.

¹⁴ Mohammed Mahmood, "The Problem of the Kurds in Iranian Policy" in *Regional Studies Center* 16, no. 6 (2009): 431.

¹⁵ Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran*, 157.

Despite their shared goal of suppressing their Kurdish populations, this relation has been mostly tense. Türkiye has been especially suspicious of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) presence in Iran. More recently, Turkish military advances into northern Iraq and Syria have raised Iranian hackles with what they see as interference in their sphere of influence.¹⁶ Kurds have played a less central, though still significant role, in Iraqi-Iranian relations. Nonetheless, Iran's interactions with Iraq have had a larger role in influencing Iranian Kurds than any other aspect of Iranian foreign affairs. In the near-term future, Iran's interests in Syria bring it into contact with a new set of Kurdish political organizations. Iranian interactions with Syrian Kurds could have larger regional repercussions. Perhaps it goes without saying, but there is one factor that underlies all these relations; that is the transnational nature of the Kurds. After all, the Kurds are readily identifiable as a semi-cohesive, single cultural group spread across four states. What happens to one country's Kurds inherently affects other countries' Kurdish populations. This is further exacerbated by the difficult mountainous geography of Kurdish regions. Finally, Iran has developed a strategy of supporting armed groups as proxies abroad. While this strategy does have limitations, it has become one of the Islamic Republic's go-to methods of developing international leverage.¹⁷ The deeply fractious and transnational nature of intra-Kurdish politics lends non-Iranian Kurdish political organizations to this strategy. Although not as prominent as Iran's relation to other armed groups, Iranian-Kurdish relations outside Iran fit this model.

Domestically, there are likewise a couple of factors that influence Iranian Kurdish policy. Iran has always been a multi-ethnic state. As alluded to earlier, the same international trends that formed the backdrop of Kurdish nationalism also formed the backdrop of Persian nationalism. This creates inherent tension within state between its Persian core and its substantial but diverse set of minorities. As the Pahlavis modernized the state through centralizing control, spreading Persian culture became an almost inherent corollary. The ensuing nationalist backlash among minorities, especially the

¹⁶ Jared Szuba, "Pentagon: Iran-backed militias, PKK coordinated vs. Turkish troops in Iraq," *Al-Monitor*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/pentagon-iran-backed-militias-pkk-coordinated-vs-turkish-troops-iraq#ixzz7daxpzCl9>.

¹⁷ Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Military Clients" in *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 160.

Kurds, to political centralization and Persian cultural hegemony has permanently spooked the Iranian state. From the viewpoint of Tehran, to budge an inch on ethnic issues risks the state looking weak to its own people and coming apart at its seams. A similar logic train regarding religion is deeply ingrained into the psyche of the Islamic Republic. The theocratic ideology of Velayat-e Faqih that the Islamic Republic is based on is ostensibly sectarian-neutral within Islam.¹⁸ Consequently, the Iranian Constitution makes no mention of Islamic religious minorities. Even though this may be the ideal of Khomeinist clerics, the reality is that the Islamic Republic is an overtly sectarian Twelver-Shi'ite state. The Kurds are a predominantly Sunni group. Acknowledging this would undermine the Islamic Republic's self-image. As a result, the Islamic Republic has proven especially sensitive to domestic Kurdish nationalism. Both questions of ethnicity and religion remain an unresolved friction point between Iranian Kurds and the state.

E. THESIS OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

After a brief introduction that outlines the friction between Iran and Kurdish nationalism, this paper will be broken into two main chapters. The first will address the foreign policy side of Iranian policy. Iraq, Türkiye, and Syria will each be addressed respectively. This order is based on the volume of material to work with. With respect to each state, three points will be addressed, Iran's relation to that state, that state's relation to its Kurds, and Iran's relation to that state's Kurds. Both the history and current state of affairs will be included. The second chapter will address the domestic and security policy side of Iranian policy. This will revolve around the points of ethnicity and religion, in that order due to salience to Kurdish nationalist thought. Both the periods of the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic will be covered. Within each period, this paper will cover the central governments' self-image, goals, and ensuing policy; the Kurdish reaction to this policy; and the Iranian counter-reaction to the Kurdish reaction. Special note will also be made of the points of continuity and discontinuity between the two periods. The order of the two chapters is akin to peeling back the layers of the onion. As an outsider, Iran's foreign Kurdish policy will be encountered before its domestic

¹⁸ "Religious Democracy: An Introduction," *khamenei.ir*, September 15, 2020, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/7930/Religious-Democracy-An-Introduction>.

Kurdish policy. The conclusion will attempt to wrap the threads of the two chapters together and analyze what broader observations of the Iranian state can be made via its Kurdish policy.

II. KURDISH NATIONALISM IN IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

A. INTRODUCTION

Intra-Kurdish transnational politics is a labyrinthine affair with layers that parallel and overlap each other. Unfortunately for the student, this complexity carries over to the policy of regional states' international relations policy vis-a-vis the Kurds. Iranian policy is no exception. Constructing the logic in Iran's Kurdish policy abroad must account for three factors; the Kurds' relationship to their own state, Iran's relationship to that state, and Iran's relation to those Kurds. This triangular relationship led to Iran using the Kurds as wedge issue to obtain leverage over their neighbors. In the more recent past, another factor has arisen that must also be added to the equation. Between the arrival of American forces in the region and the advent of more muscular Turkish foreign policy, Iranian Kurdish foreign policy has been influenced by broader regional competition. The confluence of these factors has been most openly on display in Syria. While the intensity is more muted, signs indicate similar dynamics are simmering beneath the surface in Iraq and are nearing a boiling point. This represents a change in Iran's overall policy. No longer are the Kurds merely a tool aimed at their own state, but rather a potential a proxy force and arena for competition against third party actors.

Of course, the intra-Kurdish politics previously referenced have not developed in a vacuum without foreign influence. Over the course of the last half century, Kurdish nationalist politics have split over two questions. First, is solidarity across all elements of Kurdish society important to build as powerful a base as possible, or are the natural socio-economic alliances between the upper crust of Kurdish society and the state Kurdish nationalism's greatest impediment? Secondly, should Kurdish nationalists align with each other across international borders, or is there more benefit in selling out other Kurds to gain an international sponsor? Divides over how to answer the second question are the direct result of Iranian foreign policy. Today, taking these political divides at face value would create contradictions beyond explicability. Time and the regionalization of competition has muted the second question's relevance. Nonetheless, these fracture lines are the lines within Kurdish politics along which regional competition runs, even if they

have lost their political potency. Adequately addressing Iranian Kurdish policy abroad must consider all of this. This chapter will look at Iran's relation with Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria along with the Kurdish nationalist movements in each of them. Additionally, the historical timeline will play a key role in looking at the evolution of Iran's policy from a dyadic to more complex nature.

B. KURDISH NATIONALISM IN THE POST-OTTOMAN WORLD

Kurdish nationalism developed along similar lines in both the Persian and Ottoman worlds, albeit several decades later in modern Iran. As the 19th century wound to a close and in the lead up to the First World War, the Ottoman Empire attempted to modernize the state with the Tanzimat reforms.¹⁹ This included a drive to centralize state authority, curbing autonomy in the Kurdish regions. Furthermore, nascent nationalism began to rise and created attempts to supplant Kurdish culture. These trends created the early manifestations of Kurdish nationalism as tribal leaders sought to maintain or regain their autonomy. Like all nationalist movements, Kurdish nationalism began as an exclusively elite problem. The movement gradually morphed into a more truly national sentiment as the effects of cultural repression began to affect all levels of society after the First World War. The First World War rent the Ottoman Empire asunder, creating three states with significant Kurdish populations. While each of these states faced Kurdish challenges that were founded on a similar Ottoman legacy and Kurdish transnationalism played a role, the Kurdish policy of each governing power created three unique dynamics.

Ataturk's new Turkish state had the geographically and demographically largest Kurdish minority. This new state's primary objectives were to secure its borders and establish a new national identity. Initially, the Kurds were partners in this venture.²⁰ However, the Turks soon eschewed retaking Iraqi Kurdistan for a political settlement with the British and ended the Caliphate, the two primary Kurdish interests. Further

¹⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 38–84.

²⁰ Hamit Bozarslan, "Kurds and the Turkish State" in *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Volume 4: Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Resat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 337–339.

driving home the point that the Kurds were not equal partners in the state, in fact they had no place in the state, the ruling Kemalists instituted a Turkification policy.²¹ Kurdish language and culture were aggressively repressed. Unsurprisingly, this led to a series of revolts throughout the 1920s and 30s.²² Often, these insurrections coalesced around religious issues. The language of Kurdish nationalism was present to various degrees, but not universal.²³ Fortunately for Ankara, these uprisings were sporadic and never unified. This allowed the government to stamp them out individually over the course of a couple decades, never having to engage against a full-on revolution. Turkish suppression tactics were extremely brutal and bordered on genocide. The last pockets of Kurdish resistance were eliminated following the Dersim Revolt of 1937.²⁴ The Kemalist attempts to eradicate Kurdishness from their state temporarily succeeded. Perhaps that success would have been more permanent, but transnational Kurdish activism and a growing Kurdish diaspora enabled the Kurdish challenge to make a comeback in Turkish politics several decades later.²⁵

As opposed to its northern neighbor, the newly formed state of Iraq was heavily dependent on British support.²⁶ Between the governing Hashemite's natural bent towards tribal-style politics and the lack of a strong and fully developed state structure in Iraq, Iraqi Kurdish regions naturally defaulted into a relatively high level of autonomy. They were encouraged by the presence of a couple extremely pro-Kurd British military liaisons and a much higher degree of awareness with respect to the pro-Kurdish provisions in the Treaty of Sevres. Even though Iraq was an officially independent state, the British were the real power brokers. Kurdish leadership was well aware of the fact that any Kurdish independence movement ultimately relied on the good graces of the British and tried to

²¹ Rifat Bali, "The Politic of Turkification During the Single Party Period," in *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Postnationalist Identities*, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006).

²² Uur Ümit Üngör, "Seeing Like a Nation-State: Young Turk Social Engineering in Eastern Turkey, 1913–50," *Journal of Genocide Research* 10, no. 1 (June 2003): 30–33.

²³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 197.

²⁴ Ibid., 202–210.

²⁵ Ibid., 232.

²⁶ Ibid., 151–180.

court their support. When push came to shove, though, British policy fully backed the Iraqi government. As it became apparent that Britain would not support Kurdish aspirations within Iraq, the Kurds began to mobilize. Kurdish political parties were closely aligned with the rest of Iraq's opposition parties, most notably the Communists. This close association with proper political parties in the open allowed Iraqi Kurds to develop organizational skills that Iranian and Turkish Kurds could not. However, Iraqi Kurdish politics still had a strong tribal streak.²⁷ In the 1930s and early 1940s, armed insurrections based mostly on tribal lines were nearly continuous.²⁸ Out of these revolts emerged Mulla Mustafa Barzani, who became a central figure of Kurdish nationalism, both in Iraq and transnationally. Nonetheless, the Iraqi government managed to put down these revolts, in large part thanks to British support, by the early 1940s.

Moving further west, Syria and its Kurdish minorities developed along a third line. The set-up was unique for several reasons. Unlike the other three states with Kurdish populations, Syria's Kurdish regions are not geographically contiguous. Demographically, Syria's Kurds are also a much smaller entity. These two facts alone stymie Kurdish political organization in the country. Furthermore, Syria was left under direct colonial rule by the French in the wake of the First World War. Consequently, unlike other Kurdish populations, Syria did not quickly devolve into local, albeit non-Kurdish, government.²⁹ Syrian Kurds were not subjected to harsh state-building policies that repressed Kurdishness until after independence. French authorities lacked regional insiders' prejudices and never sought to curtail Kurdish cultural expression. Indeed, like many imperial powers, France used minorities such as the Kurds within Syria to maintain a coalition of local leadership in favor of colonial rule. Although Syrian Kurds would not become a chess piece of international relations until much later, more broadly, Kurdish discontent was firmly entrenched by the early 1940s. Despite its hidden nature, after the

²⁷ Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 62.

²⁸ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 287–293.

²⁹ Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 2014), 9–10.

Second World War, the problem would come roaring back. Once it got its own house in order, Iran found Kurdish aspirations a useful tool for pursuing Iranian goals.

C. IRANIAN AND THE KURDS DURING THE COLD WAR

In the years immediately following the Second World War, Iran was preoccupied sorting out domestic political issues. But after an American and British-backed monarchist coup in 1953 permanently settled internal affairs, the young Shah began pursuing an aggressive international agenda.³⁰ Mohamed Reza seemed acutely aware of his father Reza Khan's militaristic legacy and was determined to project a similarly muscular image.³¹ With the British vacating the region, Iran tried to slip into the void. They seized control of three islands previously administered as part of the Trucial States as the United Arab Emirates was granted independence. Iran pressed its claim to the island of Bahrain. Oman made good use of significant Iranian military assets lent to support the suppression of a communist insurgency in the Dhofar region. During these years, Iran became the top purchaser of American-made arms. However, Iran's biggest policy initiative was vis-a-vis Iraq. Iraq was a demographically large enough state to pose a more significant military threat to Iran than any of the Gulf sheikhdoms. Furthermore, it was a hotbed of anti-monarchist and communist sentiment, both anathema to the Shah's regime. With Imperial Britain no longer present to referee and enforce the peace, this budding rivalry quickly took shape around the issue of border demarcation along the Shatt al-Arab. The previous status quo had favored the Iraqis and Iran needed leverage to strengthen its hand. Enter the Kurds.

Since the end of the Second World War in Iraq, internal politics devolved into a messy affair that paved the way for Kurdish political resurgence.³² The new government of Abdul Kareem Qasem, which had toppled the Hashemite monarchy in a coup in 1958, sat atop a precarious political situation. Inviting the exiled Mulla Mustafa Barzani back provided Qasem with a powerful ally. Initially, this arrangement worked satisfactorily for

³⁰ Karsh, "Geopolitical Determinism," 246.

³¹ Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, 85–87.

³² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 302–313.

both parties with Barzani violently suppressing the Communists in Mosul. Barzani also consolidated control of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which he would use to dominate internal Kurdish politics for over a decade. But in eliminating the most significant enemy of the ruling government in Baghdad, the KDP instantly filled the same role. Baghdad began to shy away from fulfilling promises to Barzani and the KDP that underpinned the initial alliance. Close to a decade and a half of intermittent negotiation between Barzani and the various Baghdad governments failed to produce a solution.³³ The status of Kirkuk, in particular, was a consistent sticking point. Overall, Kurdish demands seem at least a little excessive in light of what Baghdad could politically afford to concede. For their part, successive Iraqi governments tried to have their cake and eat it, too. Iraqi politicians never truly reconciled themselves to the idea of an autonomous Kurdistan and opposition figures as a source of support and courted Kurdish support behind the backs of the ruling government.

This was Iran's opportunity. At various points punctuating these negotiations, Baghdad tried to militarily crush the KDP.³⁴ However, these attempts failed. While Barzani's military leadership deserves a fair bit of credit for holding of the Iraqi Army, Iranian support was the lynchpin of Kurdish success on the battlefield. Supporting the KDP provided Iran the leverage it needed in the Shatt al-Arab dispute. This forced a dilemma on Baghdad, either negotiate autonomy with the Kurds to present a united front against Tehran or concede Iran's border demands to suppress the Kurds. Nor were Iranian-KDP ties useless to Tehran beyond negotiations with Baghdad. The KDP's Iranian affiliate, the KDPI, had also been rising out of dormancy since its repression in the aftermath of the Second World War. In exchange for Iranian backing, the KDP severed its ties with the KDPI, shutting down KDPI operations in Iraq and killing its leadership or handing them over to SAVAK.³⁵ Eventually, Iraq caved to Iranian demands rather than Kurdish ones, renegotiating the Shatt al-Arab demarcation at Algiers in 1975. In a Machiavellian move, the Shah ruthlessly cut off support to the KDP. Baghdad

³³ Ibid., 332–339.

³⁴ Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 69–71.

³⁵ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 77–78.

quickly reestablished control of its Kurdish regions and the Iraqi Kurdish political solidarity fractured.³⁶ The whole ploy had worked incredibly well for Iran.

As the Cold War began to wind down, Middle Eastern political dynamics began to change. Iran's international Kurdish policy began to change with it. One of the most significant changes was the Iranian regime itself. In the Iran-Iraq War that followed the Revolution, the new Islamic Republic utilized its Iraqi Kurdish relation in a similar manner to the Pahlavi monarchy. To augment its efforts against Baghdad, Tehran opened a second theater of operations in Iraqi Kurdistan and funneled support to both the KDP and their new intra-Kurdish rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).³⁷ But this was very much a secondary theater to ongoing southern campaigns. When Iran ceased hostilities with Iraq, its support for Iraqi Kurdish parties melted away, enabling the Iraqi's genocidal Anfal campaigns. Despite the limited nature of Iranian interest in Iraqi Kurdistan as a mere leverage against Iraq in the early years of the Islamic Republic, a new dynamic was slowly beginning to develop. Iranian-Turkish relations had never been warm and Kurdish issues were often at the one of the primary issues.³⁸ Iraqi Kurdistan became an understated proxy war between the two states with Iran supporting the PUK and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkish support going to the KDP and KDPI. Although Iranian involvement in the ensuing Kurdish civil war was limited and their support of the PKK muted, the dynamic of using the Kurds to fight proxy wars against third party actors represented a distinct policy. It portended a greater shift to come.

D. AMERICAN PRESENCE AND REGIONALIZATION

The catalyst for the shift in Iranian policy was permanent American military presence on its border in Iraq. American occupation of Iraq changed Iranian policy vis-a-vis the Kurds through several mechanisms. First, Iran's relation to the Iraqi state was dramatically altered. Additionally, Iran no longer had a monopoly on supporting Iraqi

³⁶ Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 80–81.

³⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 347–363.

³⁸ Robert Olson, *The Kurdish Question and Turkish-Iranian Relations: From World War I to 1998* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1998), 27.

Kurds. Underpinning these new developments was mutual American-Iranian hostility. A more activist Turkish foreign policy also created a similar dynamic, albeit less openly hostile. All of these factors emerged on a more public stage with development of the Syrian Civil War and the rise of IS. Syrian Kurdish issues began to intertwine with Iraqi Kurdish issues. Along with the increasing number of international actors with a stake, this has elevated Kurdish issues from distinctly national issues to a broader regional problem. Whereas Iranian policy throughout the Cold War and the end of the 20th century could afford to treat Kurds monolithically, this is no longer the case two decades into the 21st century. Interlocking layers of interests have created much more nuanced positions.

After the fall of the Hashemites, Iraq posed one Iran's more persistent threats.³⁹ Iraq was a comparable neighbor demographically and economically. Restive Arab and Kurdish minorities in Iran had extensive cross-border connections. Latent Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shi'ite tension also simmered. Anti-monarchic and secularist bent of Iraqi governments that succeeded the Hashemites naturally created unease with first the Pahlavi monarchy and then the Islamic Republic. Territorial borders in the south also provided a point of diplomatic contention. Both countries routinely hosted each other's exiled political opposition. This contentious relation was highlighted by the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. All of this changed with the American-sponsored regime change in 2003. The militarily aggressive anti-Iranian Ba'athist government was gone. The electoral politics of the democratic regime that followed tended to favor Iranian interests. Furthermore, the Iraqi state was in shambles following a decade of American military interventionism. It no longer represented a serious threat to the Iranian state. However, the American administration behind the reconstruction and occupation of Iraq was virulently anti-Iranian. In fact, many considered Iran next on the Bush administrations list of countries in need of American-driven regime change.⁴⁰ With the other American occupation in Afghanistan, Iran felt encircled. Consequently, while the Iraqi state was not

³⁹ Karsh, "Geopolitical Determinism," 240–243.

⁴⁰ David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 439.

necessarily problematic, Iran proceeded to sabotage American interests in Iraq to the maximum extent possible.⁴¹ Iran drove up the cost of American presence through supporting numerous militias and political parties. Iran also tried to cultivate an image as Iraqi Shi'ites true friend and protector. These endeavors were largely successful with Iran serving as one of the major power brokers in Iraq and the United States no longer militarily present.

Iraqi Kurds were likewise politically transformed by American intervention. Through the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran was the only real international backer of Iraqi Kurdish parties. In the aftermath of the War, Iraqi depredations in Kurdistan raised such an outcry that the United States initiated Operation Provide Comfort and eventually established a no-fly zone. With the Iraqi Army effectively blocked, the Kurds devolved into an internecine war pitting the Barzani-led KDP against the Talabani-led PUK that involved the PKK, KDPI, and Turkish military. In a sign of a shift in Iraqi Kurdish politics, Iran had little influence on the civil war while the United States that brokered and enforced an agreement between the Barzanis and Talabanis that held through American presence in Iraq.⁴² During the 2003 invasion the Kurds proved willing allies in toppling the Ba'athist regime. This turned the Kurds into the darlings of American policy makers.⁴³ Further cementing this status, the KRG proved one of the more stable parts of Iraq. Between the high quality of American support and their hostility towards, Iranian influence in the KRG was minimal through the 2000s. Undoubtedly, Iranian policy makers would have liked to make inroads, but the KRG was neither fruitful ground for investment nor Iran's highest priority within Iraq at the time.

Perhaps the most pointed Kurdish development within American occupied Iraq from Iran's perspective was the establishment of the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in

⁴¹ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Military Clients," 175–176.

⁴² Orfa Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2012), 274.

⁴³ Linda Fawaz, "America Needs a Stable and Democratic KRG as a Partner," Middle East Research Institute, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13610>. This think-tank piece is a representative sample of the pro-KRG opinion that has been powerful in Washington, D.C., since Operation Enduring Freedom. Note the friendly view of Iraqi Kurds as exemplary partners through the 2000s.

2003. For all intents and purposes, it is the Iranian branch of the PKK.⁴⁴ Much like the two primary Iranian Kurdish parties, the KDPI and the Komalah, the PJAK set up its base of operations with the KRG. While there was certainly intellectual room within the Iranian Kurdish political space for the rise of a new activist entity, more on that in the next chapter, the PJAK's raison d'être seems to be linked more to issues of international relations. When PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured by Turkish intelligence in 1999, the PKK insurgency was largely a spent force. However, its leadership network was still partially intact and maintained a firm operational foothold inside Iraqi territory. As previously mentioned, American-Iranian tensions were no secret. Both the Israelis and Sunni Gulf monarchies were also antagonistic towards Iran. Although never acknowledged by either party, founding the PJAK was possibly a PKK play to get the international backing it rarely had.⁴⁵

From the American side, the foreign policy establishment had begun to put in strategic thought to how it would take down the Islamic Republic presuming it was the next target for regime change.⁴⁶ One of the principal concepts was the arming and support of restive ethnic minorities within Iran. Iranian Kurdish parties seemed like a logical starting point for this project. American ties to the PJAK, KDPI, and Komalah have never been acknowledged, but there are strong indications that there was at least some material support, although this appears to have ceased before the end of the of the

⁴⁴ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 187.

⁴⁵ "Female Fighters of Kurdistan," July 23, 2012, Vice, video, https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/female-fighters-of-kurdistan/55dc9b6f1ce00c683baee92f. To be clear, the evidence for this specific claim is purely circumstantial. Reporting does not extend beyond in-region reporters with unclear sources. Nonetheless, the strategic concept of founding a PKK proxy to drum up foreign support is given enough credence by reporters in the KRG around the timeframe that it should not be dismissed out of hand. The clandestine support the PJAK seemed to receive lends further weight to the claim.

⁴⁶ Seymour Hersh, "The Next Act: Is a Damaged Administration Less Likely to Attack Iran, or More?," *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/11/27/the-next-act>.

decade.⁴⁷ To Tehran, the rise of foreign backed militias specifically aimed at Iran was extremely concerning. Indeed, the threat was not idle as the parties, the PJAK in particular, conducted ongoing low-level guerrilla operations in Iran from across the border. Iran has not overreacted to this development, instead focusing its Iraqi policy on other arenas of concern. Whether this is a luxury born out of the relative lack of success by the insurgents, an acknowledgement of American preeminence within the KRG, or simply higher priorities in Iraq is an open question. Nonetheless, one of the most significant current Iranian policy goals within the KRG seems to be thoroughly rooting out Iranian Kurdish parties, albeit a position slowly built towards and far from completion.

One more factor within influenced Iranian-Kurdish relations within the KRG is Turkish resurgence. With one or two notable exceptions, Turkish foreign policy had largely been benign and unassuming since the founding of the Republic. This began to change on its southeastern frontier specifically as a result of Kurdish unrest. Despite its successful repression of Kurdishness by the 1940s, Kurdish nationalism came roaring back to life with the PKK's insurgency in the 1980s.⁴⁸ At the height of this insurgency, the United States de facto established an autonomous Kurdish state in Iraq. To forestall this development serving as inspiration to its own Kurds and in an attempt to deny the PKK sanctuary, the Turkish government began developing ties with the forerunners of the KRG. Within Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDP quickly became Ankara's partner of choice for a number of reasons.⁴⁹ Willingness to sell out transnational Kurdish interests in pursuit of narrower interests had been one of the primary fracture points in the initial

⁴⁷ "U.S. Brands Anti-Iran Kurdish Group Terrorist," Reuters, February 4, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN04297671>. The clandestine nature of the support makes it difficult to pin exactly when the aid was cut off. Certainly, ties were cut by the time the terrorist designation was announced, but whether the Bush administration maintained relations throughout its time in office or cut the PJAK off before the Obama administration was sworn in is unclear. The fact that the PJAK is not declared a terrorist organization until 2009, despite its known association with the long-designated PKK, is also indicative of American ties with the PJAK.

⁴⁸ Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 49–99.

⁴⁹ Olson, *The Kurdish Question*, 46–47.

KDP-PUK split.⁵⁰ The PUK was ideologically a much closer match to the PKK than the KDP. Furthermore, the PKK had begun infringing on KDP turf. The PKK had a history of violently assimilating rival Kurdish groups in its areas of operation while the KDP was especially touchy about its authority given the ongoing intra-Kurdish civil war and PKK-PUK ties; this tension opened up the KDP to Turkish overtures. While American presence prevented further intra-Kurdish fighting, the solidification of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq reinforced Ankara's threat perception and need to establish a partner within the KRG.⁵¹ Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Turkish military conducted multiple operations inside Iraq, often in conjunction with the KDP, with the goal rooting out the PKK.⁵²

As the 2000s melted into the 2010, American influence began to wane within both the KRG and Iraq as a whole as the United States looked to end its occupation of the country. This opened the door for Iran to reestablish influence in the KRG. Although waning American presence meant the threat of American invasion declined, Iran's interests in Iraq did not. Specifically within the KRG, denying sanctuary to Iranian Kurdish parties remained an important objective. Furthermore, growing Turkish influence was not to be trusted. While not truly antagonistic towards each other, neither do the two countries have a friendly history with each other. Both had leveraged each other's Kurdish minority against each other before.⁵³ In addition, American withdrawal meant a new regional pecking order of influence needed to be hashed out. All these reasons led to increased Iranian involvement within the KRG. Considering Turkish-KDP connections, Iran's primary ally became the geographically more proximate PUK. The American decision to invade and upend a regional powerhouse in 2003 created a power vacuum that needed to be filled as they left. Whereas Iranian policy towards international Kurdish politics had previously been about obtaining leverage against a given country, it morphed into an issue with broader regional implications.

⁵⁰ Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, 80–81.

⁵¹ Ibid., 96–102.

⁵² Olson, *The Kurdish Question*, 35–56.

⁵³ Ibid.

E. OPEN COMPETITION FOR KURDISH INFLUENCE

While the American intervention laid the seeds of regional competition amongst the Kurds for Iran, the Syrian Civil War brought the issue into the limelight. The authoritarian Assad regime in Syria came unraveled after four decades with the advent of the Arab Spring. Initially peaceful protests devolved into a sectarian civil war by the middle of 2011. The Kurdish position was nuanced. As previously covered, the Kurdish lot in Syria was rather benign through the colonial period. However, after the French were gone, the heady visions of Arab nationalism began to run roughshod over Kurdish sensitivities.⁵⁴ Despite this dynamic, Syrian Kurds never experienced the same level of repression as any of their transnational brethren. Also, the Syrian government adroitly prevented Kurdish nationalism from ever developing politically by providing the PKK sanctuary in exchange for keep a lid on Kurdish issues within Syria.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the PKK felt betrayed over the expulsion of Ocalan and other PKK leaders in the late 1990s, leading it to form a Syrian affiliate in 2003. At the onset of the Syrian Civil War, Syrian Kurds would have been happy enough to see the Assad regime fall. However, neither were they enthusiastic about the prospects of a successful rebellion that would lead to a Sunni Arab dominated government.

Rather than pick sides, the Syrian Kurds initially stayed aloof. As the conflict dragged on, the Kurds quietly began establishing an autonomous region in the northeast.⁵⁶ While the PKK affiliate PYD is dominant in both the government and security forces, it is by no means the only actor.⁵⁷ Its primary opposition is a coalition of minor parties backed by the KDP in Iraq. While there is tension between the two sides, the rift is not so great as to prevent unified action. This de facto autonomous Kurdish

⁵⁴ Radwan Ziadeh, *The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2009) 2, <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/LPS111957/LPS111957.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 2014), 27. This is an extremely difficult hypothesis to prove. However, it is worth noting that this is less than a decade after the Pahlavi regime had successfully cut a similar deal with the KDP to curtail the KDPI. The logic of such a relationship between Syria and the PKK certainly makes sense. Even given the lack of documentation, this author is of the opinion that where there is smoke, there is fire.

⁵⁶ Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 34.

⁵⁷ Steven A. Cook, *Neither Friend nor Foe: The Future of U.S.-Turkey Relations*, CSR82 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2018), 5.

state of Rojava was catalyzed by the rise of the IS. Ideologically, the IS's extreme theology did not appeal to Kurds while their military operations isolated Rojava and tried to overrun it, which increased Kurdish sovereignty within the territory. This also won Syrian Kurds western sympathy. When the IS expanded its operations into Iraq, this opened up Rojava to direct American support and indirect international support via the KRG. The continued development of Rojava triggered a reflexive defensive Turkish reaction, especially given the power of the PYD within Syria. Since 2015, the Turkish military continues to conduct operations and a military occupation of northern Syria.⁵⁸ Officially, this is about controlling a refugee problem, but is also directly aimed at tamping down on Kurdish independence. To date, American support of Syrian Kurdish forces has prevented Ankara from fully pursuing this aim.

Iran's stake in Rojava is more complicated. Since the outbreak of the Civil War, preserving the Assad regime has been the Iranian's first objective. Iran regards Syria as strategically significant geography and has long-standing ties with the Assad regime dating to the early days of the Islamic Republic.⁵⁹ Anything less than a friendly and fully unified Syrian state is a less than ideal outcome. Reestablishing regime authority in Rojava is the ultimate goal, for both Iran and Syria, but doing so has been complicated by operational and strategic considerations. Initially, PYD control of Rojava was not the greatest threat to the Assads; they did not actively fight for regime overthrow and their small demography meant they could be militarily dealt with easily after the more significant Sunni rebel groups had been crushed. Furthermore, with the Assads painting themselves as the protector of Syrian minorities, there was always the hope that the Kurds could be brought back into Damascus's fold peacefully.

More recently, the rise of the IS created developments that add nuance to Iran's perception of Rojava. The IS's rapid initial growth led to the expansion Kurdish-American ties in Iraq and their growth into Syria, a problem from Tehran's view. On the

⁵⁸ Burhan Yuksekkas, "Turkey's Erdogan Pledges Syria Incursion to Cement Buffer Zone," Bloomberg, June 4, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-04/turkey-s-erdogan-pledges-syria-incursion-to-cement-buffer-zone>.

⁵⁹ Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 205.

other hand, Iran's early unequivocal support against the IS expanded their influence among the same groups.⁶⁰ Indeed, this opportunity seems to have allowed Iran to close the gap of relative influence within the KRG vis-a-vis other countries. Kurdish-Turkish conflict within Syria is problematic for Iran, too. Increasingly permanent Turkish presence inside Syria prevents regime-aligned forces from reestablishing full control of the country.⁶¹ This creates a feedback loop. Turkish armed forces are unlikely to leave as long as there is an armed Kurdish group present, but the Kurds are unlikely to disarm as long as the Turkish military is present. Perhaps there is an out if the PYD and Damascus were to ally with the goal of forcibly expelling the Turks. However, such an alliance would require more political concessions than Damascus appears willing to make, regime forces appear unready to directly battle their Turkish counterparts, and American influence in Rojava weighs against this move. In addition, Turkish policy and transnational Kurdish links have blurred the Iraqi-Syrian border in Kurdish areas. Returning Syria to the status quo ante bellum in Rojava would require a change to current dynamics with unpredictable and far-reaching side effects. Iran, then, will likely pursue a policy of delicately balancing its long-term goal for Syria against current tension with regional competitors, trying not to overplay its hand in a way that would trigger dramatic American or Turkish backlash.

F. PROXIES AS A TOOL OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

If Kurdish nationalism is an object of Iranian foreign policy, it is also means of that policy as well. Since its early days, the Islamic Republic has shown a strong affinity for supporting armed groups in other countries.⁶² This has been a flexible and scalable tool that straddles the line of legitimate political party and armed militia. Iran can use various groups as a means of fighting an enemy host state, battling a third-party actor as part of broader competition, or simply expanding Iranian influence inside an otherwise non-hostile state. Sometimes, these ends overlap and transitioning between them is

⁶⁰ Rena Netjes, "Iran and the YPG Team Up in Northwestern Syria," *MENAAffairs*, August 22, 2022, <https://menaaffairs.com/iran-and-the-ypg-team-up-in-northwestern-syria/>.

⁶¹ Yuksekkas, "Erdogan Pledges Syria Incursion."

⁶² Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Military Clients," 160.

seamless. This tool of Iranian policy was born out of zealous fervor to export the Islamic Revolution to other countries, but has since morphed into a more cynically minded expression of realpolitik.⁶³ The first such entity the Islamic Republic helped establish was Lebanese Hezbollah in the early 1980s. Lebanese Hezbollah has proven an incredible success from Tehran's perspective, giving Iran an outsized influence within Lebanon and leverage against Israel. Since then, Iran has tried to recreate this success numerous times. Iranian influence in Iraq expanded and American influence was countered by backing a constellation of Shi'ite groups. Further leverage was obtained against Israel by establishing ties to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Supporting the Houthis stymied regional rival Saudi Arabia's interests in Yemen. This approach is not without its limitations.⁶⁴ The robustness and effectiveness of Iranian support is strongly correlated to sectarian alignment and geographical proximity. More significantly, Iranian-backed groups have never managed to entirely transition from armed resistance into a constructive political force. Nonetheless, armed proxies are arguably the defining feature of Iranian foreign policy.

Iran's Kurdish policies are not usually described within the proxy paradigm. Yet, this descriptive fit is quite warranted.⁶⁵ In fact, the proxy nature of Iranian-Kurdish relations goes back to the early days of the Islamic Republic. During the Iran-Iraq War, the KDP and PUK were cultivated as allies against the Ba'ath regime.⁶⁶ Budding Turkish nationalism and the threat it posed in Iran's Azeri regions concerned Tehran, so Iran developed PKK linkages from their Syrian allies to counterbalance the Turks.⁶⁷ By supporting the PKK, Iran aligned itself against the KDP within Iraqi Kurdish politics.

⁶³ Afshon Ostovar, "The Limits of Religion," 1240–1249. This is not to say ideology is no longer an important theme, merely that Iranian clientele has expanded beyond strictly revolutionary purposes.

⁶⁴ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Military Clients," 184–186.

⁶⁵ Perhaps this discrepancy is attributable to an American perception. Traditionally, one of the things the United States uses to designate Iran a malign actor is its support for proxy groups. Within Iraq, Iranian support for Kurdish groups is dwarfed by its support of Shi'ite groups in the south. Neither have the Kurds challenged American interests in Iraq. Consequently, describing Iraqi Kurds as an "Iranian proxy" does not fit the American political narrative.

⁶⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 347–363.

⁶⁷ Olson, *The Kurdish Question*, 32–34.

Supporting the PUK was a natural follow on. Tehran's PUK-PKK alignment within Iraq was enhanced by concerns over the possibility KDP-KDPI and Turkish-KDP ties turning into close Turkish support of the KDPI and other Iranian Kurdish groups in Iraq. Close American-Kurdish ties during the American occupation of Iraq kept Iranian connections within the newly formed KRG from growing, but this seems to have merely suppressed external competition within the KRG rather than eradicate it. As the United States has drawn down its presence in Iraq over the last decade, internecine Kurdish politics and the same international alignments have begun to reappear.⁶⁸ The establishment of Rojava and the war against the IS extended the KRG's political fracture lines into Syria, with Iranian support defaulting to the PYD inside Rojava. Iranian support for Kurdish proxies in Iraq has been largely limited to arms and other small tangible items, not extending to political or diplomatic cover for its friends. This bellies Kurdish groups' relatively low status within a hypothetical power ranking of Tehran's favorite partners. Nonetheless, they still provide Iran with significant influence in the KRG specifically, Iraq more generally, and leverage against the Turks.

G. THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE, AND CONCLUSIONS

Currently, the situation in the KRG sits on a knife's edge. Intra-Kurdish politics seem on the verge of breaking back into open civil war. Both Türkiye and Iran continue to expand their physical military presence within the KRG. Both countries remain tense about the presence of armed Kurdish groups in Iraq that present challenges within their own state.⁶⁹ The unresolved status of Rojava and the Syrian Civil War along with American withdrawal exacerbates competition within the KRG. Forecasting into the future, a resolution to this tension seems implausible. One potential outcome is the outbreak of a civil war within Iraqi Kurdistan. The historical precedent from the 1990s for this possibility is quite strong, especially given that it was only ended by external

⁶⁸ Amberin Zaman, "Family Feuds Among Iraq's Kurdish Leaders Embolden Iran," Al Monitor, December 9, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/family-feuds-among-iraqs-kurdish-leaders-embolden-iran>.

⁶⁹ Whether or not Iranian concerns are justified will be covered more in the next chapter; however, the language used in Iranian media regarding its military presence in the KRG bears a strikingly similarity to Turkish media coverage of their own military operations in Iraq.

American pressure and not a genuine resolution of issues. This would drag Türkiye and Iran into more open conflict, albeit likely via proxy. However, both countries have a vested interest in maintaining a modicum of stability in Iraq. Neither are they keen to jeopardize their economic ties. Rather, a more likely outcome is that intra-Kurdish conflict remains just below the level of open conflict due to their pressure. Iran would seek to aggressively pursue its own interests within the KRG, but, as in the recent past, avoid overplaying its hand. Overall, tension would continue to ratchet higher, but not find resolution or break into open conflict. This state of nervous stasis would be broken by a resolution of the Syrian Civil War and Rojava's role in that event, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that Iran's Kurdish foreign policy is so disconnected from its domestic Kurdish policy. This stands in stark contrast to Turkish policy. With the exception of one aspect of the Pahlavi-KDP connection in the 1960s-70s, Iran's relation to Kurds abroad has been almost exclusively about that state, not the Kurds. Even the ongoing Iranian military presence in the KRG, although ostensibly about combatting Iranian Kurdish groups, seems linked to greater Turkish incursions. Iran perceives itself as having a historical role as the leader that dictates regional events. Unsurprisingly, its neighbors do not share this outlook. Restive minorities, such as the Kurds, have presented Iran a potential tool to achieve its goals against uncooperative states. Neither of these factors have changed. Iran has a grandiose self-perception. As long as there is no fully independent Kurdistan, which does not appear likely any time soon, Kurdish questions around the northern Levant will provide Iran with the potential for the leverage it seeks. What has changed is the regional political dynamics. Previously, Iran simply used the Kurds as direct leverage against their foreign rivals. American presence and Turkish resurgence have intertwined formerly separate issues. For instance, Turkish-Iranian competition in the KRG will have repercussions not just in Baghdad, but also in the south Caucasus and Syria. How Iran balances this nuanced complexity will be fascinating to follow as it unfolds.

III. KURDS AND IRANIAN DOMESTIC SECURITY POLITICS

A. INTRODUCTION

There is a dichotomy between Iran's foreign and domestic Kurdish policies. Latching on to Iran's foreign Kurdish policy is intellectually alluring; its sheer complexity draws the scholar in. Nonetheless, it is Iran's domestic Kurdish policy that is likely to yield more consequential lessons about Iran itself. Official statistics are lacking and estimates vary, but as many as 10 million Kurds live in Iran.⁷⁰ Even with more conservative estimates at roughly 10% of Iran's total population, Kurdish nationalism represents a significant security challenge to the state. What really catalyzes the issue is the presence of other significant ethnic groups within Iran. How Tehran relates to its own Kurdish population will reverberate among Arabs, Baluch, and others. For the Islamic Republic, the fear is that any perceived Kurdish successes would inspire ethnic nationalist agitation around the country. Consequently, the government takes the hardest line possible to set an example for others. Furthermore, the Kurdish nationalist movement within Iran has been the most persistent of all ethnic nationalist movements in Iran.⁷¹ For governments in Tehran then, Kurdish nationalism appears to be the leading edge of a force that could rip Iran apart at the seams. The threat perception is existential.

Analyzing Iran from a larger national or regional perspective, Kurdish nationalism seems to be a rather minor problem within Iran. Nonetheless, giving it breathing room would undermine the Iranian state at a fundamental level due to underlying nationalist conceptions. Nationalism has become one of the dominant themes in international politics since its advent in the 19th century. Iran is no exception. Persian

⁷⁰ "Iran," CIA – The World Factbook, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://cia.gov/the-world-factbook>.

⁷¹ For comparisons sake, Azeri nationalism has been largely dormant since 1946. Arabs nationalists noticeably did not jump ship when their Arab brothers from Iraq invaded in 1980. The Baluch are a notable case, but Baluchi nationalists cannot boast the same significant international backers, strength of transnational ties, or demographic weight that Kurds enjoy. Neither is Baluchi identity as well developed and understood as Kurdish identity.

nationalism began to emerge through the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁷² As the Iranian state attempted to enforce the newly developed Persian identity, minority groups that did not fit that identity in some aspect began developing their own identity politics.⁷³ This is the advent of Kurdish identity in Iran. The conflicting narratives of Kurdish and Persian identity meant that Kurdish identity functioned as a direct intellectual challenge to the state's nationalist project. This environment of conflicting identities enabled the political endeavor of Kurdish nationalism to arise. Iranian domestic policy towards Kurdish nationalism, then, is a counter-reaction to the reactionary force that is Kurdish nationalism. While nationalism and identity are abstractions, they are powerful ideas that drive many individuals to take tangible action. The primary effort of this chapter will be exploring the interplay of competing official state and Kurdish ideologies and linking them to current and historical policy action.

Stacking reactionary and counter-reactionary layers on each other explains the uncompromising Iranian position, but not the persistence of the Kurdish problem. At a surface level, any ethnic nationalist movement causes just as much threat to Iran as the Kurds do. However, Arab and Azeri nationalist movements that nearly destroyed Iran in the 1940s have been largely dormant.⁷⁴ By way of comparison, Iran's Kurdish regions have experienced significant rounds of militant activism almost every decade since then. Why the difference? Kurdish national identity is uniquely positioned to challenge all three pillars of Persian nationalism. In addition to ethnicity, Kurds differ from the Iranian state in religion and live in a border region. Arabs and Azeris do not challenge Shi'i identity. Groups such as the Qashqai do not reside in sensitive geography. The only other group that challenges Persian national identity on all three grounds of ethnicity, religion, and geography are the Baluch. But the Baluch are demographically significantly smaller than the Kurds and Kurdish militancy dates back over a half century beyond the Baluch

⁷² Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3–4.

⁷³ Vali, *The Making of Kurdish Identity*, 14–36.

⁷⁴ Robert Olson, "The 'Azeri' Question and Turkey-Iran Relations, 2000–2002," *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 8, no. 4 (2002): 61–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110208428678>.

equivalent.⁷⁵ Kurdish nationalism, then, is uniquely oriented to comprehensively challenge domestic Iranian security policy.

B. PERSIAN NATIONALISM: THE THREE PILLARS

To understand this problem analytically, Persian nationalism comes first. It is based on three distinct, but overlapping pillars; these are geography, religion, and ethnicity. The basis of these themes of the nationalist mythology are rooted in history. Drawing from the ancient Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid empires provide a large swath of geography in which to define a Persian nation. Outside of the central core of the Iranian Plateau, the Zagros Mountains and the Elburz Mountains, these empires established extended periods of control well into Mesopotamia in the west, Anatolia and the Caucasus to the north, and deep into the Central Asian steppes to the east. However, the modern sense of what constitutes Iran is much less expansive.⁷⁶ Over the last several centuries, neighboring empires blocked Iranian expansion and expanded at Iranian expense. Particularly during the Qajar period, this decline triggered Persian awareness of and attachment to geography. Reza Khan's state building efforts and his preoccupation with historical Persian empires further cemented this sentiment. Today's borders were mostly settled upon at the close of the First World War. Episodes of ethnic unrest in the 1940s linked issues of ethnicity and geography for Persian nationalists. Echos of bygone empire are also present in Iran's sense of sphere of influence in its interaction with the Persianate countries of Afghanistan and Tajikistan.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, as an issue of Persian nationalism, geography can be decoupled from ethnicity. Echoes of bygone imperial competition can still be witnessed in the decades long dispute over the Shatt al-Arab with

⁷⁵ Beehner, *Iran's Ethnic Groups*.

⁷⁶ Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 5.

⁷⁷ Giorgio Cafiero, "Drones Sing of Strong Iran-Tajikistan Relations as Tehran Looks East," Al Jazeera, June 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/8/drones-sign-of-strong-iran-tajik-relations-as-tehran-looks-east>. Iran has also been expanding its relations and influence in Armenia, another area of former empire. However, this seems driven more by the hard security need of countering Israeli influence than by irredentism.

Iraq, irredentist claims to Bahrain, and an outstanding dispute with the United Arab Emirates over three islands in the Gulf.⁷⁸

As a matter of national mythology, Persian nationalists have had a love-hate relationship with religion over time.⁷⁹ At moments over the past century, religion has been a suppressed outsider with relation to the Iranian state. At other times, it has superseded ethnicity at the center of national identity. Religion as an element of Persian nationhood dates to the budding Safavid dynasty imposing Twelver Shi'ism on its subjects.⁸⁰ Safavid religious efforts succeeded, but Twelver Shi'ism as a political force hid beneath the surface for the next couple of centuries.⁸¹ Early 20th century state building efforts by Iran's rulers sought to create a purely secular Persian state. However, the regime clearly overreached as religion was a key source of opposition that toppled the Pahlavi monarchy and created a pendulum swing to the opposite extreme with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Initially, the Islamic Republic professed the transnational nature of its religious approach. This notion was crippled by the lack of support among Iraqi Shi'ites during the Iran-Iraq War.⁸² Shi'ite religious connection continues to be an official talking point of Iranian foreign policy and the Iranians do have more success with Shi'ite than non-Shi'ite groups, but there have been clear limits on the effectiveness of transnational religious politics.⁸³ Yet, the Islamic Republic continues to stake religion to the core of its claim to legitimacy. This leaves religion at the center of the question of Iranian identity.

⁷⁸ Hussein Ibish, "Iran's New Ploy to Disrupt the Mideast: Laying Claim to Bahrain," Bloomberg, September 20, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-09-21/iran-claims-bahrain-to-shake-up-nuclear-talks-and-rebuff-israel>.

⁷⁹ Meir Litvak, "God's Favored Nation: The New Religions Nationalism in Iran," *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 11, no. 10 (2020): 542. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100541>.

⁸⁰ Najam Haider, *Shi'i Islam: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 155–156.

⁸¹ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 105–146.

⁸² Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988): 167.

⁸³ Afshon Ostovar, "Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion," *International Relations* 94, no. 6 (2018): 1237–1255.

Of the three pillars of Persian nationalism, ethnicity is the youngest. It is also the pillar that turns Iranian nationalism into Persian nationalism, thereby becoming problematic for Kurds and other minorities. The decline of the state under the Qajar dynasty and the ensuing geographic shrinking of the empire left many patriotic Iranians searching for a stronger state.⁸⁴ To build a stronger state, the ensuing Pahlavi monarchy began building a strong sense of identity grounded in the idea of Aryan ethnicity.⁸⁵ The following Persianization campaign did forge a more cohesive national identity, but not everyone bought in. When the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979, its position was that all Iranians had suffered under the Pahlavis and refused to address ethnic grievances.⁸⁶ When the Islamic Republic chose religion as its *raison d'être*, it defaulted into continuing Pahlavi ethnic policy. Even though the regime tries to ignore the question, this leaves ethnicity and Iranian national identity an open question to the present moment. Compared to the Persian nationalist pillars of geography and religion, ethnicity seems to be the stronger and more provocative. After all, we speak of a Kurdish insurgency, not a Sunni sectarian resistance. That is not to say religion and geography are unimportant. Indeed, Kurdish identity provokes responses that demonstrate just how much they underpin the Persian nationalist psyche. Rather, ethnicity is the most salient flashpoint, especially from the Kurdish perspective.

C. PERSIAN NATIONALISM: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Having teased apart the themes of Persian nationalism, its history must be addressed chronologically to fully recontextualize it. The obvious starting point is Shah Isma'il founding the Safavid dynasty in the early 16th century.⁸⁷ After conquering the Iranian heartland from the west, Shah Isma'il's conquests stretched from Mesopotamia and eastern Anatolia to well into modern day Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

⁸⁴ Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 102–104.

⁸⁵ Ali Anooshahr, "Franz Babinger and the Legacy of the 'German Counter-Revolution' in Early Modern Iranian Historiography," in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie and Afshin Marashi (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): 25–48.

⁸⁶ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 187.

⁸⁷ Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind*, 123–144.

Aggressively promoting Twelver Shi'ism also instituted a new intra-Islamic sectarian strife. Combining these two facts, Shah Isma'il found himself deep in a conflict with the budding young Ottoman Empire. Ottoman armies proved to be the superior force. Over the next couple hundred years, they pushed the Safavids back all along the Iran's western border and even challenged Iranian sovereignty up through the First World War. Safavid weakness was further exposed by the rebellion and establishment of an independent Afghanistan in the early 18th century. By the end of the century, the Safavids were a decrepit force and replaced by the Qajar dynasty.

But the Qajars were to prove even more inept at arresting Iran's geopolitical decline.⁸⁸ Simultaneous to their rise, the expansion of the Russian Empire was beginning to reach the region. A weak Iranian state made a tempting target for the Russians. During the 19th century, the Qajars suffered a series of wars, defeats, and diktat treaties at the hands of the Russians. First, Iran lost all of its territory in the Caucasus. Then, Russia began encroaching in Central Asia. Meanwhile, Iran rapidly lost influence in the Gulf and along its eastern border due to British Machinations. Indeed, the Qajar state was so weak that even the national heartland and Tehran became an arena of diplomatic contest for controlling influence between Russia and Great Britain in the Great Game. Obviously, this all sat poorly with patriotic Iranians. Although fully formed Persian nationalism had not yet arrived, this sense of colonial exploitation was an incubator for it. To push back against outside power and reestablish national pride, the state needed to be reformed. A furtive attempt was made to do so through a revolution and constitution in 1905–06. Ultimately, this effort came to naught and it was left to the arrival of a military strongman, Reza Khan, in the 1920s to forge a modern Iranian state.

Between the end of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, both Great Britain and Russia were too exhausted to interfere in Iran, giving Reza Khan a free hand to pursue state building on his own terms.⁸⁹ The most important task was creating a strong sense of national identity. National mythology was based on pre-Islamic Persian

⁸⁸ Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 31–152.

⁸⁹ John Le Clair, "A Future for Iran: The Land Once Known as Persia Embarks on a New Policy of Strict Nationalism," *Current History* 46, no. 4 (1941): 86–89.

empires. Their exploits became the ideal of what a Persian nation was capable of while the preceding two centuries showed the pitfalls that could become a disunified nation. In keeping with the zeitgeist of the times, Persian nationalist intellectuals traced Persian lineage back to Indo-European stock, specifically the Aryan race.⁹⁰ Some of these scholars tried to carve out space that provided for Iran's minority groups within the nationalist myth.⁹¹ However, this nuance did not trickle down in the practice of state policy. To ensure that the nationalist project was successful, the Pahlavi regime mandated linguistic Persianization. Persian was to be the only language allowed in schools and government business while non-Persian place names were changed to Persian ones. On top of forming and forcefully teaching a Persian nationalist mythology, Reza Shah also undertook many social and economic endeavors to modernize Iran. Most notably for the development of Kurdish nationalism, nomadic people on Iran's periphery were forced to settle.⁹² With all of these initiatives, Reza Khan certainly created a stronger Iranian state, but he also created an impending backlash against his harsh policies.

The first wave of this backlash broke with the close of the Second World War. To ensure Iran did not declare for Germany early in the War, a joint Russo-British invasion had toppled Reza Shah in favor of his son Mohamed Reza and occupied the country through the end of the War. After the War ended, Imperial Britain was clearly a receding force and its Iranian influence was waning. Russia on the other hand, made a play to bring Iran completely into the Soviet sphere. In addition to heavy meddling in Iranian electoral politics, the Russians also supported breakaway republics in Azeri and Kurdish regions.⁹³ While Russian support was crucial in these brief independence movements, they were just as indicative of just how unpopular Persianization had been among the ethnic minorities.⁹⁴ Outside of Russian influence, Arabs in the resource rich southwest

⁹⁰ David Motadel, "Iran and the Aryan Myth," in *Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Ali Ansari (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014): 108–146.

⁹¹ Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 214–216.

⁹² Koohi-Kamali, *Pastoral Nationalism*, 18–37.

⁹³ Archie Roosevelt, Jr., "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *The Middle East Journal* 1, no. 3 (1947): 247–269.

⁹⁴ Vali, *The Making of Kurdish Identity*, 29–36.

became politically militant and activist.⁹⁵ The more irrelevant Qashqai revolted, too. Within a couple short years, thanks to a politically deft prime minister and a revamped army, the Iranian state had re-exerted its control over each of these dissatisfied regions. However, chauvinist Persian nationalists failed to recognize the chickens coming home to roost. To them, the whole episode served to remind them that little had changed since the Qajar years; powerful neighbors still sought to tear Iran apart with the added lesson that Iran's own minorities were not to be trusted.

The Pahlavis' authoritarian tendencies finally got the better of them when popular unrest boiled over in 1978. Nearly every segment of society mobilized in the revolution.⁹⁶ When the Shah finally departed, there was a brief moment during which it was unclear what vision for a future Iran would take the reins of power.⁹⁷ Despite the expectations of minority groups like the Kurds, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the religious elements of society that seized power with him drastically reduced the potential inclusivity of the state. Their conception of the new Iranian identity focused on religion. Entrusting leadership to Islamic jurists, specifically Twelver Shi'i ulama in practice, would create a just and prosperous Iran.⁹⁸ While acknowledging minority religions like Christianity and Zoroastrianism were acknowledged in the new constitution, minority forms of Islam were not. While the regime's official position regarded all Islam as equal in the state, the reality was that Twelver Shi'ism ruled the day with the treatment of other Islamic practice ranging from underrepresentation of Sunnis to outright persecution of the Baha'is.⁹⁹ Since the new foundation of the state was to be religion, the Islamic Republic also refused to recognize issues of ethnicity as legitimate.¹⁰⁰ If all individuals are equal as Islamic citizens, then differences such as language are irrelevant. Raising these issues

⁹⁵ Brian Mann, "The Khuzistani Arab Movement, 1941–1946: A Case of Nationalism?," in *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie and Afshin Marashi (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): 113–136.

⁹⁶ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 130–131.

⁹⁷ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 179.

⁹⁸ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 195–196

⁹⁹ Koohi-Kamali, *Pastoral Nationalism*, 143.

¹⁰⁰ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 195.

was tantamount to treason. Consequently, grievances raised by ethnic minorities were ignored and ethnic Persian nationalist administrative tendencies from the Pahlavi years were not changed. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic's defensive instincts were further seared into the consciousness of the young state by the invasion of Iraq in 1980. Through the decades since, the regime has not shown any signs of reconsidering this portion of its intellectual foundation.

D. THE DEVELOPMENT OF KURDISH NATIONALISM

To counter Persian nationalism and identity, Kurds have their own nationalism and identity. Kurdish mythology traces Kurdish to the ancient Medes who helped end the biblical Assyrian Empire and were crucial partners in the Achaemenid Empire.¹⁰¹ Distinctly Kurdish proto-national identity began to emerge around the Safavid and Ottoman Empires. In the northern Levant, a number of tribes inhabited the mountains between the Arab, Turkish, and Persianate worlds who were readily distinguishable from all three.¹⁰² These people became known as Kurds. By the early 20th century, a group of intellectual elites, largely in the growing diaspora, were articulating a Kurdish identity unique from their respective Ottoman and Qajar states.¹⁰³ Their efforts to create an internationally recognized Kurdish state in the aftermath of the First World War proved fruitless, but their work laid the foundations for Kurdish nationalists in the future. Part of the reason for their failure was that neither the Ottoman nor Qajar empires had developed enough of their own nationalist identity to inflict it upon others. The newly formed states of Iraq and Turkey, along with the Iranian change in leadership, changed this. While distinct in their own ways, the Kurdish experience of and reaction to nation building followed a broadly similar arc in each of these states. Perhaps Kurdish nationalism picks at the Persian nationalist ego precisely because it is a reaction. But Kurdishness does seem rather uniquely oriented to specifically challenge the pillars of Persian nationalism. Kurds are linguistically and religiously distinct from Persians. Iranian Kurds' geographic

¹⁰¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 16.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰³ Hamit Bozarslan, "An Overview of Kurdistan of the 19th Century," in *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. Michael Gunter (London: Routledge, 2018): 48–62.

location on the border of two empires that had been taking Qajar territory and Kurds' transnational nature also place them in a sensitive spot vis-a-vis Persian nationalists' geographic insecurities. Consequently, then, Kurds were a logical target for extra aggressive Iranian state building.

As Reza Khan launched his state building efforts in the 1920s, Kurds were not singled out, but did experience a hefty dose of statist reforms.¹⁰⁴ Linguistic Persianization efforts probably created the longest lasting sense of Kurdishness among most people. Although never the explicit reason for violent resistance, latent religious sentiment probably compounded the alienation of Kurdish regions.¹⁰⁵ Understanding Kurdish society's social and economic development is the central component to explaining why Kurds experienced so much state-induced upheaval, and why they reacted so strongly. For centuries, the Kurds had been nomads. Regionally, they served as the area's herders. Forced settlement and the hardening of political borders collapsed this economic sector, both in terms of markets and production.¹⁰⁶ For what was already an impoverished region, this unintended disruption bred discontent. Politically, this policy also had dramatic effects that were intended. Nomadism had created a Kurdish society that was largely autonomous and only loosely tied to the government in Tehran. The resultant political structure was tribal in nature. Tribal leaders, those who stood to lose the most from these policies, initiated the first round of armed Kurdish resistance. Agha Simko, leader of the Shikak tribal confederation, was the most significant of these rebels. His movement expressed itself in Kurdish nationalist language, but his political maneuvering and behavior are better explained by tribal politics than genuine nationalist sentiment.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, it was a seminal moment as the first revolt in Iran that could

¹⁰⁴ Koohi-Kamali, *Pastoral Nationalism*, 20–31.

¹⁰⁵ The Sheikh Said revolt in Turkey provides a contemporary comparison point for what religiously motivated Iranian Kurdish resistance would have looked like. A similar revolt never materialized in Iran. However, religion was a focal point for expressing disapproval of modernization by underdeveloped, rural communities across the world in this time period; albeit the disapproval did not often lead to violence. It is difficult to imagine Iranian Kurds as different from this global trend and that religious critique of state policy did not factor into motivating Kurdish resistance. Notably, religious motivation would not have been sectarian at this point.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 25–36.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 44–52.

be described as Kurdish in nature. However, Reza Khan proved adept at tribal politics and effectively crushed Kurdish rebellion, bringing it to a close with the assassination of Simko in 1929.

Although Kurdish nationalists lay low for the next decade and a half, they were not inactive. During this time, they established important linkages with Iraqi Kurdish political organizations and the Soviets.¹⁰⁸ This led to a widespread and genuinely nationalist Kurdish self-identity. Initially, Soviet influence also led to a Marxist political agenda, but this agenda was dropped to create a more inclusive political party when the KDP was formally established. This carefully laid groundwork bore fruit in the tumultuous year of 1946. One of the Russian's main tools for expanding its influence in Iran was support for an independent socialist republic in Iranian Azerbaijan. Hoping to also benefit from Russian support and capitalize on Iranian weakness, the charismatic KDPI leader Qazi Mohamed declared an independent Kurdish republic in Mahabad. The Mahabad Republic successfully established the administrative framework of a functioning state. Newspapers and other propaganda further spread Kurdish nationalist ideas to Kurdish citizens. One piece of dramatic theater was especially noted for its impact around the region.¹⁰⁹ Security services, too, were placed on a solid footing. A number of Kurdish students were dispatched to study at Soviet military academies. The legendary Iraqi Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani was in exile in Mahabad at the time and led the Republic's military endeavors.

Despite these important state building achievements, the Mahabad Republic was doomed by two fatal weaknesses. It was entirely dependent on Russian diplomatic cover and for all the progress in developing Kurdish identity, many rural elites still privileged tribal over national politics.¹¹⁰ When Russian influence in Iran collapsed, the Iranian military swiftly brought independent Azerbaijan back under control. Kurdish tribal leaders could see the writing on the wall and began abandoning the Republic to make their own deals with Tehran. To save his people the violence visited on Azerbaijan, Qazi

¹⁰⁸ Vali, *The Making of Kurdish Identity*, 33–41.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 112.

¹¹⁰ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 124–143.

Mohamed surrendered himself and the Republic to Iranian authorities. Even though it ultimately failed, the Mahabad Republic would have important reverberations. At the local level, the KDPI was the only Kurdish political party for several decades and is still an important player to this day. Questions of social equity and justice that had been ignored in the name of unity to create the KDPI played into the failure of the Republic and later cropped up as divisive point within intra-Iranian Kurdish politics.¹¹¹ From a broader perspective, the Mahabad Republic is the only fully independent Kurdish government ever. As such, its memory carries a resonance with Kurdish nationalists inside and outside Iran. Unlike Agha Simko and other Kurdish tribal leaders in the 1920s, no historians question the Republic's nationalist credentials. Of course, all of this also permanently branded any Kurdish political activity as separatism in the eyes of the Iranian state.

E. SINCE MAHABAD: PARTIES, INSURGENCY, AND FAILURE

With the failure of the Mahabad Republic, the KDPI and Kurdish nationalism went back underground for a time, although not dormant. The Pahlavi regime continued its Persianization and economic modernization efforts that was disruptive to Kurdish life. A spontaneous peasants' revolt in the 1950s underscored the fact that even though the KDPI and Kurdish political activity could not be seen publicly, Kurdish discontent continued to fester beneath the surface.¹¹² Meanwhile, the KDPI continued to act as the sole Kurdish political organization of note. During this period, their platform began to solidify. Despite the allure of Mahabad in 1946, it had become obvious that Iranian Kurdistan was not economically viable as an independent state. Furthermore, while Kurds felt especially repressed, they were not only group suffering at the hands of the regime. Ongoing contacts with other resistance groups, such as the Mojahedin-e Khalq, convinced KDPI leadership that there were political actors within Iran that they could work with. This combination of factors led to the formulation of the official KDPI agenda

¹¹¹ Ibid., 150–165.

¹¹² Ibid., 72–86.

that they still proclaim up to the present, “autonomy Kurdistan, democracy for Iran.”¹¹³ Aspirations for full independence had been given up and so long as certain rights were protected, the KDPI saw a place for themselves and the Kurds within a greater Iran. Notably, issues of social class and economic injustice were left off the party platform.

Another important connection for the KDPI and Iranian Kurds were their Iraqi brethren. With Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s return to Iraq, the KDP and the Kurds had become a major player in Iraqi politics by 1960.¹¹⁴ Tied at the hip since their essentially simultaneous founding, this provided the KDPI with the most significant outside backing it had had since the Russians in the 1940s. Kurdish political and military exploits in Iraq also served to heighten Kurdish consciousness in Iran. Given these developments, the KDPI felt confident enough to launch an insurgency in the late 1960s.¹¹⁵ It was a low intensity insurgency that never seemed to really challenge Iranian control of Kurdish regions. Throughout the next several years of insurgency, the KDPI stayed true to its agenda strictly limited to autonomy. Unsurprisingly, the Iranian state always perceived the insurgents as motivated by seeking to breakaway with full independence. Unfortunately for the KDPI, they had become dependent on KDP support. The Shah managed to split the groups by offering the KDP support against Iraq in exchange for turning on the KDPI in 1975. Quickly and thoroughly hunted down by the KDP, KDPI leadership crumbled and their insurgency ended. The KDPI went back underground for three years.

The Iranian Revolution in 1978–79 brought most opposition groups out from hiding and into the public eye and it breathed life back into the KDPI.¹¹⁶ Their autonomy-democracy formulation fit in well enough with many opposition players. The Revolution featured insanely high levels of participation throughout the country and Kurdish regions were no exception.¹¹⁷ A half century of Persianization and economic

¹¹³ “About,” KDPI, November 11, 2022, <https://pdki.org/about>.

¹¹⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 297–316.

¹¹⁵ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 139–146.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹⁷ Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, 131.

underdevelopment poured out into the streets in the form of Kurdish protesters. Between the political discipline of the KDPI and strong street level support for the Revolution, Kurdish expectations were high that the new Iranian state would make important concessions. Initially, the KDPI acquiesced to the ascendancy of Khomeini and Islamists with agreements that Kurdish interests would be fairly represented in the new constitution.¹¹⁸ However, the budding Islamic Republic quickly reneged. The draft of the new constitution made no comment on the issue of ethnicity, the key Kurdish concern. Worryingly, it also failed to recognize Islamic minorities, a less salient issue, but a good indicator nonetheless.¹¹⁹ While this should not be surprising in hindsight, given the Islamic Republic's self-perception as addressed earlier, this was not yet clear at the time.

After a fresh round of negotiations with the new government failed, the KDPI went back into armed revolt.¹²⁰ This time around, they were much more successful militarily. Partly, this was due to technical improvement in their military operations. Partly, it was also due to greater incompetence on the Iranian side bred by the chaos of the preceding two years and their distraction with the Iraqi invasion.¹²¹ Kurdish insurgents managed to establish de facto control of the countryside. The Islamic Republic only managed to maintain tenuous control of urban centers. Even then, Iranian forces lost control of more westerly cities, such as Sanandaj, for extended periods of time. Tehran's response was harsh but ineffective. It relied heavily on the emerging Pasdaran, the forerunner to the IRGC, instead of the regular army as its muscle. Their heavy-handed tactics won them no love from the local population. In cities under Iranian control, they instituted revolutionary courts and martial law. These courts usually sentenced suspected rebels to the gallows, although most were likely innocent since actual Kurdish fighters would have remained in the countryside and out of the hands of the Pasdaran. This behavior by the Iranian government seared further resentment into their Kurdish subjects.

¹¹⁸ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 149.

¹¹⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 394.

¹²⁰ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 161–167.

¹²¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 401–412.

Despite this state of affairs, the KDPI never budged from its limited demands for autonomy and maintained open communications with the Islamic Republic through the 1980s.¹²² But the Islamic Republic never seriously considered a deal. Undoubtedly, the fact that the KDPI was in armed revolt stoked old Persian nationalist insecurities about sensitive border regions. This feeling was compounded by simultaneous Iran-Iraq War. Even if the Islamic Republic had decided to treat with the moderate position of the KDPI, the KDPI soon lost its position as the sole voice of the Iranian Kurdish population.¹²³ Their moderate demands for no more than autonomy and insistence on negotiating with a government in Tehran that was treating Kurds with increasing brutality did not sit well with everyone. Furthermore, hearkening back to the compromises made in the initial founding of the KDPI, the KDPI had never attempted to address issues of economic inequality. Not only had Kurdistan been economically underdeveloped compared to the rest of Iran, but there were also significant problems of intra-Kurdish inequality. By not addressing this, the KDPI had developed a reputation as a conservative party of the elites. Those who wanted to take a harder line against Tehran and more populist minded individuals split from the KDPI to form the Komala party in 1981. Both the KDPI and the Komala experienced further splintering. This proved disastrous to the Kurdish position vis-a-vis the Islamic Republic.

This splintering not only weakened each group, but also erupted into fratricidal civil war between the parties. Combined with the assassination of the most gifted Kurdish leaders by the Iranians, the parties failed to maintain permanent control of territory in Iran.¹²⁴ By the 1990s, the parties had mostly retreated to bases in Iraq. Iran's no negotiation approach largely worked. Once in Iraq, the parties were separated from the people they represent. While they maintain some military capability and proclaim that they still are the best representative of Iranian Kurds, their actual influence on the streets of Iranian Kurdistan is at best unknown. Meanwhile, Iranian Kurds are left to endure the regime. Persianization policies are perhaps not pursued as aggressively, but neither is

¹²² Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 171–174.

¹²³ Ibid. 175–180.

¹²⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 419–422.

Kurdishness acknowledged. Political and religious underrepresentation in the state is still quite noticeable.¹²⁵ A harsh justice system remains in place. Economic underdevelopment also remains a theme, underscored by the large number of Kurdish youth who must turn to dangerous border smuggling work to earn a living.¹²⁶

Enduring Kurdish discontent continues to simmer just beneath the surface. A dominant electoral showing in Kurdish regions by presidential candidate Mohamed Khatami was widely interpreted as a vote of frustration against the Islamic Republic.¹²⁷ Another recent development in Iranian Kurdish politics was the establishment of the PKK-affiliated PJAK in 2003.¹²⁸ With the Komala and KDPI operating from outside Iran, a vacuum of Kurdish political organization existed inside Iran. The PJAK may have sprung up in that gap. However, an alternate explanation is that the PKK sought to indirectly gain American support by standing up an anti-Islamic Republic militia. While these explanations are not mutually exclusive, the fact that PJAK is headquartered and administered outside of Iran lends weight to the latter analysis. Between the PKK's heavy-handed tactics to maintain group cohesion, radical social agenda, and divisive effect on Iraqi Kurdish politics, many Iranian Kurds view the rise of the PJAK with trepidation.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, the PJAK is now a permanent part of the Iranian Kurdish political spectrum. All three major parties have engaged in sporadic guerilla fighting against the regime for the last decade. This is a testament to their continued connection to at least some Iranian Kurds. However, given the Islamic Republic's plethora of regional enemies with the money, means, and motivation to back Kurdish militias, it is perhaps more surprising just how inconsistent this round of insurgency has been.

¹²⁵ Koohi-Kamali, *Pastoral Nationalism*, 147. It is worth noting that the only Kurds who have served the Islamic Republic in a significant capacity are Shi'ite.

¹²⁶ Mehmed Bedirxan, "Kolbars: Quest for a Livelihood on the Iran-Iraq Border Ends in Tragedy," Independent, January 26, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kolbars-quest-for-a-livelihood-on-the-iraniraq-border-ends-in-tragedy-b1788052.html>.

¹²⁷ Nada Entessar and Michael Gunter, "Iran and the Kurds," in *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. Michael Gunter (London: Routledge, 2018): 399–409.

¹²⁸ Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*, 206–208.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

F. THE CHALLENGE TO THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

It is at this point that some nuance must be added to this analysis. To adequately address the dueling reactionary nature of Kurdish and Persian nationalism, this work has had to separate the themes of each. This potentially risks overemphasizing the strength of Kurdish nationalism and identity in Iran today. The relationship in Iran between Kurdish nationalism, identity, political parties, and the actual interests of everyday Kurds is hazy. As has been alluded to, the Kurdish political parties are physically separated from Iranian Kurds. Does this mean they have become out of touch with the daily realities of Iranian Kurdistan? It is impossible to know to really know, but an affirmative answer would delegitimize the parties and the political violence they have created. Furthermore, the economic woes of Iranian Kurdistan are well established.¹³⁰ There is the idea that Kurdish discontent is merely an expression of economic frustration. Should Iran manage to fully develop and integrate the Kurdish economy, Kurdish nationalism would be a mere afterthought to most Kurds. Combining all of this, it becomes easy to construct a convincing narrative that Kurdish nationalism has no innate appeal to ordinary Kurds and is merely a tool of political machinations used by those seeking to obtain power and leverage. Is this true? Possibly. Indeed, Kurds have been a part of the Iranian state for centuries.

On the other hand, there is a risk of making the opposite analytic mistake. Undervaluing Kurdish nationalism ignores very real problems. Kurds are politically underrepresented in the formal institutions of government. Kurds are poorer than the average Iranian. Kurdishness has been suppressed by the Iranian state for close to a century. These grievances foster serious resentment that must find a voice. Kurdish nationalism has become the vessel of that discontent. This cycle has been entrenched for a century. At this point, Kurdish self-identity is firmly established. Kurdish nationalism has become strongly intertwined and cannot be easily dismissed. For the Iranian state, addressing Kurdish nationalism head on is thorny business. Considering the multi-ethnic makeup of the state, there is considerable risk of a Pandora's box effect. This risk is

¹³⁰ Koohi-Kamali, *Pastoral Nationalism*, 128–145.

exacerbated by the perception that engaging the Kurds after a century of ignoring or denying their concerns would be seen as caving and demonstrate the government's weakness.¹³¹ However, the Kurdish question in Iran will not resolve itself. It will continue to fester on until it is adequately addressed in one way or another.

G. KURDS AND THE ONGOING PROTESTS IN IRAN

One final note must be made as current events seem at risk of potentially overtaking this paper. Iran has been rocked by protests. Following the death of Mahsa Amini in the custody of the morality police, the nation took to the streets. Amini was a Kurd. Despite the national-wide character the ensuing protest assumed, initially, protests were heavily concentrated in Kurdish regions.¹³² One of Tehran's most notable early responses was to conduct missile strikes against Kurdish party bases in Iraq and blame them for the unrest.¹³³ This response was not entirely unwarranted. The security situation in Kurdish regions has seemingly been even more tense than in the rest of the country.¹³⁴ Kurdish parties have claimed to be protest organizers.¹³⁵ Furthermore, the protests across the nation have had a distinctly feminist flavor and both the Komala and PJAK have explicitly feminist political platforms.¹³⁶ In addition, targeted political violence in Sistan va Baluchistan province have undoubtedly further stoked the Islamic Republic's fears of

¹³¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 408.

¹³² "Protests Flare Across Iran in Violent Unrest over Woman's Death," Reuters, September 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/tehran-governor-accuses-protesters-attacks-least-22-arrested-2022-09-20/>.

¹³³ Amberin Zaman, "Tehran Strikes Kurdish Opponents in Iraq as Protests over Mahsa Amini's Death Convulse Iran," *Al Monitor*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/tehran-strikes-kurdish-opponents-iraq-protests-over-mahsa-aminis-death-convulse>.

¹³⁴ Miriam Berger and Sanam Mahoozi, "At the Center of Iran's Uprising, Kurds Now Face a Mounting Crackdown," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/18/iran-kurds-protests-mahsa-amini/>.

¹³⁵ "Mustafa Hijri in a Interview with La Repubblica," KDPI, October 14, 2022, <https://pdki.org/english/mustafa-hijri-in-a-interview-with-la-repubblica/>.

¹³⁶ "Read About," Komala, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.komalainternational.org/read-about/>; "Policy," PJAK, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://pjak.eu/en/policy/>.

ethnic separatism and revolt.¹³⁷ However, the regime also has a history of using banned ethnic political parties as a scapegoat. Perhaps the scapegoating narrative is not mutually exclusive to the narrative of actual concern within Tehran about the issue of ethnic separatism.

Regardless of which pieces come to the fore in retrospect, analysts will see these protests as a national, not merely Kurdish, affair. Rightfully so. Traditional regime strongholds such as Qom and Mashhad have experienced civil unrest. Chants of “death to Khamenei!” are commonplace.¹³⁸ Clearly, this is no longer about merely Kurdish discontent. However, in emphasizing the nation-wide narrative, the specifically Kurdish element will likely be lost. This would be unfortunate as it would leave specifically Kurdish concerns unaddressed. The uniquely Kurdish element is no mirage, either. After all, early unrest did have a distinctly Kurdish flavor.¹³⁹ Kurdish cities have faced some of the most severe crackdowns. It seems implausible that the large number of attendees at Amini’s funeral could have been national in makeup.¹⁴⁰ Considering the more rural nature of Kurdistan, if the attendees were indeed predominantly local, it would speak to the depth of Kurdish anger with the government. While Kurdish discontent drowning in the sea of national discontent is unfortunate, it is perhaps to be expected. This was the Kurdish experience in 1979. Ultimately, this seems to be the Catch-22 of Iranian Kurds. They are just insignificant enough within Iran that they cannot force change on their own.

¹³⁷ Adam Lucente, “Iranian IRGC Commander Killed During fighting with Protesters,” *Al Monitor*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/iranian-irgc-commander-killed-during-fighting-protesters>. We have no actual evidence to doubt the official state story that he was killed by protesters, but this seems highly suspect. An official of that seniority seems unlikely to have been involved in street fights and the location is well within the operating range of Baluchi nationalist groups.

¹³⁸ Nick Schiffrin and Zeba Warsi, “Students in Iran Refuse to Back Down from Protests Sparked by the Death of Young Woman,” *PBS*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/students-in-iran-refuse-to-back-down-from-protests-sparked-by-death-of-young-woman>.

¹³⁹ “Iran: Deadly Crackdown on Protests Against Mahsa Amini’s Death in Custody Needs Urgent Global Action,” *Amnesty International*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/iran-deadly-crackdown-on-protests-against-mahsa-aminis-death-in-custody-needs-urgent-global-action/>.

¹⁴⁰ “Clashes As Thousands as Thousands Attend Mahsa Amini Memorial in Iran’s Saqqez,” *Al Jazeera*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/26/clashes-thousands-attend-mahsa-amini-memorial-iran-saqqez>.

With support, either from abroad or domestically, Kurdish interests will lose out to those of their partners.

To tie all of this together, Kurdish problems have plagued the Iranian state for a century. However, they have never become acute outside of three or four instances, the 1920s, Mahabad in 1946, the insurgency beginning in 1980, and maybe the present. Each of these cases is closely linked to a crisis that more broadly threatened the Iranian state. Consequently, Kurdish concerns were either violently repressed in a way that ensured future discontent, kicked further down the road, or both. In the interregnum between these moments, the Kurds have been subjected to policies that leave them feeling minimized. This is inherent in the underlying conflict of ideologies between Kurdish and Persian nationalism. Considering just how precisely Kurdishness challenges Persian nationalism, the Iranian state has routinely taken an uncompromising and reactionary stance. Predictably, this leads to further Kurdish agitation. Consequently, it is difficult to foresee any end to this cycle. Without the complete disillusionment of Iran as we know it, Kurdish nationalism will continue to challenge Iranian policymakers through future generations.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. SUMMARY

Over the course of the preceding two chapters, this paper has looked at the Iranian interaction with Kurdish nationalism. Iran's policy towards Kurdish nationalism is bifurcated by the fact that some Kurds live within its borders and others do not. Although having a consistent and comprehensive Kurdish policy would seem logical, it does not. Consequently, Iran must address Kurdish nationalism as an issue of domestic affairs and international relations. Even then, Iran could pursue an international policy designed to buttress its domestic agenda, but this is not so. Rather, the reigning regime in Tehran, both Pahlavi and clerical, have opted to separate their international and domestic relations to Kurdish nationalist groups. Internecine Kurdish fighting is ripe for Iranian exploitation. Neither is Iran's interest in the Kurds amongst its neighbors solely about Kurdish nationalism. Either because Iran fears regional competitors too much or because they sense too great an opportunity, entities such as the PKK and KDPI are not linked in Iranian policy.

Abroad, Iran sees Kurdish nationalism as an opportunity to gain leverage against its rivals. During the Ba'ath years, Iraqi Kurds were in almost constant conflict with Baghdad. Tehran used support to Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the KDP to extract territorial concessions on the Shatt al-Arab. Through the Iran-Iraq War, the Kurds provided a second front that drained Iraqi resources away from the more significant southern front. The American imposition of a no-fly zone over northern Iraq gave Iraqi Kurds de facto autonomy and thus ended their usefulness as leverage against Baghdad. An ensuing civil war between the KDP and PUK laid the groundwork for future competition as Iran began cultivating its ties to the PUK and PKK. However, this competition remained underground for years as the American-Kurdish partnership and over a decade of American presence in Iraq kept a tight lid on intra-Kurdish fighting. The development of the Syrian Civil War with Syrian Kurds as independent players coincided with the beginning of the American retrenchment in Iraq. This reopened Turkish-Iranian competition in the Kurdish world while regionalizing the complex web of tensions.

Neither has the United States completely disappeared as a factor in Kurdish nationalist politics. While encouraging Kurdish nationalist groups is not an ideal move, Iran seeks to insulate itself against threatening competitors in what it sees as its backyard and the tactic of working through proxies is a familiar one.

Domestically, Tehran views Kurdish nationalism in no uncertain terms; it is a threat that cannot be tolerated. This is driven by the way in which Kurdish nationalism strikes at the greatest sensitivities of Persian nationalism. Losing significant chunks of land during the Qajar years heightened Iranian awareness of the risks associated with both ethnic separatism and its insecure border regions. In forging a national, Persian identity, the state alienated its Kurdish population, leading to a reactionary movement whose identity was about being explicitly different from Persian. Finally, as the Islamic Republic forged a post-Pahlavi system based on the country's longstanding Twelver Shi'ite predominance, a further wedge was driven between the state and its predominantly Sunni Kurds. The first appearance of real Kurdish nationalism in Iran, the Mahabad Republic, was the worst-case scenario Tehran could have dreamed of, appearing as a territorial dismemberment by an outside power that could create a domino effect with Iran's other ethnic minorities. This ingrained the perception of Kurdish nationalism as a force that could not be negotiated with. More moderate demands made by the KDPI in the 1980s were rejected out of hand and the only negotiations the Islamic Republic has engaged in has been to set up assassinations of Kurdish leadership. Nothing has changed since, and even if it should, the fractured nature of the Kurdish nationalist movement would necessitate an incomplete, piecemeal approach.

As outlined in the introduction, the question of Iranian policy with respect to Kurdish nationalism has many points that touch American Middle Eastern policy. Iraqi Kurds have been one of the United States' most useful and consistent partners in the region. Iran has been a primary adversary. Kurdish issues and Iranian-Kurdish relations are a significant factor in the outcome of the Syrian Civil War and the future stability of the Iraqi State, both problems Washington has expended considerable time and resources on. Additionally, the United States must account for the interests of its Turkish NATO partner, who has proven to be incredibly sensitive to Kurdish activism throughout the

region. In light of all this, what lessons or observations can American policymakers glean from studying Iran's policy towards Kurdish nationalism? Undoubtedly, there are many, but this work will focus on two specific ones.

B. AN INDEPENDENT KURDISTAN?

Establishing an independent Kurdish state has been a question in American policy since the settlement of the First World War, but has really come to the fore since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Articles extolling a three-state solution to fix American problems in Iraq abound.¹⁴¹ Indeed, the Iraqi constitution's enshrinement of Kurdish interests and the ensuing establishment of the KRG have been interpreted as the first step towards an independent Kurdistan with American acquiescence.¹⁴² Although the United States has never made official moves to back independence, it has never been ruled out. American sentimentality has been piqued by image of a plucky people fighting for their freedom. There is also more tangible reasoning behind the American dalliance Kurdish nationalism. Ever since America became embroiled in Iraq, the Kurds have been ready partners. Kurds welcomed any American assistance they could get in the wake of Desert Storm and quickly developed ties that bore fruit when the Turks refused the United States staging bases during the 2003 invasion. Both the KDP and PUK were enthusiastic supporters of the new Iraqi state. While much of the rest of Iraq was embroiled in civil war and insurgency, the KRG appeared to be a bastion of relative stability and functioning democracy.¹⁴³ Again, with the rise of the IS, it was Kurdish Peshmerga, not Iraqi national forces, that stood strong. Syrian Kurds, too, proved to be ready and competent American partners. Giving the Kurds an independent state, presumably centered on the KRG, would be a just reward for decades of steadfast partnership and give the United States a strong regional ally with a firmer footing.

¹⁴¹ Michael Rubin, "Embracing the Three-State Solution in Iraq," American Enterprise Institute, July 17, 2006, <https://www.aei.org/articles/embracing-the-three-state-solution-in-iraq/>. In this article, Rubin is a heavy critic of the three-state solution, but reviews a couple of the significant writings in favor of it.

¹⁴² Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, 112.

¹⁴³ Denise Natali, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Stabilizer or Spoiler?," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2013): 73–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43134413>.

Despite the public traction it has, an American initiative for an independent Kurdistan is a half-baked idea that should be avoided. The effects on the viability of the Iraqi state and Turkish-American relations have been extensively written about and are best left to other authors. However, Iranian-KRG relations point to other fundamental problems with giving Kurds independence. Iranian Kurdish policy over the last three decades has been predicated on exploiting internecine Kurdish divisions. Currently, the PUK and PKK serve as Iran's proxies within the KRG. American policy, on the other hand, has generally treated the Kurds monolithically. The occupation of Iraq kept the peace, thereby hiding the question who exactly would the United States be giving independence to? Iraqi Kurds are dramatically divided along the lines of the KDP-PUK split. Although an initiative for independence would presumably hand power to the KRG as an institution, the indications are that it would quickly devolve into a civil war if the United States did not pick a side. Although the PUK has received American support, its ties to Iran and the PKK would likely make the KDP the American partner of choice in such a scenario. But regardless of which side the United States chose, the enforcement of such a political settlement would likely be bloody, making it anathema to American and global opinion while fundamentally undermining the strength of the new state. To summarize, an independent Kurdistan would be a broken entity from the start and would force a series of no-win decisions on the United States.

C. ETHNIC POLITICS AND THE FUTURE OF IRAN

Looming in the background of American policy consideration is the specter of what follows the Islamic Republic. The regime has proven to be an implacable opponent of the United States' Middle East agenda. Coupled with Iran's perceived irresponsibility on the international regime, the United States would be appreciative of a different government in Tehran. Over the last decade and a half, a series of protests have presented this possibility. In 2008, the suspicious reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency sparked protests that garnered widespread sympathy in western countries. Although proliferation of new social media platforms slowed suppression efforts, the main constituency of the protests came from groups traditionally opposed to the regime and did not fundamentally threaten its grip on power. Learning from these protests, the

regime effectively limited the flow of information when rising gas prices sparked a new round of protests a decade later. This enabled quick and effective suppression while partially covering up the fact that these protesters were largely from the regime's core constituency and thus far more threatening to the regime's stability. The most recent round of protests began in the ethnic peripheries, but quickly became generalized across Iran. While the widespread nature of the protests makes it unclear if the regime has any national demographic that really supports it, the continued loyalty of the security services meant regime collapse was never imminent.

Although the Islamic Republic has successfully endured each of these protest movements, the protests' demographics expand with each new wave. Furthermore, averaging a significant round of protests every five years is not a sign of a stable government. The Islamic Republic may stave off demise for decades, but it has reached a point where its end is not inconceivable and what comes next should be considered. From the perspective of American policy, the primary question, who should the United States back in trying to create a new system? Over the last couple of decades, the United States has taken the approach of supporting repressed political minorities in the Middle East. Once an unfriendly regime is gone, these groups have been given powerful positions in the new political order with their minority rights constitutionally guaranteed. Should the Islamic Republic fall, a similar pattern could be followed in Iran. There would be numerous groups lining up for American support. The United States could work with ethnically oriented groups among the Arabs and Baluch. Undoubtedly, the Mojahedin-e Khalq would welcome a chance at returning to any relevancy. Most relevant to this work, the United States could support the extensive Kurdish nationalist network, potentially leveraging some combination of the KDPI, Komala, and PJAK.¹⁴⁴

However, much like potentially supporting an independent Kurdistan, this approach has some fundamental issues. Both Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate some of

¹⁴⁴ The KDPI is the only Iranian Kurdish entity with any experience in electoral politics and seems to be the most comprehensive and best organized Kurdish nationalist party in Iran, despite the numerous splits over the years. The Komala's and PJAK's more radical ideologies are beyond what American policy has traditionally been willing to support. Nonetheless, all three parties shared agenda of autonomy, linguistic protection, and independent security services are similar to what the United States has supported in other places.

these shortcomings. By supporting marginalized groups from the periphery, the United States weakened the states. In Afghanistan, the new state devolved into “warlordism” along the lines of the Northern Alliance.¹⁴⁵ In Iraq, the enshrinement of sectarian interests in the constitution have been one of the primary obstacles to building solid state institutions.¹⁴⁶ The risk in Iran would be the same. If the United States overly empowered Kurdish interests, other ethnic interests in the country would in turn receive similar concessions. The totality of this could have a crippling effect on the new Iranian state. Avoiding these problems has historically not been a strong suit of American state building. The Iranian statist concern of ethnic concessions being a slippery slope is not entirely unjustified. Beyond the domestic confines of Iran, weakening one of the region’s predominant actors could have unpredictable second order effects that harm American interests. Planning for a post-Islamic Republic Iran, American policy makers need to think careful about how not to break Humpty-Dumpty.

D. LOOKING FORWARD

Regardless of how the United States ends up approaching the region, Iranian-Kurdish relations will be important dynamic to monitor going forward. Internationally, the next major development seems to be the conclusion of the Syrian Civil War. Just how it will wind up is still unclear, with the question of Rojava being one of the greatest sticking points. Just how much autonomy will it have? Whose sphere of influence will it be in? And what Kurdish group will dominate its politics? The answers to these questions will directly affect politics within the KRG. They will also set the stage for potential Turkish-Iranian competition. How this plays out will be an important indicator of regional dynamics following further American retrenchment in the Middle East. Inside Iran, the strength of Kurdish political activism has been a strong inverse indicator of the ruling regime’s strength. Protests begun in Kurdish cities over the Mahsa Amini’s death

¹⁴⁵ Conrad Schetter and Rainer Glassner, “The Peripheralization of the Center: ‘Warlordism’ in Afghanistan,” Middle East Institute, April 19, 2012, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/peripheralization-center-warlordism-afghanistan>.

¹⁴⁶ Ranj Alaaldin, *Sectarianism, Governance, and Iraq’s Future*, Number 24 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2018). www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Sectarianism-governance-and-Iraqs-future_English.pdf.

grew into the third round of major protests the Islamic Republic has had to deal with in the last 15 years. The regime has shown cracks in its facade. There are no indications that Tehran has taken action to address its citizens' underlying concerns. Nonetheless, Ali Khamenei's government does not appear to be in imminent danger of collapse. There are still too many regime stakeholders and it appears as though it has weathered this storm. Not coincidentally, Iran's Kurdish regions have taken little action beyond combative protesting. A generalized armed revolt has not emerged. How much longer can the regime hold on? Much like the Syrian Civil War, that answer is unclear. But it is in dire enough straits to keep a close eye. Those monitoring the situation for future developments would be wise to watch Iran's Kurds.

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