

"The Future of the Peshmerga Forces: Navigating the Relationship Between the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Region"

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Renas Bakr Ali

Political consultant

MS in political science and security studies

Ministry of peshmerga\ Kurdistan region

renaz.nina@gmail.com

Dr. Abdul Aljabar Ahmad

Collage Baghdad

Abstract

The Peshmerga forces have played a very essential part in the security of Iraq especially in guarding Kurdistan Region and its efforts in attacking terrorism. However, their continuity is not certain because there have been political and legal conflict between the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) and the Iraqi federal government. This paper presents a brief look at the historical evolution of the Peshmerga forces since 2003, their involvement in the regional security and the collaboration with international forces like the United States and NATO. The study narrows down on the central political, legal and constitutional controversies between Baghdad and Erbil, such as to what extent the Peshmerga should be integrated as part of the national defense system of Iraq, how the Peshmerga should be funded and what the role of the lawyers is in the legal status of the Peshmerga. The results reveal that although the efforts provided by the Peshmerga have been very crucial in controlling the counterattack against terrorism, internal disunity, political clash, and legal grey areas degrade their efficiency and assimilation within the general security system of Iraq. The paper also addresses prospective future of the Peshmerga, any future model of cooperation or separation with the Iraq federal government. The studies rely on qualitative approaches of historical writings, contracts and political choices. The paper ends with the recommendation of policy reforms in defeating the legal, political, and financial issues and guaranteeing the position of Peshmerga in the long-term stability of Iraq.

Keywords: *Peshmerga, Kurdistan Region, Iraqi Federal Government, Security Cooperation, Conflict, Integration*

مستقبل قوات البيشمركة: إدارة العلاقة بين الحكومة الاتحادية العراقية وإقليم كردستان

ريناس بكر علي

مستشار سياسي

ماجستير في العلوم السياسية والدراسات الأمنية

وزارة البيشمركة - إقليم كردستان

renaz.nina@gmail.com

د. عبد الجبار أحمد

كلية بغداد

ملخص

لعبت قوات البيشمركة دورًا محوريًا في أمن العراق، لا سيما في حماية إقليم كردستان وجهوده في مكافحة الإرهاب. إلا أن استمراريته غير مؤكدة نظرًا للصراع السياسي والقانوني بين حكومة إقليم كردستان والحكومة الاتحادية العراقية. تقدم هذه الورقة نظرة موجزة على التطور التاريخي لقوات البيشمركة منذ عام ٢٠٠٣، ومشاركتها في الأمن الإقليمي، وتعاونها مع القوى الدولية مثل الولايات المتحدة وحلف شمال الأطلسي (الناتو). تُركز الدراسة على الخلافات السياسية والقانونية والدستورية المحورية بين بغداد وأربيل، مثل مدى ضرورة دمج البيشمركة كجزء من منظومة الدفاع الوطني العراقي، وكيفية تمويلها، ودور المحامين في الوضع القانوني للبيشمركة. تكشف النتائج أنه على الرغم من أن الجهود التي بذلتها البيشمركة كانت حاسمة للغاية في السيطرة على الهجوم المضاد ضد الإرهاب، إلا أن الانقسام الداخلي والصراع السياسي والمناطق القانونية الرمادية تُضعف كفاءتها واندماجها في النظام الأمني العام للعراق. كما تتناول الورقة مستقبل البيشمركة، وأي نموذج مستقبلي للتعاون أو الانفصال عن الحكومة الفيدرالية العراقية. تعتمد الدراسات على مناهج نوعية للكتابات التاريخية والعقود والخيارات السياسية. وتختتم الورقة بتوصية بإصلاحات سياسية لتغلب على القضايا القانونية والسياسية والمالية وضمان مكانة البيشمركة في استقرار العراق على المدى الطويل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البيشمركة، إقليم كردستان، الحكومة الاتحادية العراقية، التعاون الأمني، الصراع، التكامل

"داهاتووو هيزي پيشمەرگه: گهشتکردن به پهيوهندی نینوان حکومهتی فیدرالی عێراق و ههریمی کوردستان"

ریناس بهکر عهلی

راویژکاری سیاسی

بهكالفریوس له زانسته سیاسییهكان و خویندنی ئەمنی

وهزارهتی پيشمەرگه ههریمی کوردستان

renaz.nina@gmail.com

د. عهبدولئه لجهبار ئەحمهد

رابدوو سهردیتری سیاسی له دواي کۆلاج-بهغدا

پوخته

هيزي پيشمەرگه رۆليكي زۆر جهوهري ههبووه له ئاسايشي عێراق بهتاييهتي له پاراستنی ههریمی کوردستان و ههولنهكاني له هيزشکردنه سهر تيرۆر. به لام به رده وامبوونيان دلنيا نيه چونكه ململانيی سیاسی و ياسایی له نینوان حکوومه تی هه ریمی کوردستان و حکوومه تی فیدرالی عێراق دروست بووه . ئەم توێژينهوهیه کورتهیهک له پهرسهندنێ میژووپی هيزي پيشمەرگه له سالی ٢٠٠٣هوه و تيوهگلانیان له ئاسايشي ناوچهکه و هاوکاري لهگهڵ هيزه نيودهولتهتيهکاني وهک ئەمريکا و ناتو دهخاته روو. ليکۆلینهوهکه تهسک دهکاتهوه لهسهر ناکۆکییه ناوهندييه سیاسی و ياسایی و دهستورپيهکاني نینوان بهغدا و ههولير، وهک ئەوهی تا چهند پيوسته پيشمەرگه وهک بهشیک له سيستهمی بهرگريی نيشتمانیی عێراق

which includes distribution of oil revenues, the legal status of the Peshmerga and the status of disputed territories.

4- 3. Iraqi Federal Government

Federal government of Iraq is the central government of Iraq located at Baghdad. It is part of the federal system provided for in the 2005 Constitution of Iraq and although it is somewhat self-governing, it is still subordinate to the central government in Baghdad with regard to matters of the nation's strategic importance such as defense, foreign relations and resources (Belser, 2021). The political system of the country includes branches of powers; the executive, the legislative and the judicial branch headed by the Prime minister of Iraq. The ISF is under the control of Baghdad and despite the recognition of the Peshmerga in the 2005 Constitution, there is no clear provision of what functions they are going to served in balancing the structure of the national defense system. This has led to continual debate on the sources of Peshmerga funding, leadership, and how they can be incorporated into the security forces of Iraq.

5- 4. Security Cooperation

Security cooperation refers to the formal and informal arrangements through which the Peshmerga and the Iraqi federal government coordinate their military actions. Since 2003, a number of agreements have sought to integrate elements of the Peshmerga into Iraq's national security forces while preserving the KRG's control over its regional defense (Dalton, 2022). Possibly the most notable example of security cooperation was during the fighting against ISIS (2014–2017), when Peshmerga and Iraqi forces conducted joint military operations with support from the U.S.-led coalition. Coordination between the two forces has, however, often been undermined by political mistrust, disputes over funding, and competition for control over disputed areas such as Kirkuk.

6- 5. Constitutional and Legal Framework

The legal status of the Peshmerga is a contested issue under Iraq's constitutional system. Article 121 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution gives the KRG the right to its own security forces, including the Peshmerga (Matviichuk et al., 2022). However, Article 9 of the same constitution states Iraqi armed forces are to be controlled by the federal government, creating legal uncertainties regarding the Peshmerga's status and funding. The lack of legal clarity has led to Baghdad-Erbil conflicts over whether the Peshmerga is to be regarded as a regional force subject to the control of the KRG or a national force within Iraq's security system. Efforts to resolve this issue through legislation and negotiation have largely failed because of political disagreements and overall regional-federal tensions.

7- 6. Disputed Territories

Disputed territories are areas in northern Iraq that are claimed by both the Iraqi federal government and the KRG. The most contested of these territories is Kirkuk, a multi-ethnic city with vast oil reserves. Other disputed territories comprise parts of Nineveh, Diyala, and Salahuddin provinces. The dispute over these territories intensified after the death of Saddam Hussein in 2003, when Kurdish forces extended their control over traditionally Kurdish-populated areas (Vasquez and Henahan., 2023). The 2017 Kurdistan independence referendum further escalated tensions, triggering the deployment of Iraqi federal forces to reclaim Kirkuk and other disputed territories from Peshmerga control. The status of these territories is as yet unresolved, and their security governance is a key point of contention between Baghdad and Erbil.

8- 7. Peshmerga Unification Efforts

One of the most significant challenges to the Peshmerga's future is the division between KDP- and PUK-controlled forces. Historically, the two ruling parties have maintained separate military forces, each loyal to their respective party leadership. This has weakened the operational efficiency of the Peshmerga and complicated efforts to establish a unified command structure. In recent years, international partners, including the U.S. and NATO, have helped support efforts to unify the Peshmerga under a single command structure to improve efficiency and coordination (Aziz and Cottey., 2021). However, internal political rivalries and resistance from party-affiliated military commanders have slowed efforts. The success or failure of these unification efforts will have a significant influence on the future of Peshmerga forces and their relationship with the Iraqi federal government.

9- 8. The Role of International Actors

International actors, namely the United States and NATO, have played a key role in shaping the Peshmerga's abilities and strategic function in Iraq (Meskell and Isakhan., 2024). The United States has provided the Peshmerga with military training, weapons, and financial aid, especially in the fight against ISIS. The degree of international support for the Peshmerga, however, is at the mercy of the whims of broader geopolitical considerations, including Iraq's relations with Iran, Turkey, and other regional powers. While some states prefer greater Kurdish autonomy, others, such as Turkey, oppose any move that would strengthen Kurdish separatism. The involvement of external actors complicates the relationship between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi federal government, and longer-term security arrangements more difficult to negotiate.

1 0 - Introduction

The Peshmerga forces as the Kurdish regional military force have been in the frontline of the security of Iraq and specifically in the Kurdistan Region. Guaranteed however, is their future, as problems of politics, legal, and financial matters exist, between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Iraqi federal government. This paper seeks to examine the changing nature of the Peshmerga in the security situation within Iraq, the threats they pose towards the Iraqi government, and the possible ways through which they can be accommodated into the national status quo in terms of defence. The area of study will be based on the legal standing of Peshmerga, their structure and organization, and in its political reach how this relation comes across as between the Peshmerga and Baghdad. Considering these questions, the present paper is set to give a more detailed picture of a role of the Peshmerga in future security of Iraq and its future stability.

1 1 - The role of peshmerga in Iraq after 2003

1 2- 1. The role of peshmerga as defense organisation for the Kurdistan region

The Peshmerga forces are the primary defense force of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), ensuring its security and sovereignty. Their existence as a military force has been shaped by past wars, legal arrangements, and modern security challenges. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the Peshmerga transformed from a guerrilla force to an orderly military formation under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), charged with safeguarding Kurdish territory against foreign incursions and domestic upheaval (Aziz & Cottey, 2021). The Peshmerga's legal standing is provided for by the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which recognises the KRG's right to its own security forces. The constitution does not, however, subordinate the

Peshmerga fully to Iraq's national military command, leaving relations between Erbil and Baghdad complicated and sometimes strained. Unlike the Iraqi Army, which is federally controlled, the Peshmerga operates independently under the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Despite periodic efforts to integrate the force into Iraq's national defense framework, political differences regarding funding, command structures, and regional autonomy have prevented full coordination between the two forces (Borsari, 2022). As the Kurdistan Region's primary military force, the Peshmerga are responsible for defending the region's borders against external attacks. Since 2003, they have been instrumental in maintaining regional stability, especially in periods of political instability and war. Their presence has been crucial in securing Kurdish-held areas, including disputed territories such as Kirkuk, which have been flashpoints of tension between the KRG and Iraqi federal government. The Peshmerga's geographic positioning and military strength have deterred would-be threats from state and non-state actors, such as extremist organisations and militias operating in Iraq (Hama, 2021).

Moreover, one of the Peshmerga's most significant contributions has been in the realm of counterterrorism, and specifically the fight against ISIS. Between 2014 and 2017, the Peshmerga were instrumental in pushing ISIS forces back from Kurdish-held territory, often fighting in direct combat alongside international coalition troops led by the United States. Their battlefield experience, local knowledge, and commitment to defending Kurdish territory made them one of the most effective ground forces in the fight against ISIS (Bakr, 2021). The Peshmerga's alignment with the U.S. and NATO forces provided it with access to advanced training, intelligence-sharing, and logistical support, which further augmented its military capabilities. Despite their successes, however, the Peshmerga remain hampered by organisational and funding challenges (Hasan & Khaddour, 2021). The force remains divided between KDP- and PUK-loyal units, generating internal fragmentation that detracts from its overall effectiveness. Unification efforts under one command structure have moved slowly due to political rivalries and opposition from party-aligned military leaders. Consolidating the Peshmerga's institutional capacity, improving coordination with the Iraqi federal government, and implementing sustainable funding arrangements will be imperative to securing the Kurdistan Region's long-term security (Hama, 2022). While the force has demonstrated resilience and effectiveness in defending Kurdish autonomy, it will be essential to resolve these structural and political challenges in order to define its role in Iraq's overall security landscape.

1 3- 2. The role of peshmerga against terrorism

The Peshmerga have been a central force in counterterrorism, particularly in the fight against ISIS. As one of the most successful ground forces against terrorism in Iraq, they have played a critical role in securing the Kurdistan Region and protecting vulnerable communities from extremist incursions. Their contribution has extended beyond battlefield operations, encompassing intelligence activities, strategic coordination with international allies, and assisting in the stabilisation of territories liberated from ISIS. The rise of ISIS in 2014 posed an existential threat to Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region (Caggins III, 2023). As ISIS forces rapidly advanced and captured key cities such as Mosul, the Iraqi Army collapsed in many areas, leaving a security vacuum. The Peshmerga quickly mobilised to protect Kurdish territories, stopping ISIS from capturing Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region. Despite being outgunned and lacking heavy weaponry at the outset, the Peshmerga were able to maintain defensive positions and launch

counteroffensives against ISIS-held territory. Their resilience and determination were crucial in pushing back ISIS forces, particularly around territories bordering Kurdish-controlled territories (Aziz & Cottey, 2021). One of the most significant aspects of the Peshmerga's role in counterterrorism was their coordination with the U.S.-led coalition. International military support, including airstrikes, intelligence sharing, and the provision of weapons, significantly enhanced their operational capabilities. Peshmerga forces carried out joint operations with coalition partners, retaking key cities and villages from ISIS. The battle for Sinjar in 2015 was an example, where the Peshmerga, backed by coalition air support, liberated the area from ISIS, ending the violent persecution of the Yazidi minority. Beyond direct combat, the Peshmerga have also supported counterterrorism through intelligence activities and security measures to prevent ISIS resurgence (Ibrahim, 2022). They have been in cooperation with Kurdish and Foreign security services to monitor the whereabouts of terrorists, eliminate impending sleeper cells, and seize vital lines of infiltration. Their capability of functioning in hostile ground and their intimate knowledge of the local dynamics have seen them as assets in the war against terrorism in large parts of the world. The war on terror has not been free of its hiccups though. Another challenge that the Peshmerga has faced includes aging weaponry and inconsistent funding, as well as inter-service rivalries among units that favor opposing Kurdish political forces (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Even though the international support has alleviated some of the aspects of these problems, sustainability is a serious matter of concern in the long run. In addition, tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi federal government have at times strained joint counterterrorism cooperation. Disputes over funding, security jurisdiction, and control of disputed territories have created operational challenges that complicate smooth coordination against the terrorist threat (Sadoon, 2023). Despite these issues, the Peshmerga remain a key force in Iraq's counterterrorism campaign. Their sacrifices and strategic efforts have degraded ISIS and prevented its reconstitution in Kurdish territories. Moving forward, sustained cooperation with Baghdad and international partners, as well as internal reforms to professionalize and unify the force, will be essential in ensuring the Peshmerga's continued effectiveness in the fight against terrorism and in maintaining regional security.

1 4- 3. The role of peshmerga with international alliance

The Peshmerga have been significant contributors to global security, mainly through their cooperation with international partners in counterterrorism and regional stability operations. Their partnerships with the United States, NATO, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and other global partners have been crucial in building their military capability and increasing security in Iraq (Caggins III, 2023). These relationships have not only involved military assistance but have also shaped the overall geopolitical dimensions of the Kurdistan Region's defense policy. In the wake of the rise of ISIS in 2014, the Peshmerga became one of the most reliable ground troops in the war against the terror organisation. At a time when the Iraqi Army suffered catastrophic defeats, international powers pinned their hopes on the Peshmerga as reliable partners in reversing ISIS gains. The United States and its allies, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, supplied the Peshmerga with weapons, ammunition, and logistic equipment. Furthermore, airpower from the U.S.-led coalition was key to assisting Peshmerga units in retaking areas captured by ISIS (Barwari, 2025). One of the most high-profile examples of Peshmerga-international collaboration was the retaking of Sinjar in 2015. The Peshmerga, supported by

extensive air and intelligence support from the coalition, were able to reclaim Sinjar from ISIS, ending the organisation's brutal occupation of the district. This operation demonstrated how international military coordination could be utilised to enhance the performance of local forces. Furthermore, the battle for Mosul in 2016–2017 saw sustained coordination between the Peshmerga and international forces (Sadoon, 2023). While the Iraqi Army led the main offense, the Peshmerga were instrumental in securing outlying areas and preventing ISIS reinforcements from regrouping.

Moreover, NATO and Western nations have developed very elaborate training programs and military advisory services to the Peshmerga, and not only of battlefield operations. Several military trainings have been undertaken since 2015 aimed to professionalize the strategic planning, counter terrorism tactics of the Peshmerga as well as battlefield coordination. Training has sought to professionalize the force, to assure better logistics, and to integrate into a command structure. Events like Germany and Canada have been keen in training and supplying the Peshmerga with modern weapons (Gumustekin, 2021). Although the Peshmerga has a very close relationship with international allies, there is still a challenge. The failure to have a centralised command in the Peshmerga is one of the greatest challenges. The force continues to operate at a political split with distinct units answering to Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The pyramid of control has at some moments worked against international military support efforts, since foreign forces have demanded a more centralised and unified chain of command on the Peshmerga. The second challenge is the Baghdadi and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) conflict regarding the reception of international military support (Oxford Analytica, 2022). The KRG is demanding direct international assistance of the Peshmerga whereas the Iraqi federal government wants all military assistance to come through Baghdad. This has seen occasional interruption of foreign military aid, a situation that has been causing logistical and financial difficulties to Peshmerga units. Regardless of such difficulties, the role of the Peshmerga in international coalitions cannot be underestimated. Cooperation with the international community remains an important requirement to sustain security in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Partnerships between the parties, which include military modernization, diplomatic coordination and security programmes, should be consolidated to help the Peshmerga to continue to be effective in their role of counterterrorism and stability in the region.

1 5 - Literature Review

1 6- 1. *Constitutional and Legal Disputes*

The constitutional and legal status of the Peshmerga remains one of the most contentious issues between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While the 2005 Iraqi Constitution recognises the Peshmerga as the Kurdistan Region's armed force, it does not define its status within Iraq's national security framework. This legal ambiguity has helped fuel ongoing disputes over issues such as funding, command, and integration into Iraq's national military. One of the most contentious constitutional disputes centers on Article 121 of the Iraqi Constitution, which grants the KRG the right to its own security forces, including the Peshmerga. Kurdish officials have used this provision as a legal argument for the Peshmerga's independence from Baghdad's authority (Alkış & Sever, 2024). Article 9 of the same constitution, however, mandates that Iraq's armed forces must be under the control of the federal government and prohibits the formation of militias outside state control. This contradiction has fueled tensions

between Erbil and Baghdad, with the Iraqi government insisting that the Peshmerga must be integrated into the national military framework and Kurdish officials insisting on the maintenance of their autonomous defense force. Another legal dispute concerns the Peshmerga's salaries and funding. The Iraqi government has historically been responsible for funding national security forces, but it does not directly pay the Peshmerga (Hama, 2021). The KRG is instead meant to fund the Peshmerga's budget from its share of the Iraqi national budget, which has been the subject of frequent political disputes. The Iraqi government has repeatedly withheld or delayed budget payments to the KRG, contributing to financial difficulties for the Peshmerga, affecting their operational effectiveness, salaries, and access to modern equipment. The KRG has reacted by pursuing direct military aid from international partners, but Baghdad insists that all foreign military assistance be routed through the central government, compounding the issue further. The disputed territories' legal status is also a paramount factor in the Peshmerga disputes. Following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, Peshmerga forces moved into areas like Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala, which are historically claimed by both Baghdad and the KRG (Kruczek, 2021). The Iraqi Constitution's Article 140 calls for a referendum to determine the territories' status, but the referendum has been repeatedly postponed. In 2017, following the Kurdistan independence referendum, the Iraqi federal government launched a military campaign to retake Kirkuk and other disputed territories from Peshmerga control, further increasing tensions. Mediation of these legal complaints has been limited since both sides have refused to compromise on core issues of military control and territorial sovereignty. Although international actors, such as the United States and the United Nations, have encouraged dialogue and legal reforms, an enduring solution has remained out of reach (Entessar, 2023). The prevailing legal uncertainty regarding the Peshmerga remains a serious detriment to Iraq's national security and political stability, and future talks between Baghdad and Erbil will be needed for a lasting settlement.

1 7- 2. Political Disputes

The Peshmerga have long been at the center of political dispute between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While the Peshmerga constitute an essential element of Iraq's overall security, their funding, structure, zone of operation, and coordination with Baghdad remain unresolved (Borsari, 2022). These disputes are rooted in deeper political tensions over Kurdistan's autonomy, revenue sharing, and control over disputed areas, and they render the Peshmerga a constitutional issue at the core of overall federal-regional relations.

1 8 - A- Funding and Structure

One of the longest-standing political disputes between Erbil and Baghdad concerns the funding of the Peshmerga forces. Unlike the Iraqi Army, which is funded directly by the central government, the Peshmerga are not explicitly included in Iraq's military budget. The KRG is instead meant to fund the Peshmerga from its share of the Iraqi national budget, which has frequently been withheld or reduced due to political disputes (Aziz & Cottey, 2021). This has led to periods of months in which Peshmerga fighters have gone unpaid, damaging morale and operational effectiveness. The Peshmerga's internal organisation has also fueled political disputes. The force remains divided between KDP- and PUK-loyal units. This internal split has weakened the Peshmerga's ability to function as an effective military force and has complicated efforts to negotiate a clear status with Baghdad. Although U.S. and German-supported reform efforts have

promoted the unification of the Peshmerga under a single command, political rivalry between Kurdish parties has stalled efforts.

1 9 - B- Disputed Areas

The control of disputed territories, particularly Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala, remains a major political point of contention between Baghdad and Erbil. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution calls for a referendum to determine the status of these territories, but successive Iraqi governments have delayed its implementation, leaving these territories in political and military limbo. Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Peshmerga forces moved into a series of disputed territories, filling the security vacuum left by the collapse of the Iraqi Army (Hasan & Khaddour, 2021). For years, the Peshmerga de facto ruled Kirkuk and its oil-rich surroundings. However, following the Kurdistan independence referendum in 2017, Baghdad launched a military campaign to retake Kirkuk from Peshmerga forces, radically altering the political and security landscape. Ever since, tensions have persisted over who should secure and govern these disputed territories, with Baghdad rejecting Kurdish claims over these territories while the KRG persists in asserting its historical and political rights (Aziz & Cottey, 2021).

2 0 - C- Security Coordination

Despite their differences, the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army have had to cooperate on security matters, particularly on counterterror efforts against ISIS. At the peak of ISIS's territorial control, the two forces waged joint military campaigns together with support from the U.S.-led coalition. After the recapture of Mosul and other key territories in 2017, however, political tensions resumed, and security coordination became more fraught. One of the largest points of contention is the lack of an official joint security mechanism (Hasan & Khaddour, 2021). While the two sides intermittently coordinate on intelligence-sharing and counterterror efforts, there is no long-term agreement on how to structure security in disputed areas or how to integrate Peshmerga forces into national defense planning. Baghdad insists that security operations in these areas must be led by federal forces, while the KRG argues that the Peshmerga must be involved to protect Kurdish populations and interests (Palani, 2021).

2 1- 3. *Future Challenges*

The fate of the Peshmerga forces is subject to several challenges that will ultimately determine their status in Iraq's security landscape. Despite the Peshmerga's integral role in the defense of the Kurdistan Region and in CT operations, they are limited in their efficiency by fragmentation within their ranks, regional and global pressures, and political distrust between Erbil and Baghdad (Hama, 2021). Surmounting these challenges will prove paramount to the Kurdistan Region's and Iraq's long-term stability.

2 2 - A- Peshmerga Unification

One of the most significant issues is the fragmentation of the Peshmerga forces. Today, the Peshmerga remain divided between units loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Each party maintains its own military units, which operate independently under their own party leaderships rather than an integrated command structure. This fragmentation weakens the overall effectiveness of the Peshmerga, as it is difficult to coordinate military operations and negotiate with Baghdad as a single actor (McConville, 2022). Efforts at unifying the Peshmerga under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government have been ongoing for years, with the help of the United States, NATO, and

Germany. These efforts aim to create a professional, centralised military independent of political party control. However, opposition from party-aligned commanders and concerns about political influence have slowed progress. Without unification, the Peshmerga's ability to operate will remain limited, and their chances of negotiating an official security role within Iraq's military structure will be diminished.

2 3 - B- Balance in Peshmerga Relations with Regional and International Powers

The Peshmerga's relationships with regional and international actors present another fundamental challenge. Historically, the Peshmerga have relied on United States, NATO, and Western military and financial aid, particularly in the fight against ISIS. Their relationship with Iran and Turkey is more troubled because both view a strong Kurdish military force as a danger to their own national security given their concerns about Kurdish separatism (Hasan & Khaddour, 2021). The Iraqi federal government also wishes to limit direct international aid to the Peshmerga, insisting that all military aid come through Baghdad. This has created tension among Erbil, Baghdad, and international partners and made it hard to modernise and equip the Peshmerga with proper resources.

C- Rebuilding Trust between the Federal Government and the Region

The main obstacle to deciding the Peshmerga's future is the lack of trust between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Relations between Baghdad and Erbil have been marked by political differences, budget disputes, and military confrontations, particularly following the 2017 Kurdistan independence referendum, which led to a federal military intervention in Kirkuk (Hama, 2021). For the Peshmerga to have a clear role within Iraq's security frameworks, there needs to be a political agreement between Baghdad and Erbil. This includes resolving issues related to Peshmerga salaries, security coordination, and control in disputed areas (Borsari, 2022). Without trust and coordination, the possibilities for renewed fighting are high, and therefore the Peshmerga will not be a fully integrated, stable military force.

Research Methods

2 4 - The Future of the Peshmerga Between Conflict and Cooperation

1. Influential Factors

The future of the Peshmerga forces depends on a series of driving factors, which include political dynamics, economic stability, security challenges, and international relations. These determine whether the Peshmerga remain an independent force under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or become more integrated within Iraq's national security structure. One of the most significant drivers is the political relationship between Erbil and Baghdad. Although the Iraqi Constitution guarantees the KRG its own security forces, it is unclear regarding the extent of their role within Iraq's national military framework (Eklund & Dinc, 2024). This has contributed to ongoing disputes regarding funding, command structures, and the Peshmerga's legal status. While the Iraqi government argues that the Peshmerga need to be included within the national defense system, the KRG regards them as a key component of Kurdish autonomy. Domestic Kurdish politics also contribute to these uncertainties. The Peshmerga remain divided between KDP- and PUK-loyal units, making it difficult to place the force under a unified command. In the absence of internal political consensus, agreements with Baghdad are tricky. Economic stability is also a critical driver (Knappe, 2023). The Peshmerga's salaries are primarily dependent on the KRG's share of Iraq's national budget, which has often been delayed or reduced due to political

disputes. This has helped to create salary arrears, limited military modernisation, and logistical challenges. Without a guaranteed funding stream, the Peshmerga cannot guarantee operational readiness. The KRG's overall economic situation, including reliance on oil revenues and repeated financial disputes with Baghdad, further compounds the challenges. Economic instability erodes the Peshmerga's ability to function effectively and reinforces reliance on foreign military support (Stansfield & Hassaniyan, 2022).

Additionally, the overall security situation in Iraq and the Middle East also ultimately determines the Peshmerga's future. The ongoing presence of ISIS remnants and other militant groups in disputed areas still poses a security threat, requiring close coordination between the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army (Arif & Mokhtar, 2022). Territorial control tensions and the lack of a formalised joint security agreement, however, complicate coordination. The absence of trust between Erbil and Baghdad also discourages long-term security planning. Shifting global priorities and geopolitical tensions also shape the level of international support the Peshmerga can anticipate. The convergence of these political, economic, security, and international variables determines whether the Peshmerga remain an independent force, become integrated into the Iraqi military, or continue in a politically contested and financially uncertain state.

2. The Role of the International Community

The Peshmerga forces have adapted to the international community which has been instrumental in changing this force in matters relating to military support, training, and diplomacy between KRG and federal Iraqi governments. Activity of various foreign actors and the United States, NATO, and other powers in the region has influenced the development of Peshmergas military strength, their place in the security sector of Iraq, as well as the geopolitical situation as a whole in the region (Van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024). Military assistance and training have been one of the most important roles of international involvement as well. Since the emergence of ISIS in 2014 Peshmerga were considered as amongst one of the finest ground troops in Iraq, thus, securing the Kurdistan Region and other parts of Iraq, it was deployed to push back terrorism. With the weapons, information-sharing, and logistical assistance of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Peshmerga capabilities to deal with the threat of terrorists were changed radically. The United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and France are western countries that have provided their military equipment, anti-tank weapons, and airpower which proved to be significant in deciding the outcome of major battles, including the conquering of Sinjar and Mosul. Moreover, the NATO and the European Union training missions have aimed at modernising Peshmerga, enhancing command, and building counterterrorism abilities (Koç, 2021). With this backing, international aid funneling has been a matter of conflict between Erbil and Baghdad. The Iraqi federal government has demanded that any military aid given to it on foreign grounds is to pass through Baghdad where the KRG has requested direct military assistance to Peshmerga. This has even led to delayed delivery of the weapons and even funds towards the Peshmerga salaries which undermine their preparedness to operate. The international community especially the United States and NATO urge the further inclusion of the Peshmerga into the national security system of Iraq, but the inclusion process is slow because of serious political issues between Erbil and Baghdad (Cancian & Greenwald, 2022).

Additionally, beyond military aid, the international community has played a role in diplomatic mediation between Baghdad and the KRG. The United Nations, the United States, and

European countries have mediated discussions on Peshmerga unification, funding disputes, and security coordination in disputed territories. International pressure was evident following the 2017 Kurdistan independence referendum, which escalated tensions between Baghdad and Erbil. In the aftermath, the United Nations and Western allies mediated negotiations to prevent further military confrontations and stabilise relations between both sides (van Bruinessen, 2023). Regional powers, particularly Iran and Turkey, have also influenced the Peshmerga's role in Iraq's security landscape. Iran opposes any measure that increases Kurdish military autonomy, lest it embolden Iranian Kurdish separatist movements. Similarly, Turkey has conducted military operations against PKK militants in northern Iraq, rendering security dynamics in the Kurdistan Region more complex (Arif & Mokhtar, 2022). Such regional interventions have forced the KRG to manage complex diplomatic relationships while containing security threats at home. The international community's contribution to strengthening the Peshmerga remains important, yet ongoing political differences between Baghdad, Erbil, and regional powers undermine the effectiveness of international assistance. In the absence of explicit agreements on military funding, security coordination, and Peshmerga integration, foreign aid remains ad hoc, affecting the long-term stability and effectiveness of the force (van Bruinessen, 2023).

2 5- 3. Future Scenarios

The future of the Peshmerga forces is subject to political, security, and economic factors that lead to diverse scenarios of their relation with the Iraqi federal government. These extend from continued confrontation and separation, partial integration in Iraqi forces, or independence with coordination with Baghdad (Arif & Mokhtar, 2022). Each path has distinct challenges and opportunities based on the level of political will, security coordination, and outside actors' interventions.

2 6 - A- A Conflict Scenario with Continuing Tensions and Division

One situation involves continued strife and political tensions between Erbil and Baghdad that exclude meaningful cooperation on defense and security matters. The chronic disputes over financing, legal status, and control of territory could also deteriorate relations to a point where the Peshmerga operate independently without coordination with the Iraqi Army (Stansfield & Hassaniyan, 2022). Under this situation, the contentious issues over disputed territories, particularly Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala, would not be settled, and military standoffs or security vacuums would result that could be exploited by insurgent groups such as ISIS.

2 7 - B- A Cooperation Scenario

Alternatively, Erbil-Baghdad cooperation can take different forms towards a more stable and structured security arrangement (Koç, 2021). The most likely models of cooperation are partial integration into Iraqi forces or independence with joint coordination.

2 8- 1. Partial Integration with Iraqi Forces

One model of cooperation is the partial integration of Peshmerga forces into the Iraqi Army for better coordination and access to state funds. Under this model, Peshmerga forces would be partially integrated into Iraq's Ministry of Defense, in which they would be financially supported and receive military training but remain active in the Kurdistan Region. This model would parallel the integration of other regional security forces into national armies, which would balance regional autonomy and national unity (Cancian & Greenwald, 2022). This model is opposed by Kurdish political actors, particularly those for whom the Peshmerga represent a symbol of

Kurdish self-rule. Trust issues between Baghdad and Erbil, as well as disputes regarding command structures, are formidable challenges to this model.

2 9- 2. Maintaining Independence with Joint Coordination

A second cooperative scenario foresees the Peshmerga remaining autonomous but seeking structured security coordination with Iraqi forces. The arrangement would allow the Peshmerga to operate independently under KRG command while cooperating on joint military operations, intelligence, and counterterrorism with Baghdad (Van Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2024). This has been the arrangement in previous security crises, such as the fight against ISIS, where both forces cooperated despite political differences. Entrenching this security arrangement could help bring greater regional stability and prevent future wars over disputed regions. The Peshmerga's future will most likely be determined by political agreements, security dynamics, and economics, with cooperation being the most stable long-term strategy.

3 0- Findings

3 1- Internal Fragmentation of the Peshmerga

The Peshmerga is heavily divided on political grounds especially between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This split has complied with poor military coordination and effective performance. Although international forces, particularly the United States and the NATO have attempted to engage the forces in a single command, internal political differences have been seen to act as a roadblock. This disintegration weakens the Peshmerga in that it does not work like a single military body and becomes inefficient in means of defense and counter terrorism operations.

3 2- Legal and Constitutional Issues

It is a disputed matter of the legal character of the Peshmerga. The Constitution of Iraq in 2005 stipulates that the KRG is allowed to have its own security organs such as Peshmerga. There is however a lot of ambiguity on how they fit in the larger Iraqi national defense framework. Article 121 of the Constitution accorded the KRG the autonomy on its security force whereas Article 9 stipulated that Iraq national armed forces are under the control of the federal government. It was due to this constitutional paradox that caused controversies in funding, leadership and assimilation into the national defense structure.

3 3- Funding and Resource Allocation

A key problem of the Peshmerga is its economic unreliability. The KRG funds the Peshmerga using their share in the Iraqi national budget but Baghdad has in several occasions refused to or has delayed making these payments. Such a question of finance impacts the readiness of Peshmergas and their pay and the availability of equipment modernization. The strain that the Peshmerga rely on foreign military funding also adds to the aspect that they are fraught with due to differences whether foreign aid should be channeled through the central government or through KRG itself.

3 4- International Cooperation and Influence

The effectiveness of the Peshmerga has been dependent on international assistance especially by the United States and NATO. The input of the United States, including support in the way of training, equipment, and intelligence, has had a very positive impact on the performance of the Peshmerga, mainly in combating ISIS. Nevertheless, external support has been affected by

geopolitical tensions in Iraq, Iran and Turkey, because some international players have been afraid of encouraging separatism in their capitals.

3 5 - Discussion

The evidence provided in this study shows that the Peshmerga fighters encounter severe obstacles that hamper the performance of these forces as one fighting unit. The internal disintegration among the KDP and the PUK-supported forces significantly interferes with the coordination of the operations, which leads to the case of Peshmerga not being entirely equipped to react to the security challenges as a united formation. This internal political split is a reflection of the bigger split in the political life of KRG and has long historical background in the politics of the territory. According to previous researches, one of the central problems in the KRG has always been the political rivalry between its Kurdish parties, which affects not only the army, but also policies and the stability in the region (Aziz & Cottey, 2021).

Legally, the study brings out constitutional ambiguities that exist with regard to the role of Peshmerga. Although the 2005 Iraqi Constitution provides the KRG with the authority to have security units, the nature of the integration of the Peshmerga into the national defense system has not been made clearly yet, this creates a certain complication to the interaction between Baghdad and Erbil. Such a legal ambiguity has been a bone of contention between the federal government and the KRG and thus national security coordination between the two has become difficult. Borsari (2022) and Matviichuk et al. (2022) have also raised concerns about implications of such legal ambiguity, which makes the attempts at the integration of the regional forces into the broader defense system of Iraq futile.

These funding matters, in the findings, also support literature available on the topics concerning financial weakness in the KRG and its security forces. The Peshmerga cannot be ready anymore and buy the equipment they need to defend themselves because they have no reliable source of funding anymore. It is even made worse by the unwillingness of Baghdad to directly fund the Peshmerga yet this is not commented clearly by the Iraqi Constitution, which does not specify the financial dependence between the KRG and Baghdad.

Lastly, international partnership is both a two-edged sword. Though the alliance of the Peshmerga with the U.S. and NATO has played a critical role in the war against ISIS, the international alliances are always a problem to the national security equations of Iraq. The presence of outside players has increased tensions with its neighboring states, in which Turkey and Iran are cautious of further movement of the Kurdish military autonomy. Such geopolitical complexity accelerates challenges of winning international policies in a long-term perspective with regard to supporting the Peshmerga, which is discussed by Meskell & Isakhan (2024).

3 6 - Conclusion and Recommendations

The future of Peshmerga forces is closely linked to the process of addressing political, legal, and financial issues that exist between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi federal government. All the above factors, the Peshmerga fragmentation, constitutional uncertainty of their role, and the financial uncertainty contribute to the problems the force is facing in its effective security of the Kurdistan Region.

In order to overcome these challenges, the following recommendations are offered:

- **Unification of the Peshmerga Forces**

Coordinated attempts to integrate Peshmerga into one centralized command are required. These attempts should be supported by international players like the United States and NATO and must make sure that the Peshmerga will become a more coordinated and effective fighting force. Unified command would simplify the operations and produce a more relevant force in relation to dealing with security threats in Kurdistan Region, as well as with facilitation of national defense with Iraq.

- **Clarification of Legal Status**

The amendment to the Iraqi Constitution is also expected to give a clear definition on the role that the Peshmerga will play in the national defence structure. This would assist in ending the legal limbo that existed and create a clear legal situation of the status of the Peshmerga, beneficial to both the KRG and the federal government. Such an explanation is necessary towards the process of integrating the Peshmerga into the larger Iraqi security system.

- **Stabilizing Funding Mechanisms**

A more consistent and stable financing system has to be developed. KRG is supposed to collaborate with the Iraqi federal authorities in ensuring that the Peshmerga are well funded consistently. It should further have clearly stipulated arrangements on how the foreign military support should be handed on so that there is avoidance of delays in relation to the delivery of crucial help.

- **Strengthening International Partnerships**

Although the Peshmerga have been assisted by international cooperation, especially with the U.S and NATO, more sustainable and long-lasting relations would have to be put in place. Such entities are not only supposed to involve military support but economic support and mediation of diplomatic relations with the aim of resolving the political tensions between the KRG and the federal government.

- **Promoting Political Dialogue Between Baghdad and Erbil**

Despite the tense relations between Baghdad and Erbil, both parties need to begin the process of dialogue to find mutual agreements on security cooperation, resource distribution, and the further place that the Peshmerga will take. Foreign mediators may also be very useful in such discussions so that they can be both sides that are determined to have a long-lasting peace.

3 7 - References

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