

Between Partnership and Dependency: The Dynamics of Kurdistan Region–United States Relations

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Abstract

The relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has long been characterized by ambiguity and fluctuation. This study seeks to examine the nature and dynamics of this complex relationship by addressing two central questions: What type of relationship exists between the United States and the KRI? And does Washington pursue a distinct policy toward KRI? To explore these questions, the research employs the theoretical framework of Structural Realism, particularly John J. Mearsheimer's concept of Offensive Realism, complemented by insights from the English School of international relations. While Offensive Realism helps explain the behavior of great powers such as the United States in pursuing strategic interests, the English School provides a lens through which to interpret the broader international community and the norms of international order.

The findings suggest that the United States does not maintain a coherent or direct policy toward the KRI. Rather, its engagement with Erbil has been contingent and instrumental shaped by broader strategic considerations and mediated through its relations with Baghdad and regional developments in the Levant and the Persian Gulf. Historically, U.S.–KRI interactions have been driven by shifting geopolitical contexts rather than enduring commitments. This study concludes that Washington's approach toward Erbil remains governed by a realist logic—prioritizing the preservation of the regional nation-state system and stability of the international order over Kurdish aspirations for deeper bilateral relations or statehood.

Keywords: United States; Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI); Foreign Policy; Middle East Politics; International Order.

له‌نیوان هاوبه‌شی و پاشکۆیه‌تی: داینامیکی په‌یوه‌ندییه‌کانی نیوان هه‌ریمی کوردستان و ویلایه‌ته‌یه‌گرتوو‌ه‌کانی ئەم‌ریکا

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پوخته‌ی توێژینه‌وه

په‌یوه‌ندی نیوان ویلایه‌ته‌یه‌گرتوو‌ه‌کانی ئەم‌ریکا و هه‌ریمی کوردستان- عێراق (KRI) ره‌هه‌ندیکی میژویی هه‌یه‌، کیشه‌ و هه‌لبه‌ز و دابه‌زی زۆری به‌خۆیه‌وه‌ بینیه‌وه‌. ئەم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ هه‌ول دهدات سروشت و داینامیکییه‌تی ئەم په‌یوه‌ندییه‌ ئالۆزه‌

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له ڕێگه‌ی وه‌لامدانه‌وه‌ی دوو پرستیاری سه‌ره‌کی شیبکاته‌وه: ئایا په‌یوه‌ندیی نێوان ویلایه‌ته‌ یه‌کگرتووه‌کان و هه‌ریمی کوردستان چ جو‌ره‌ په‌یوه‌ندییه‌که؟ و ئایا واشنتن په‌یره‌وی سیاسه‌تییکی جیاواز له‌ به‌غدا و تایبته‌ به‌رامبه‌ر هه‌ریمی کوردستان ده‌کات؟ بۆ لیکۆلینه‌وه‌ له‌م پرستیاران، توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ سوود له‌ چوارچۆیه‌ی تیۆری "ریالیزمی پیکهاته‌یی" (Structural Realism) وهرده‌گریت، به‌تایبه‌تی چه‌مکی "ریالیزمی هێرشبه‌رانه‌ی" میرشایمه‌ر، به‌ پشتبسته‌ن به‌ تیۆریکی تری ته‌واوکار له‌ ڕێگه‌ی دیدگاکانی "قوتابخانه‌ی ئینگلیزی" بۆ په‌یوه‌ندییه‌ نیوده‌وه‌لته‌یه‌کان. له‌ کاتییدا ریالیزمی هێرشبه‌رانه‌ یارمه‌تیده‌ره‌ بۆ تیگه‌هه‌شتن له‌ ره‌فتاری زله‌یزییکی وه‌ک ئه‌مه‌ریکا له‌ گه‌ران به‌دوای به‌رژه‌وه‌ندییه‌ ستراتیژییه‌کان، قوتابخانه‌ی ئینگلیزی روانگه‌یه‌ک پێشکesh ده‌کات بۆ شروقه‌کردنی کۆمه‌لگه‌ی نیوده‌وه‌لته‌ی به‌ شێوه‌یه‌کی فراوانتر و تیگه‌هه‌شتن له‌ نۆرمه‌کانی سیسته‌می نیوده‌وه‌لته‌ی.

ده‌ره‌نجامه‌کانی توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ ئاماژه‌ به‌وه‌ ده‌کهن که‌ ویلایه‌ته‌ یه‌کگرتووه‌کان خاوه‌نی سیاسه‌تییکی توکمه‌ یان راسته‌وخۆ نییه‌ به‌رامبه‌ر هه‌ریمی کوردستان. به‌لکو، مامه‌له‌کردنی له‌گه‌ڵ هه‌ولێر مه‌رجدار بووه‌ به‌ کاریگه‌ری ره‌چاوکردنی ستراتیژیکی فراوانتر، تا ئاستیک زۆرجار روانگه‌ی ئه‌مه‌ریکا به‌رامبه‌ر هه‌ریمی کوردستان کاریگه‌ر بووه‌ به‌ په‌یوه‌ندییه‌کانی له‌گه‌ڵ به‌غدا و گۆرانکارییه‌ هه‌ریمییه‌کان له‌ سووریا و که‌نداوی عه‌ره‌بی/ فارسی. له‌ ڕوی میژووپییه‌وه‌، په‌یوه‌ندییه‌کانی نێوان ئه‌مه‌ریکا و هه‌ریم زیاتر له‌ ژێر کاریگه‌ری گۆرانکارییه‌ جیۆپۆله‌تیکییه‌کاندا بوون نه‌ک پابه‌ندبوونی درێژخایه‌ن. ئه‌م توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ ده‌گاته‌ ئه‌و ده‌ره‌نجامه‌ی که‌ ڕیکاره‌کانی واشنتن به‌رامبه‌ر هه‌ولێر هه‌شتا به‌پێی لۆژیکییکی ریالیستی (واقعی) به‌ریوده‌هچن، که‌ تییدا ئه‌وه‌له‌ویته‌ دهرئیت به‌ پاراستنی سیسته‌می "ده‌وله‌ت-نه‌ته‌وه" له‌ ناوچه‌که‌ و سه‌قامگیری سیسته‌می نیوده‌وه‌لته‌ی له‌سه‌ر حسابی خواسته‌کانی هه‌ریمی کوردستان بۆ په‌یوه‌ندیی دووقۆلی قوڵتر یان گه‌هه‌شتن به‌ ئاستی ده‌وله‌ت. **وشه‌ کللییه‌کان:** ویلایه‌ته‌ یه‌کگرتووه‌کان؛ هه‌ریمی کوردستانی عێراق (KRI)؛ سیاسه‌تی ده‌ره‌وه؛ سیاساتی ڕۆژه‌ه‌لاتی ناوه‌راسته؛ سیسته‌می نیوده‌وه‌لته‌ی.

بين الشراكة والتبعية: ديناميكيات العلاقات بين إقليم كردستان العراق والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية

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ملخص البحث

تمتلك العلاقة بين الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وإقليم كردستان العراق (KRI) بعداً تاريخياً، وقد شهدت كثيراً من التحديات والتقلبات. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل طبيعة وديناميكيات هذه العلاقة المعقدة من خلال الإجابة على سؤالين رئيسيين: ما هي طبيعة العلاقة القائمة بين الولايات المتحدة وإقليم كردستان؟ وهل تنتهج واشنطن سياسة متميزة وخاصة تجاه أربيل؟ لمعالجة هذه الأسئلة، توظف الدراسة الإطار النظري لـ "الواقعية البنوية" (Structural Realism)، وتحديداً مفهوم "الواقعية الهجومية" لجون ميرشايمر، مدعومةً بنظرية تكاملية أخرى من خلال رؤية "المدرسة الإنجليزية" للعلاقات

الدولية. فبينما تساعد الواقعية الهجومية في فهم سلوك القوى العظمى كالولايات المتحدة في سعيها وراء المصالح الاستراتيجية، تقدم المدرسة الإنجليزية منظوراً لتفسير المجتمع الدولي بشكل أوسع وفهم معايير النظام الدولي. تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن الولايات المتحدة لا تمتلك سياسة متماسكة أو مباشرة تجاه إقليم كردستان. بل كان تعاملها مع أربيل مشروطاً باعتبارات استراتيجية أوسع، لدرجة أن المنظور الأمريكي تجاه إقليم كردستان كان غالباً متأثراً بعلاقات واشنطن مع بغداد وبالتحولات الإقليمية في سوريا والخليج العربي (الفارسي). وتاريخياً، كانت العلاقات بين الولايات المتحدة والإقليم مدفوعة بالتحولات الجيوسياسية أكثر من كونها قائمة على التزامات طويلة الأمد. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن نهج واشنطن تجاه أربيل لا يزال محكوماً بمنطق واقعي، حيث تُعطى الأولوية للحفاظ على نظام "الدولة-الأمة" في المنطقة واستقرار النظام الدولي على حساب تطلعات إقليم كردستان لتعميق العلاقات الثنائية أو الارتقاء إلى مستوى الدولة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الولايات المتحدة؛ إقليم كردستان العراق (KRI)؛ السياسة الخارجية؛ سياسات الشرق الأوسط؛ النظام الدولي.

1. Introduction

The relations between the Kurdish political movements and the United States, in general, have a historical dimension. To date, much discussion has taken place, and much has been written, on this topic, both in the fields of history and political science. Clearly, studying the policy and strategy of the United States is not a simple task, as US foreign policy itself, and the process of building relations with the United States, is a complex process. Of course, this is even more complex for a stateless nation like the Kurdistan Region, which seeks to enhance its own position within America's policy and agenda in the Middle East.

It is possible to divide the vast majority of literatures on Kurd-US relations into two types. The first group sees the Kurds as a friend of America in the region, to the extent that some view the Kurdistan Region as a "second Israel" in its friendship with the United States. The other group sees that what binds the US and the Kurdistan Region is solely the interests of the United States; otherwise, there are not even mutual interests between them. On the level of foreign policy, they see the US as having no clear foreign policy towards the Kurdistan Region (Gunter, 2011, p.104) ^[1]. This is in addition to the fact that many of the studies available so far discuss Kurdish-US relations very generally, meaning they do not differentiate between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the other parts of Kurdistan.

Both approaches exhibit absolutist conclusions while generally neglecting the nuanced details of the relationship. Their heavy reliance on scientific theories of international

¹ Michael Gunter is one of the prominent researchers who has done extensive research on the Kurds. He says: America has no clear strategy or foreign policy toward the Kurdistan Region or the Kurdish issue in general. For more on this, see: Gunter, M., (2011). Foreign Policy towards the Kurds, 13(2), p. 104.

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relations and foreign policy also constitutes a significant limitation. This research attempts to understand the relations between the Kurdistan Region and the United States.

The central research question here is to determine the nature and foundation of the relationship between the KRI and the United States during the period from 1991 to 2025. Furthermore, it seeks to ascertain the existence and characteristics of any specific United States policy directed toward the Kurdistan Region.

To answer this question, our main argument in this research is that the factor determining the relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the United States is always another issue and another subject. That is, a direct relationship between the Kurdistan Region and America, or a direct US policy towards the Kurdistan Region, does not exist to date. The US has always dealt with the Kurdistan Region within the framework of another issue. For example, when the US drew closer to the Kurds in 1998 and ended the civil war between the KDP and the PUK, it was for the purpose of putting pressure on Iraq and creating an Iraqi front to overthrow the Saddam regime. When the US established relations with the KRI after 2003, it was linked to the rebuilding and reconstruction of post-2003 Iraq. In other words, in the KRI-US relationship, there is always an independent variable (another issue) that determines the relationship between these two parties, not the KRI itself.

2. Significance of the Research

The significance of this study stems from its focus on a subject that commands considerable debate and discussion, not only within academic and scholarly spheres but also at the popular level. Notwithstanding its prominence, the topic currently suffers from a paucity of meticulous and impartial academic research, particularly when considering the literature available in the Kurdish and English language.

From a political standpoint, the research holds vital importance for the political elite in the Kurdistan Region. It seeks to critically delineate the fundamental nature of the Kurdistan Region–United States relationship and, crucially, to determine the primary factors to which this relationship is intrinsically tied. For students specializing in Political Science and International Relations, this study provides essential insight by clarifying the underlying premises and structural basis of the relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the United States.

Consequently, this research is positioned to contribute significantly across multiple dimensions: it offers substantial academic value by addressing an existing research gap, and it provides crucial analytical information for political decision-makers and strategists within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the United States, and the broader Iraqi context.

3. Theoretical Framework

To conduct a detailed analysis of KRI-US relations, this study will be situated within a theoretical and scientific framework drawn from international relations (IR) theory. Specifically, to comprehend the behavior of a superpower such as the United States, a theoretical lens is required that can effectively define its interests and actions as a Great Power within the global order. For this purpose, the study employs Structural Realism, particularly the variant developed by John Mearsheimer known as Offensive

Realism. Mearsheimer's seminal work, "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", will serve as the principal theoretical foundation for interpreting US conduct. This thesis provides a powerful explanatory framework for identifying the primary factor driving US policy and behavior toward the Kurdistan Region.

In the view of Offensive Realism, the state, especially the Great Power, seeks power to guarantee its own survival (Mearsheimer, 2001. P. 21,325). According to this theory, great powers are very sensitive to changes and disruptions in the balance of power. They are always looking for opportunities to gain more power and weaken their rivals. Based on this theory, great powers are never satisfied with the amount of power they have. Their goal is to become a dominant force, whether at the regional or global level. Another importance of this theory is, as Mearsheimer (2001, p. 5) says: Great powers play a primary role in what happens in the world, or as he puts it, in "International Politics". From this perspective, the interests and behaviors of Great Powers, especially superpowers like the US, Russia, Britain, and France, have had a great impact (both good and bad) on the Kurdish issue in the region.

Another field that we must pay attention to in this research is understanding the "International Community" or the "International Order". This is because the Kurdistan Region operates within an international framework and a global political order. That is, the existence of a political entity, for which the Kurds in general and the KRI are working, means exiting the framework of a "*de facto state*" and achieving the status of a sovereign entity, which is related to understanding the principles of the international system. For this purpose, the "English School" (of theory) helps us significantly in this regard.

The main idea of this school is that among states, there is a large degree of system (order) and stability, versus a low level of violence. This is despite the fact that states are in a condition of "Anarchy" that is, there is no higher authority above the authority of the states themselves (Burchill, et al. 2013, p. 32-33). This research attempts to read the relations of the Kurdistan Region and the United States from the perspective of these two theories.

4. Methodology

The methodological foundation of this research is predominantly rooted in the Qualitative Method. To operationalize this approach, a diverse array of informational sources was utilized, including scholarly monographs, research papers, scientific journals, official governmental documents, and formal declarations issued by both the Kurdistan Region and the United States.

The investigation and analysis of the subject matter utilized an Analytical Approach. This entailed the systematic deconstruction of political behaviors, salient phenomena, and complex political issues, followed by their intellectual reconstruction within a novel interpretive framework. Crucially, this encompasses a meticulous chronological and thematic analysis of critical junctures (milestones) characterizing the bilateral relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the United States. This rigorous methodology is employed to facilitate a deeper ontological and epistemological engagement with the core

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research problem: identifying the primary drivers underlying the relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region.

Furthermore, to critically engage with existing literature, the strategy of Critical Engagement with Sources was frequently implemented. This involved a dialectical critique of antecedent scholarly texts to generate conclusions that differentiate from prior studies. In addition, the Interpretive Approach was employed to gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the bilateral relationship, linking its historical trajectory to its contemporary instantiation.

Data and information were sourced from materials published in English, Arabic, and Kurdish. Nevertheless, the research primarily foregrounded reliance on English-language sources, specifically drawing upon the expertise of specialists in Kurdish-US relations and scholars in the broader discipline of International Relations.

5. Research Structure

This research is structured around an introduction, three sections, and a conclusion. The first section provides a historical analysis of Kurdish-US relations, tracing developments from the 1970s to the March 1991 uprisings that culminated in the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). These historical milestones are essential for contextualizing subsequent phases of the relationship, many of which represent a re-articulation of earlier dynamics.

The second section categorizes KRI-US relations into four distinct political stages. While the character and trajectory of the relationship evolved during each period, its foundational underpinnings remained largely consistent. The third section examines the strategic significance of the Kurdistan Region to a superpower, specifically the United States. The primary objective of this inquiry is to establish the extent to which the interests of both parties converge, which can, in turn, inform a strategic framework for managing and developing the bilateral relationship. The study concludes with a synthesis of the key findings and their implications.

Section One: A Brief History of Kurdish-US Relations

Although the present analysis is not dedicated to a historical narrative, establishing a robust understanding of the foundations of US policy concerning the KRI requires recourse to its historical development, a methodological imperative predicated on several factors. First: to know what the foundations of US policy were towards the Kurdish issue in Iraq in the twentieth century. Second: Has US policy towards the Kurdistan Region changed over the course of those five decades? What are the reasons for the change and non-change of that policy? The main argument of this section is that America's relationship and policy towards the Kurds of Iraq (the current Kurdistan Region of Iraq), although it has seen ups and downs according to US interests and political developments in the region, the foundations and strategy of US policy towards the Kurdish issue in Iraq have not changed. What has changed are only the mechanisms and means, not the US strategy.

Kurdish sympathy for the United States dates back to the declaration of the fourteen principles that former US President Woodrow Wilson announced to the world, especially the principle that refers to the right of nations to decide their own destiny (Arikanlı, 2010. p.5). After the dominance of nationalist Arab rule in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, and later the rise to power of Abd al-Karim Qasim in 1958, US policy interests lay in working to weaken and overthrow that regime. Because, as is clear, Abd al-Karim Qasim was not a friend of the West; if not a communist, he was a friend of the communists and a friend of the Soviet Union (Tristam, 2019). But despite this, according to one of the diplomatic memoirs of the US State Department in 1962, "America considers the Kurdish problem in Iraq an internal issue, which must be solved internally. Our government will in no way help Kurdish activists against the Iraqi government" (Little, 2010, P. 68).

Some researchers attribute this US position to the suspicion at the time that Mulla Mustafa Barzani, due to his 11-year stay in the Soviet Union (1947-1958), might have colluded with the Soviet authorities. But later, both Iran and Israel, which were part of the Western bloc led by the US against the expansion of the nationalist and communist bloc, tried to convince the Americans to reconsider their policy of non-intervention in Iraq, which the US was pursuing at the time (Gibson, 2019). In 1962, the Shah's regime, through its intelligence agency (SAVAK), decided to offer aid to the Iraqi Kurds to put pressure on the regime of Abd al-Karim Qasim. In 1964, Israel also joined Iran's policy. It reached the point where the then-Prime Minister of Israel (David Ben-Gurion) said: The Kurds are our strategic allies against the radical regime in Baghdad (Bengio, 2014, p.33-69). This policy of Iran and Israel continued for 10 years and greatly harassed and tired the Iraqi regime. It reached the point where it prevented Iraq from participating in the 1967 war of the Arab countries against Israel, and also in the subsequent war in 1973, because 80% of the Iraqi army's military force was busy fighting the Kurds in "Northern Iraq" ^[2].

With the Ba'ath coming to power in 1968, Saddam, as a Ba'ath leader, realized that preoccupation with the war with the Kurds was wasting a lot of the Iraqi army's energy and capacity. Therefore, after he came to power, he tried to reach a negotiation with the Kurds, to take a breath and strengthen his power base. Thus, Saddam Hussein came to northern Iraq and visited Mulla Mustafa Barzani and agreed to most of the Kurdish demands; which later resulted in the March 11 Agreement of 1974 (Gibson, 2019). In 1971, Saddam signed a large arms agreement with Moscow, and later in April 1972, he signed a friendship treaty with Russia (Brands, and Palkki, 2012, p. 625-659). This proximity between Russia and the Ba'ath regime finally made the US agree to the Shah of Iran's proposal, which was to use and cooperate with Kurdish forces against the Ba'ath regime.

In 1974, Henry Kissinger conveyed President Richard Nixon's (1969-1974) message to the US ambassador in Tehran, which emphasized several points: 1) Cooperating with the Kurds to obtain their rights from Baghdad. 2) Obligating the Iraqi government to implement the

² For the period prior to 1991, it is necessary to use the term 'Northern Iraq' rather than the 'Kurdistan Region,' as the latter did not yet exist as a distinct political or legal entity.

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rights of the Kurdish people, but on the condition that it does not lead to the division of Iraq and the emergence of an independent state for the Kurds, because it was not in the interest of the US or Iran to completely close the doors of their relations with Baghdad (Kissinger, 1979). A year later, in 1975, the Iraqi regime reached an agreement with the Shah of Iran, and at that very time, the US stopped its aid to the Kurdish activists. Subsequently, the Kurdish revolution, known as the September Revolution, came to an end and led to the displacement of 200,000 Iraqi Kurds to Iran and Russia. Henry Kissinger, a key architect of the agreement between Iraq and Iran, articulated the underlying approach to the policy through his renowned maxim: "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests" (Erlich, 2017, P. 9-11).

In light of this discussion, and based on both the theories of Offensive Realism and the English School, it can be argued that during the Cold War era, America's relationship with the Kurds was related to the Cold War situation. Outside of these parameters, the US lacked a specific, comprehensive policy or strategy dedicated to the Kurdish question. Within the context of the bipolar international system, Washington addressed the Kurdish issue based on realpolitik considerations, rather than through the lens of President Woodrow Wilson's self-determination principles^[3]. The latter half of the discussion addresses the evolution of US-KRI relations subsequent to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in post-1991.

Section Two: The Kurdistan Region and United States Relations

This chapter provides an analysis of the relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the United States, beginning with the formal establishment of the autonomous political administration in northern Iraq in 1992 and the subsequent formation of its elected parliament and government. For methodological clarity, US policy toward the Kurdistan Region will be divided into discrete developmental stages. Although these stages did not always produce fundamental changes in policy, each is marked by unique political characteristics, thus necessitating a periodization of the US-KRI relationship for a comprehensive understanding.

Stage One: 1992-2003

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, led President Bush (1989–1993) to resort to military force to expel Saddam from Kuwait. This US response had a number of reasons. Because Iraq's occupation of Kuwait would have a great impact on the stability of oil prices in the world, this would directly affect the US economy and regional instability, especially the imbalance of the balance of power in the region (Wittkopf, et al. 2007, P. 20). The establishment of the safe zone in Northern Iraq was driven primarily by humanitarian concerns rather than political motives. This initiative received strong backing from the US,

³ Although Henry Kissinger, the then-Secretary of State, reveals in his memoirs that President Nixon (1969–1974) made efforts toward Kurdish independence, Congressional committees fiercely criticized him, viewing such a move as detrimental to U.S. interests. See: Brwa Barzanji, *Awene* Newspaper, December 29, 2019, "Kurdish-U.S. Relations According to Kissinger's Account."

the UK, France, and Turkey, in addition to several other European countries. Crucially, the creation of the safe zone did not contravene, but rather aligned with, the collective will of the international community (Gibbons, 2002).

It can be said that, from 1992 to 1996, the US strategy was to overthrow the Saddam regime, but not through the use of direct force, but rather through a military coup. For this purpose, the US organized the Iraqi opposition forces within the framework of the Iraqi National Congress (INC); especially the Shi'a forces, by providing intelligence and financial assistance (Katzman, K., (2003). Initially, the US only viewed the no-fly zone from a humanitarian perspective and did not provide any political support to the Kurdistan Regional Government. But the failure of the CIA in its efforts to overthrow the Iraqi regime through a military coup put the Bush administration in a position to think about using and cooperating with the Kurds to overthrow the Ba'ath regime (Shukri, 2017, p.58). Especially after the US came to believe that the Kurds had good military and political organization and could be relied upon as part of the policy of changing the Ba'ath regime.

Crucially, the strategic realignment of US policy toward the Kurdistan Region post-1996 was inextricably linked to the broader objective of regime change in Baghdad. This suggests that the policy shift was not predicated on the intrinsic value of the Kurdish issue itself, but rather on its utility against Saddam Hussein. Consequently, in 1997, the US intensified its mediation efforts to resolve the civil war between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), aiming to consolidate them as a unified pillar of the Iraqi opposition. These efforts culminated on September 17, 1998, when both parties, under the auspices of the US Secretary of State, formalized the ceasefire accord known as the Washington Agreement (Stansfield, 2010, p195,197). On October 31, 1998, the US Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act. This legislation represented the most significant US stance against Baghdad, explicitly reorienting national policy toward the objective of regime change (Charountaki, 2015, 187). Within this new strategic framework, the Kurdistan Region was accorded a pivotal role, elevating bilateral relations to an unprecedented level. Indeed, the Kurds attained a status in US foreign policy that they had never previously enjoyed. Subsequently, the events of September 11, 2001, provided the Bush administration with further impetus to accelerate the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime.

In conclusion, the primary focus of US policy during this stage was the consolidation of American hegemony in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East. This strategy prioritized the containment of both Iran and Iraq, the maintenance of regional stability, and the protection of energy security and democratic principles, while simultaneously precluding the emergence of rival regional powers (Layne, 2006, p.21). This aligns with the neorealist perspective, which posits that the fundamental goal of the United States in the post-Cold War era was to preserve its primacy and strengthen the pillars of the unipolar system.

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Stage Two: 2003-2012

During this period, US-Kurdish relations entered a distinct phase characterized by substantial advancement, particularly regarding the political and legal codification of Kurdish rights in the new Iraqi constitution. However, consistent with the central argument of this study, the bilateral relationship remained contingent upon broader strategic imperatives, leading to intermittent friction. The United States sought to leverage Kurdish cooperation for the reconstruction and stabilization of post-2003 Iraq; consequently, Washington exerted pressure on the Kurdish leadership to subordinate certain nationalist demands to the preservation of a unified Iraqi state. Conversely, the Kurds viewed this transition as a strategic opportunity to consolidate political gains, capitalizing on their pivotal role in assisting US forces and the Iraqi opposition in the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime (Shareef, 2014, p.164).

After 2003, two factors had a great impact on US policy in Iraq and the region. The first was protecting the security and stability of Iraq, which was a very difficult task. The second was the US-Iran conflict; especially the Iranians created many headaches for the Americans in Iraq. Any US support for Kurdish demands, especially the separation of Kurds from Iraq or even the resolution of the “disputed areas” in favor of the Kurds, at that time, would create a threat to US interests in Iraq and the region. Because neither the regional situation nor the international community (based on the two theories of this research) was prepared for such a step. On the contrary, Kurdish independence would lead to greater dissatisfaction from the Turks, Arabs, and Iranians. This is besides the fact that it would disrupt the balance of power in favor of Iran, which would also lead to the disruption of the balance of power among the three main components of Iraq (Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds).

Despite the positive trajectory of US-KRI relations, the limits of this partnership were starkly exposed during the 2007 crisis involving Turkish military threats against the PKK within the Kurdistan Region. Confronted with a choice between a non-state ally and a strategic NATO partner, the United States prioritized its alliance with Turkey. This hierarchy of interests prompted a diplomatic protest from then-President Masoud Barzani, who notably boycotted a high-level meeting with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Baghdad (Shareef, 2014, p.166). This geopolitical triangulation is consistent with the theoretical framework of this study; as John Mearsheimer posits, the commitments of great powers are inherently provisional. In the anarchic international system, great powers shift their alliances based on structural necessity rather than sentiment, rendering their support unreliable over the long term (See Mersheimer, 2001, p.55).

Following the onset of sectarian and ethnic conflict in Iraq, US policy was driven by a dual-track strategy: preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq to prevent internal fragmentation, and mitigating the risk of regional spillover that could invite intervention by neighboring powers. To achieve these objectives amidst a predominantly Sunni insurgency, the US provided financial and logistical support to the *Sahwa* (Awakening) councils, effectively driving a wedge between moderate Sunnis and extremist elements. Concurrently, Washington sought to establish a representative, multi-ethnic government in Baghdad,

aiming to both marginalize insurgent groups and disincentivize Kurdish secessionism (Hamed, 2018, p.4).

Recognizing the geopolitical reality, the KRG leadership understood that rapprochement with Turkey was a prerequisite for sustained US support. Consequently, post-2008 relations between Ankara and Erbil underwent a significant transformation, entering a stage of strategic cooperation. This period also marked the institutionalization of US-KRI relations, transcending the era of purely personalized diplomacy; this was evidenced by the seven bilateral meetings held between the KRG President and President Obama. Yet, despite this alignment and the KRG's support for US policy until the 2011 withdrawal, the relationship remained structurally constrained. As John Mearsheimer posits, states prioritize long-term power calculations over short-term alliances (Mersheimer, 2001, p. 31). In this calculus, the strategic value of Turkey a NATO ally and sovereign state inevitably outweighed that of the Kurdistan Region.

Stage Three: 2012–2017

The partial withdrawal of US forces in 2011 created a significant power vacuum in Iraq, paving the way for heightened interference by regional actors—principally Iran and Turkey. Concurrently, Erbil-Baghdad relations deteriorated significantly. Under the administration of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the systemic marginalization of the Sunni Arab population led to profound sectarian alienation. This instability prompted many Sunni leaders to seek refuge in the Kurdistan Region, while mass demonstrations in Sunni provinces signaled the erosion of state legitimacy. While the KRG maintained a balanced relationship with Washington during this period, the institutional collapse of the Iraqi Army in early 2014 and the subsequent seizure of vast territories by the Islamic State (ISIS) radically altered the strategic landscape.

Initially, the Obama administration viewed the ISIS advance as a consequence of Iraq's internal sectarian schism—essentially a civil war between Sunnis and Shi'as, and was hesitant to intervene militarily. However, this calculus shifted abruptly when ISIS forces pivoted toward the Kurdistan Region, threatening the capital, Erbil. Recognizing the existential threat to US personnel and regional stability, President Obama authorized airstrikes, effectively drawing a strategic "red line" at Erbil. As he stated, "We will not allow the terrorist Islamic State to get close to Erbil" (Fisher, Aug 8, 2014). The potential fall of the KRG threatened to undo the US state-building efforts of 2003 and grant a global terrorist network access to significant economic resources. Consequently, the war against ISIS transformed the US-Kurdish partnership; while the conflict inflicted heavy human and material costs on the Kurds, it simultaneously internationalized the Kurdish cause, prompting direct logistical and financial support from the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Several factors drove the US strategic realignment toward the Kurdistan Region. First, the KRG represented a pro-Western zone of stability and influence in an otherwise chaotic theater. Second, the primary alternative ground force against ISIS—the Shi'a militias

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(PMF)—operated largely under Iranian command. Washington recognized that empowering these militias would inadvertently strengthen Tehran's leverage and undermine Iraqi state sovereignty (Hussain, 2020). Furthermore, the KRI's burgeoning energy sector and foreign investment profile made its survival a matter of economic security.

To degrade and defeat ISIS without committing to a large-scale ground deployment, the US adopted a strategy of "Building Partner Capacity" (BPC). This approach relied on empowering competent local proxies—specifically the Peshmerga—to conduct ground operations with US air and intelligence support. As President Obama articulated: "We have a strategic interest in driving ISIL out... but we can only do that if we know we have partners on the ground who are capable of doing that" (Obama's Full Speech on ISIS, 2014-09-10 [video]). This operational model minimizes US material and human costs while maximizing local efficacy, a hallmark of the "proxy war" strategy utilized in conflicts such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria (McInnis, and Lucas, 2015).

The territorial defeat of ISIS and the elevation of the KRG's diplomatic status. Kurdish leaders engaged in high-level diplomacy with heads of state from the US, France, UK, and Germany, exercising a level of "para-diplomacy" that rivaled sovereign nations. This unprecedented international recognition reinforced the Kurdish leadership's perception of their indispensability to the West. This heightened confidence became a primary driver behind the decision to hold the independence referendum on September 25, 2017, a pivotal event analyzed in the subsequent section.

Stage Four: Post-2017

The period from 2017 to 2025 represents the most complex phase in the US-KRI dynamic, characterized by a sharp fluctuation between near-abandonment and essential strategic partnership. This period can be analyzed through three distinct phases: the post-referendum realist adjustment, the era of institutionalized security amidst economic fragility, and the strategic pivot of 2025.

The fourth stage began with a profound dissonance between Kurdish expectations and American strategic priorities. As the campaign against ISIS wound down, the KRI leadership operated under the belief that the "robust tactical alliance" formed on the battlefield would translate into US diplomatic support—or at least benevolent neutrality for independence. However, this assessment proved to be a "strategic miscalculation." Viewed through the lens of Structural Realism, Washington's response was dictated by a "zero-sum mentality" regarding alliance commitments (Mersheimer, p. 34). The United States subordinated the interests of its non-state partner (the KRI) to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq and regional stability. In this framework, Kurdish secession was viewed not as a democratic right, but as a catalyst for instability that would provoke Turkey and Iran and disrupt US investments in a unified Iraq.

Consequently, while the US opposed the referendum, it was forced to intervene decisively in its aftermath to prevent a total collapse of the regional order. Following the events of October 16, 2017, the US Department of State issued statements explicitly endorsing the legitimacy of the KRG, supporting the leadership of Nechirvan Barzani and Qubad Talabani (Stoni and Bin Yatiban, 2019, p.314,315). This diplomatic intervention acted as a

vital security guarantee, neutralizing internal calls for a "National Salvation Government" and halting Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's efforts to dismantle the KRG's constitutional status.

Following the diplomatic cooling of 2017, relations underwent a rapprochement characterized by the "institutionalization of military aid." The US-led coalition shifted toward directly supervising the reform and unification of the Peshmerga forces (Borsari, 2019) This shift signaled that while Washington rejected Kurdish statehood, it viewed the KRI as an essential component of its long-term security architecture.

This period highlighted the "anomaly" of the relationship: the US began constructing the world's largest consulate in Erbil—an \$800 million investment—signaling permanence, yet the KRI remained legally a non-state actor (K24, 2022). This dichotomy reinforced the KRI's dependency; unable to procure weapons or guarantees as a sovereign state, it relied entirely on these US institutional mechanisms for defense against resurgent threats. The Biden administration era introduced a widening gap between diplomatic rhetoric and ground realities. In 2024, Secretary of State Antony Blinken famously termed the KRI a "cornerstone" of the US relationship with Iraq (Shafiq News, 27/2/2024). However, this period was marked by severe economic isolation for the Kurdistan Region.

Perceptions in Erbil grew that the US held a "lenient position" regarding Iran and its proxies in Baghdad. As the Federal Supreme Court in Baghdad moved to shutter the KRI's independent oil sector and cut budget transfers, the US response was viewed as insufficient. Kurdish leaders felt that the lifting of certain sanctions on Iran emboldened hardliners in Baghdad, leaving the KRI's economy—the primary engine of its autonomy—to suffocate despite the high-level praise from Washington.

As the timeline extends into 2025, the relationship faces a critical juncture defined by the fear of a "security vacuum" and the hope of renewed Republican engagement. Strategic assessments suggest that a total US withdrawal would be disastrous for the KRI. Without the US as a balancing actor, the region would likely face:

1. **Iranian Hegemony:** A power vacuum would likely be filled by Iran, assuming a role similar to the "policeman of the Gulf" but with an anti-Western orientation.
2. **Internal Fragmentation:** The removal of the primary external check would exacerbate KDP-PUK tensions, potentially diverging the region.
3. **Economic Isolation:** The KRI stands to lose the most, as it lacks the fiscal autonomy to survive without the leverage US presence provides against Baghdad.

The 2025 Shift: the return of a Trump administration

Against this backdrop, the return of a Trump administration and the engagement of Secretary of State Marco Rubio in April 2025 sparked cautious optimism. The focus on "business opportunities" and the immediate demand to reopen the Iraq-Türkiye Pipeline represented a shift from the previous "impasse" toward tangible economic relief (Salih, May 26, 2025). For Erbil, this signals a potential return to a transactional but protective relationship, where US strategic interests in energy and containment align once again with Kurdish survival.

A significant realignment is underway in US-Kurdish relations, shifting the Kurdistan Region's role in Washington. This was evident during Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's recent visit, highlighted by the signing of \$110 billion in natural gas deals with US energy companies (WesternZagros and HKN Energy). In a departure from decades of cautious policy, the State Department and US Secretary of Energy "publicly endorsed" these contracts, supporting the KRG's efforts to develop its resources (The New Region, May. 19, 2025).

While previous administrations, notably under President Biden, had merely defended existing US energy contracts, the current Trump administration is actively encouraging and publicly endorsing new deals. This reflects a broader US foreign policy reorientation prioritizing commerce and non-intervention over military commitments⁴. Though this shift could reduce the KRG's reliance on the US as a security guarantor, it creates new opportunities: the KRG is now valued as a "long-term economic and energy partner", not just a counterterrorism or anti-Iran asset.

The change was powerfully underscored by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who stated that "Kurdish autonomy is the "linchpin" of the US approach toward Iraq". This was a major rhetorical break from the traditional "one Iraq" policy, which always subordinated US-Kurdish relations to the broader US-Baghdad framework. Although the State Department later softened the phrasing to call the KRG a "foundational pillar," the substantial policy shift has clearly been established.

It can be argued that, the 2017–2025 era validates the structural realist argument: the US-KRI relationship is durable not due to sentiment, but because the KRI remains a necessary "residual force posture" [⁵] for the US in the Middle East. However, the dependency inherent in this posture means that the Kurdistan Region's stability is perpetually held hostage to the shifting priorities of the White House and the geopolitical balancing act between Washington, Baghdad, and Tehran.

Section three: The Kurdistan Region's Place in U.S. Strategic Calculations

⁴ Mohammed A. Salih (May. 26, 2025) Op. cit.

⁵ Bordenkircher, E., (2020). Pivoting to the KRG: Restructuring the U.S. Military Presence in Iraq. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Available at <<
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/pivoting-to-the-kr-g-restructuring-the-u.s.-military-presence-in-iraq>>>. [Accessed 20/3/2020].

To fully understand the relationship between the KRI and the United States, particularly when analyzed through the lens of realist theories, one must first address a fundamental question: What is the strategic importance of the Kurdistan Region to the United States? What concrete gains does Washington derive from this relationship?

Many researchers argue that the Kurdish issue—and the Kurdistan Region specifically—does not hold sufficient weight to warrant a distinct U.S. grand strategy. Michael Gunter (2011. Pp. 93-106) exemplifies this view, asserting that the sovereign states among which the Kurdish population is divided (Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq) are far more geopolitically critical to U.S. policy than the Kurdish cause itself.

Gunter emphasizes that these surrounding states view the Kurds primarily as a destabilizing factor threatening regional security. While the status of the KRG in Iraq is differentiated from Kurdish groups in other countries, Washington's relationships with the sovereign states remain a greater priority than its relationship with the autonomous Kurdish entity [6].

This complexity is well-analyzed by Michael Knights (2007), who highlights the unique case of the Iraqi Kurds for the Americans. Knights points out that the establishment of an independent Kurdish state—unlike the dissolution of Yugoslavia—is feared to potentially trigger the collapse or border dissolution of multiple neighboring states (Turkey, Iran, and Syria). This deep-seated regional fear is a crucial factor. Therefore, America's consistent and strong advocacy for a unified Iraq is driven by the pragmatic belief that it is easier for Washington to manage a single (albeit weak) state than to contend with multiple, small, and potentially unstable successor states. As Knights summarizes the U.S. position: "if the Kurds become a state, why shouldn't Basra have that right?" (Hamd, 2015, P. 8).

To understand the deepening relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region, one must analyze the interaction between local aspirations and global power dynamics. The alignment of interests between the Kurds and Washington is largely tied to broader regional developments, particularly the state of U.S. relations with the nations among which the Kurds are divided (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria).

1. The KRG's Role in the Regional Power Dynamic

From a realist perspective, the U.S. has historically utilized the "Kurdish factor" as a pressure card against regional adversaries. When Washington seeks to exert leverage over Baghdad, Tehran, or Ankara, it often strengthens ties with the Kurds.

This dynamic is historically evident. In the mid-1970s, when the U.S. sought to pressure the Soviet-aligned Ba'athist regime in Iraq, it funneled weapons and aid to the Kurds via Iran

⁶ Indeed, if we examine the policies of Donald Trump's administration, particularly in Syria and Iraq, it becomes evident that priority is given to the interests of regional countries rather than the Kurds. For instance, despite all the sacrifices and cooperation the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) offered to the Americans, Trump ultimately chose Turkey over the Kurds. In his recent book, *The Room Where It Happened*, John Bolton explicitly discusses Trump's appeasement of Turkey."

For further reference, see: Bolton, J. (2020) *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir*. Simon & Schuster.

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[⁷]. However, this support was transactional; following the 1975 Algiers Agreement between the Shah of Iran and Baghdad, both Tehran and Washington withdrew support, abandoning the Kurds in favor of state-level stability.

This pattern of prioritizing broader regional interests persists, albeit in different forms. The U.S. stance during the 2017 Kurdistan independence referendum echoed this realism. While not a direct abandonment like 1975, Washington prioritized the "One Iraq" policy and other regional concerns—such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or Syrian stability—over Kurdish aspirations (Gunter, 2011, pp. 93-106).

2. Security Cooperation: The "Building Partner Capability" Model

In the twenty-first century, local partners play a pivotal role in U.S. conflict resolution strategies (Aziz, 2019). Both the Obama and Trump administrations relied heavily on "Building Partner Capability" as a mechanism to minimize direct U.S. boots on the ground. The KRG has served as a central node in this security architecture, particularly during the war against ISIS. As noted by Fazil Kurdi (May 21, 2020), a long-time liaison with UN and U.S. organizations, the U.S. views the Kurdish forces in the region as a singular, vital asset for counter-terrorism and peacekeeping. Kurdi recalls a 2018 initiative with then-Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani to professionalize and unify the armed forces, noting that "from the American perspective, Kurdistan is one geographical area" regarding security coordination.

Furthermore, the KRG serves as a strategic buffer against Iranian influence. While Baghdad is often susceptible to pressure from Tehran, Erbil maintains a more balanced foreign policy, offering the U.S. a secure logistical hub—epitomized by the strategic utility of Erbil International Airport—away from the volatility of southern Iraq.

3. Energy Interests and Economic Statecraft

Beyond security, economic variables have become increasingly central to US-KRI relations. Since 2008, the Kurdistan Region has undergone significant development in its energy sector, attracting major American corporations such as Chevron and ExxonMobil.

The region is estimated to hold approximately 45 billion barrels of oil and up to 200 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. These resources align with U.S. goals for global energy security and the diversification of supplies away from hostile actors (Salih, 2025). As global energy dynamics shift, the presence of U.S. majors in the region helps anchor American interests, potentially transforming the relationship from purely security-based to economically symbiotic. The United States played a pivotal and necessary role in facilitating the interim deal that led to the reopening of the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline (ITP) in September 2025 and the subsequent shipment of Kurdish crude to the U.S. Furthermore, the ITP reopening paves the

⁷ The most immediate impact of the agreement was the collapse of the Second Iraqi–Kurdish War (1974–1975). For years, the Shah of Iran (with backing from the U.S. and Israel) had supported the Kurdish *Peshmerga*, led by Mustafa Barzani, as a proxy force to weaken Baghdad. In exchange for Iraq conceding sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab waterway, the Shah agreed to immediately close the border and cut off all supplies to the Kurds. See Gibson, B. R. (2015). *Sold Out? US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War*. Palgrave Macmillan.

way for deeper Baghdad-Erbil energy cooperation on gas, potentially reducing Iraq's dependence on Iranian imports, while also offering Turkey a strategic alternative to Russian crude (Raydan and Jeffrey, 2025).

4. Normative Dimensions: Democracy and Public Sentiment

While realism drives policy, normative factors also play a role. The Kurdistan Region is often viewed as a relative model of stability and religious tolerance in a turbulent region. Bayan Sami, the former KRG representative in Washington, argues that the "relationship goes back to the sacrifices of the Peshmerga... and the Kurdistan Region's opening its arms to the displaced" (Interview with the KRI Representative to the US, 2019).

This sentiment is echoed in Washington's corridors of power. Former National Security Advisor John Bolton noted that President Trump once told Turkish President Erdoğan that "a lot of people in Washington love the Kurds" (Bolton, 2020, p. 182). This pro-Kurdish sentiment in Congress and policy centers provides a layer of diplomatic insulation for the KRG that other non-state actors lack (Wahab, 2020).

5. Future Trajectories: Realigning the U.S. Footprint

Looking ahead, the U.S. appears poised to consolidate its position in the Kurdistan Region, particularly as pressure mounts in Baghdad for a U.S. withdrawal. Following the Iraqi Parliament's non-binding resolution in January 2020 calling for the expulsion of foreign forces (Reuters, January 5, 2020), the value of the KRG as a long-term host has increased.

The construction of the massive new U.S. Consulate complex in Erbil signals a commitment to long-term coordination (K24, April 23-2018). While the relationship remains bound by the constraints of the international state system—where the U.S. must balance relations with Turkey and Iraq—the trajectory suggests a deepening partnership. The KRG is no longer just a tactical asset; it is evolving into an indispensable platform for projecting U.S. power and stability in the Middle East.

Conclusion: The Structural Limits of U.S.-KRI Relations

The trajectory of the relationship between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the United States, while historically deep, remains defined by a structurally limited framework. While it is undeniable that these ties have evolved significantly since the 1970s, the nature of U.S. engagement has consistently been derivative, shaped not by the intrinsic value of the KRI alone, but by its utility within broader regional and international strategies.

Historically, this evolution occurred in distinct phases. Prior to 1991, U.S. engagement was tactical, viewing Kurdish actors primarily as leverage against the Ba'athist regime. Between 1996 and 2003, this shifted toward a regime-change paradigm, with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) serving as key assets in the effort to topple Saddam Hussein. Following 2003, the relationship entered an

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institutionalized phase, anchored in the KRI's recognition as a constitutional entity within the new Iraqi state. While cooperation peaked during the campaign against ISIS in 2014, this surge in engagement was again driven by an external variable: the necessity of defeating a transnational terrorist threat (ISIS).

Therefore, the central equation of U.S.-KRI relations is that American support has invariably been subordinate to the preservation of the Westphalian state system. Washington acts on realist principles, prioritizing the stability of existing borders and the international order over the aspirations of non-state actors. This commitment to the status quo was sharply illustrated by the U.S. opposition to the 2017 Kurdistan independence referendum.

Recent developments under the second Trump administration suggest a subtle recalibration. The U.S. increasingly explicitly identifies the KRI as a vital partner; however, this partnership remains tethered to the "One Iraq" policy. The current strategic doctrine appears to favor a "strong KRI within a unified Iraq," rather than supporting Kurdish independence.

Ultimately, this research concludes with a geopolitical paradox: the KRI and the United States may have "no better partner" than one another in the current regional context, yet the relationship is bounded by an immutable ceiling. For the United States, the KRI is an indispensable ally in Iraq, but one that remains—crucially—"a friend that is not a state."

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