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GCC–Kurdistan Region Relations: *The Role of Iran–Saudi Arabia Geopolitical Rivalry*

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RECEIVED : 28 /04/2025

ACCEPTED : 23/07/2025

PUBLISHED : 15/02/ 2026

Abstract

The relationship between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Gulf countries began after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. With Saddam's demise, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries grew apprehensive about Iraq's future, shaping their interactions with the KRG based on Iraq's significance and role in their political and security calculations. The post-2005 era witnessed heightened regional tensions, driven by an unfavorable balance of power for the GCC, governance and security challenges in Iraq, and the predominant influence of Shi'a groups over Iraqi state institutions.

The Gulf countries' engagement with the KRI in Iraq can be delineated by two principal objectives of GCC foreign policy in Iraq. Firstly, Saudi Arabia sought to assert a substantial role in regional politics, particularly in post-2005 Iraq, in response to the escalating influence of Iran and Turkey in the region. Secondly, Saudi Arabia aimed to counterbalance Shi'a dominance within the Iraqi state by fostering equilibrium among Iraq's major factions. While the Sunni population exhibited weakness and division, the Kurds significantly influenced the country's political trajectory, especially from 2005 to 2017.

I will argue that the Iran's growing presence in Iraq has emerged as the most significant factor of GCC-KRI relations. Consequently, Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, have sought to engage with the Kurds to exert pressure on both the Shia government and Iranian dominance. The GCC ties with KRI are intricately linked to the post-2005 policies of Iraq's political elite towards the Gulf countries. The GCC's engagement with the KRI primarily occurs during pivotal political developments and crises in Iraq, aiming to leverage Kurdish influence in Baghdad and assert a role in Iraq's domestic politics.

Keywords:

Iraq,
Iran,
Kurdistan Region of
Iraq,
GCC



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1-Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have shown various levels of engagement with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) since the 2003 Iraq War. However, not all the GCC's members wield equal political influence. Particularly since the onset of the Syrian Civil War, tensions have arisen within the GCC regarding regional geopolitics, notably evident in the strained relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one hand, and Qatar on the other. Therefore, references to "Gulf countries" in this article specifically denotes those nations shaping the primary policies of the GCC, predominantly Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait, rather than all GCC members. As a result of internal divisions within the GCC, individual member states have pursued varying policies, posing a challenge to the development of a unified approach towards the KRI. These states have consistently engaged with the KRI since 2003, a relationship significantly influencing Gulf policy dynamics, particularly since the outbreak of war in Syria, and the subsequent coalition against the Houthis in Yemen.

This paper seeks to understand how the Iran–Saudi Arabia regional competition has influenced GCC–KRI relations in Iraq since 2005, and what the underlying motives behind this influence are. It also explores the extent to which this rivalry has shaped the policies of GCC states toward the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Consequently, the central inquiry of this study pertains to the existence of and motivations behind any relationships between the KRI and Gulf countries.

Additionally, this article examines the nature of relations between the GCC and KRI since 2005 and discerns the guiding principles behind these interactions. The existing literature on this topic is sparse, virtually limited to Marianna Charountaki's (Charountaki, 2016) paper "The GCC in Kurdish politics", primarily based on interviews with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials and Gulf consular representatives in the KRI. Other available resources are largely journalistic in nature, lacking scholarly depth. Thus, it is imperative to fill this research gap by investigating the presence or absence of formal relations between these entities, how such relations have been pursued, and the underlying motives guiding these interactions.

2-Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, primarily utilizing secondary sources to analyze the evolving relationship between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the post-2003 era. The qualitative methodology is particularly suited to this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the political, economic, and socio-cultural dynamics that have shaped the engagement between these regions. By focusing on qualitative data, the research emphasizes contextual understanding, interpretation, and the identification of patterns and themes that are not easily quantifiable.

The study relies extensively on secondary sources, including academic articles, policy reports, official statements, and media archives, to construct a comprehensive narrative of the GCC-KRI relationship. These sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and ability to provide diverse perspectives on the topic. To ensure a robust analysis, the author has incorporated literature written in Kurdish, Arabic, and English, thereby capturing the nuances and regional discourses that might otherwise be overlooked in a monolingual approach. This multilingual framework not only enriches the study but also reflects the transnational nature of the subject matter.

A key component of the methodology is the systematic tracking and analysis of diplomatic visits and high-level engagements between the KRI and GCC countries. The author has meticulously documented and analyzed nearly all significant visits, both from the KRI to the Gulf states and vice versa, since 2003. These visits serve as critical indicators of the evolving political and economic ties, offering insights into the priorities, strategies, and mutual interests driving the relationship. By

examining the timing, frequency, and outcomes of these engagements, the study identifies key milestones and turning points in the GCC-KRI relationship.

In addition to diplomatic visits, the research incorporates an analytical framework that considers broader geopolitical and regional dynamics, including the role of external actors such as the United States, Iran, and Turkey. This contextual analysis is essential for understanding the motivations behind the GCC's engagement with the KRI and the implications of this relationship for regional stability and power balances.

The methodological approach is further strengthened by a critical evaluation of the sources used. The author has employed source triangulation to cross-verify information and ensure the reliability of the findings. This involves comparing data from multiple sources, such as government publications, international organization reports, and independent analyses, to mitigate potential biases and enhance the validity of the research.

Finally, the study acknowledges the limitations inherent in relying on secondary sources, such as potential gaps in data availability and the risk of interpretive bias. However, these limitations are addressed through a rigorous and transparent analytical process, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are well-supported and contextually grounded.

3-The Kurdish-Gulf nexus: A historical overview

The use of the Kurdish issue¹ in Iraq, Iran and Turkey can serve as a strategic tool to exert pressure and influence political behavior. This has been a longstanding agenda for countries in and beyond the region. The Kurdish card, employed as political leverage, has been utilized by Iran, Syria and even the United States against Iraq on multiple occasions (Nazeli, 2023, p.31). During the Iran-Iraq War, both Iran and Syria supported Iraqi Kurds against the Ba'ath regime (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). In line with this, Saudi Arabia will need to consider the Kurdish factor if it is to strengthen its role in Iraq. The Kurdish factor cannot be overlooked by any power wishing to exert influence in the Middle East, given the political position of the Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Iraqi Kurdish-Gulf relations are relatively young, mainly stemming from the downfall of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 2003. Particularly notable developments occurred following the ratification of the permanent Iraqi Constitution in 2005, which granted formal recognition to the Kurds as a political and constitutional entity within a federal Iraq. Since then, the Gulf countries' relations with the KRI have a legal and constitutional scope, as opposed to support for non- or anti-state groups.

However, historical records (Rubinstein, 1972) indicate diplomatic exchanges dating back to the 1970s between the Kurdish revolutionary leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, primarily concerning the perceived threat posed by the Soviet Union to the region following the 1972 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and Ba'athist Iraq. In this correspondence, King Faisal also appealed to former US President Lyndon B. Johnson for military and financial support to empower Barzani in establishing a Kurdish government in northern Iraq (Ali, 2017). Nevertheless, more concrete historical evidence regarding direct financial or logistical assistance from Gulf countries to Kurdish movements remains elusive.

After the moment of the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Gulf countries had fears over the future of post-Saddam Iraq, as discussed in greater depth in the next sections. Initially, the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, monitored the political situation in Iraq and refrained from

¹ The Kurdish issue refers to the complex political, social, cultural, and economic challenges surrounding the Kurdish people's quest for recognition, rights, and self-determination within the modern states they inhabit. These challenges are deeply rooted in history, shaped by geopolitical dynamics, and vary across the countries with significant Kurdish populations, primarily Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. See Natali, Denise (2005). *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*. Syracuse University Press. Also, Gunes, Cengiz, & Zeydanlioğlu, Welat (Eds.) (2013). *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation*. Routledge.

interfering in its internal affairs, until the coming to power of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2006, when the sectarian conflict between Arab Iraqi Sunnis and Shias reached its peak, and Iran to a great extent controlled political decision-making in Iraq. This is discussed in greater depth in the following sections.

Engaging with the KRI provides an opportunity for the GCC to counterbalance Iranian influence in Iraq and expand their own sphere of influence. As the Maliki administration aligned more closely with Tehran, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries sought a new card to counterbalance Iranian influence. The KRG, whose interactions with Shia-dominated governments were strained, emerged as potential allies. Prior to the ascendance of Shia-dominated leadership in Baghdad, Gulf nations primarily engaged with the KRG through the central government. However, Maliki's policies prompted the GCC to establish direct relations with the KRG, as will be explained next (Gulmohamad, 2021).

4-Saudi foreign policy towards post-2003 Iraq

The GCC's policy towards the KRI has been closely intertwined with its approach towards post-2003 Iraq. This section focuses mostly on Saudi Arabia's policy towards post-2003 Iraq, due to Saudi domination of the GCC's foreign policy in these years; the policy of the other Gulf countries did not conflict significantly with Saudi policy toward Iraq. It is difficult to understand Saudi Arabia's strategy in post-Saddam Iraq without first understanding the general security approach of the Saudi regime. Saudi foreign policy is guided by both domestic and foreign factors, including the need for stability within the country and the assurance of security outside its borders (Nonneman, 2005). As Gause (2011) argues, Riyadh's main regional policy is concerned with maintaining the security of the regime against domestic and external challenges, such as ideological challenges to the domestic stability and legitimacy of the regime, and external military threats.

Since the formation of both entities as modern states (Iraq out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1921, Saudi Arabia after the al-Saud family's overthrow of the Hashemite Kingdom of Hejaz in 1932), Iraq's political system, political elite and political development have been a source of concern for Saudi Arabia. From monarchic Iraq to republican Iraq, from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to post-Saddam Iraq, the country has been a troublesome neighbour for Saudi Arabia. After the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, these concerns reached a peak, when for the first time in the history of the modern Iraqi state, representatives of the majority Shia Arab population were in control. Riyadh's concern over a Shia-led government in Iraq can be understood through the role of the security dimensions in Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policies.

The involvement of Saudi Arabia in Iraq can be attributed significantly to its domestic security imperatives. Saudi rulers are wary of an outbreak of increased sectarian strife between its Sunni-majority population and its Shia minority, which they fear could be affected by the confessional enmity between Iraq's Shias and Sunnis (Gause, 2011). This is due to the Saudis' political and sectarian links with Iraqi Arab Sunnis on the one hand, and the rise of the Shia religious identity of Iraqi Shias after 2003 on the other, which could mobilize domestic opposition to the Saudi regime. Any development in Iraq's sectarian equilibrium is thus perceived as potentially impacting Saudi Arabia. Adel al-Jubeir, long-term diplomat and foreign affairs advisor to Prince Abdullah, in November 2003 told a press conference in Washington, "We are concerned that the situation in Iraq unless we deal with it in a positive way could erode and unravel" (McMillan, 2006). These fears were especially sharp during the 2003–2015 period, when sectarianism became a source of grave concern for both Riyadh's domestic and foreign policy in the region.

In the summer of 2006, Maliki, who had assumed the Iraqi premiership a few months earlier, visited Saudi Arabia and met with King Abdullah. Following this meeting, King Abdullah concluded that Maliki and his government were aligned with Iran and were therefore contrary to Saudi interests, leading him to refrain from further engagement (Riedel and Harvey, 2020). From 2003 to 2017, this perspective significantly influenced Saudi policy towards fostering closer ties with the KRI, subsequently leading to the development of KRI-Saudi relations. Additionally, the diminishing

involvement of the United States in Iraq as the years passed, culminating in its withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011, compelled Saudi Arabia to engage more extensively with both Sunni Arab and Kurdish factions.

Saudi involvement in Iraq has manifested in various forms, ranging from military support rendered to Iraqi Sunni Arabs and insurgent factions, to deliberate political obstructionism aimed at impeding the establishment of a Shia-dominated government. For instance, fearing Iranian hegemony, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf countries supported Sunni political forces and the unsuccessful candidacy of the more moderate Shia politician Ayad Allawi, in an attempt to prevent the re-election of Maliki as Prime Minister in 2010. This strategic maneuvering by Riyadh is underpinned by its adept exploitation of sectarian divides, which serves the dual purpose of fortifying its domestic legitimacy and bolstering its regional policy objectives. Central to this strategy is the consolidation of Saudi Arabia's influence among its Sunni allies in countering the ascendancy of Iran.

On a non-state, or ethnic and socioreligious level, Saudi Arabia has engaged with Sunni Arab tribes and political groups on the one hand and made approaches to the Kurds on the other. Particularly in the years from the US-led invasion in 2003 to the American withdrawal in 2011, when Saudi Arabia was in close coordination with the United States, Riyadh was somewhat cautious regarding any overt intervention in both the political process and ethno-sectarian relations of Iraq (Gause, 2011). Saudi Arabia's primary engagement in post-2003 Iraq was conducted through Iraqi Sunni Arabs. Saudi Arabia did not have close ties with the Iraqi Shia and Kurdish communities, unlike Iran and Turkey respectively, which allowed these countries to become more involved partners with the new Iraqi governments from 2003 until 2011.

Sunni Arabs were not a promising partner for the Saudis if the latter were to gain influence. Sunni Arabs' main sources of political power before 2003 were the Iraqi Army and the Ba'ath Party; both these institutions were disbanded shortly after Iraq was occupied in May 2003, by the US-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority which filled the vacuum left by the collapse of the regime. Due to Sunnis' lack of political power inside the state after the US-imposed de-Ba'athification process, and Sunnis' lack of an obvious political agenda, Saudi engagement in Iraq also remained unsystematic (Ahmed, 2017). As a result of the lack of a proper regional strategy, and of success in building institutional bases in post-2003 Iraq, Riyadh's capacity in Iraq remained weaker than that of Iran and Turkey.

After the death of King Abdullah in 2015, King Salman and his son, Mohammed bin Salman, finally realized that not engaging with Iraq cedes the field to Iran. Since then, there has been a shift in Saudi policy towards Iraq and the KRG. Mohammed bin Salman's approach has been to engage with both Iraq and the KRI simultaneously (Riedel and Harvey, 2020). Following the end of Maliki's tenure in 2014, successive Iraqi Prime Ministers, from Haider al-Abadi to Adil Abdul-Mahdi, Mustafa al-Kadhimi and now Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, have sought to establish relations with Saudi Arabia. Baghdad did not officially resume diplomatic relations with Riyadh until 2015, during the era of Abadi (2014–2018). His successor, Kadhimi, continued these efforts. Unaffiliated with any regional power, Kadhimi was able to host several high-level meetings between senior Iranian and Arab officials during his term. However, despite these diplomatic successes, a number of GCC countries still viewed the close ties between the Iraqi ruling blocs and Tehran with suspicion. Nevertheless, Riyadh received many prominent Iraqi figures, including the head of the al-Hikma Movement, Shia cleric Ammar al-Hakim, in August 2022 (Amwaj Media, 2021). Since taking office in October 2022, Sudani has worked to continue engagement with neighboring Arab countries. After becoming Prime Minister with the support of Shia forces supported by Iran, GCC countries initially viewed him as collaborating with Tehran. However, Sudani has demonstrated an ability to leverage his close relationship with Iran while building on the diplomatic successes achieved by his predecessor.

However, none of these political figures could provide Saudi Arabia (or its GCC allies such as the UAE) with an effective and powerful card to play in Iraqi politics or on the regional level. GCC

countries finally realized that they should engage more effectively with Iraqi Kurds, which has also been a long-standing goal of the Kurds towards the Arab Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. This is now explored in the next section.

5-The GCC's engagement with the KRI

As discussed, the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have sought a role in the various political changes that have occurred in Iraq since 2003. This was evident in 2006 when Maliki assumed power, as well as in 2011 as pressure was exerted on Maliki during the buildup to the emergence of ISIS. More recently, the GCC has also displayed a close interest in the KRI's referendum in 2017, and in the youth-led protests for reform that swept Iraq after November 2019. These instances highlight the Gulf countries' desire to be involved in significant political events in Iraq, and particularly those that affect the KRI.

The Kurdish dimension in Gulf politics intersects with two key aspects of GCC policy. Firstly, it reflects Saudi Arabia's burgeoning regional aspirations, particularly in the aftermath of pivotal regional shifts such as the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the waning influence of other regional powers like Syria and Egypt. Secondly, it underscores Saudi Arabia's strategic imperative to assert influence in Iraq, thereby offsetting Iran's hegemony in the country. This strategic objective involves countering the dominance of Shia political forces and Iranian influence in Iraq.

Particularly since 2003, the Kurds have emerged as influential actors in shaping Iraq's political trajectory. In contrast, the Sunni community, fragmented and weakened, struggled to assert significant pressure against Maliki's authority independently. Given the relatively limited leverage of Iraqi Sunnis in shaping the political landscape, the combined influence of both Kurdish and Sunni factions emerges as a potent force in exerting pressure on the Maliki government. The Kurdish factor can thus provide GCC with political influence. The GCC countries strive to maintain influence in Iraq and the broader Middle East; engaging with the KRI thus allows them to gain a foothold and establish diplomatic ties, potentially enabling them to shape political decisions and alliances.

After Maliki's election in 2006, Gulf countries reached the understanding that it would be difficult to challenge Maliki's government, and Shia rule, by relying solely on Arab Sunnis, who make up only around 20 percent of Iraq's population. To this end, they realized that rapprochement with Iraqi Kurds, especially the then-KRI President Masoud Barzani, would be more advantageous for advancing Saudi and other Gulf policies in Iraq. In confidential memoranda to King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, the Saudi Foreign Ministry suggested approaching the Kurds to undermine Maliki's sectarian rule (WikiLeaks, Doc#939 and Doc#68445, 2015). For this purpose, the Foreign Minister suggested that the King invite Barzani, described as a strong figure in Iraq, to Riyadh. In 2007, the KRG President visited Riyadh at the official invitation of the King (KRG.gov, 2007). In April 2010, King Abdullah met with Barzani and Iraqi President Talabani. The meeting with these two Kurdish figures was read as Riyadh's attempt to sway the Kurds politically in favour of lending their support to the Iraqiya List, a coalition dominated by Sunni Arabs, and away from the Shia bloc with its close ties to Iran (Ghahriyan, 2018).

Barzani visited the UAE and Saudi Arabia again in 2015, welcomed by King Salman bin Abdulaziz. In 2016, Saudi Arabia officially opened its consulate in Erbil due to the increased diplomatic role of the KRI and its importance in the fight against terrorism and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria group (ISIS). Subsequently, the relation between the KRI and Gulf countries has grown still stronger. Current KRG President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani have made multiple visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as Qatar, in the years 2020–24. These visits and warm relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been criticized repeatedly by Iraqi and Iranian officials, alleging that Saudi Arabia aims to create a Sunni alliance against Iraqi Shia political forces and Iran.

Other Arab Gulf states have demonstrated their eagerness to forge close links with the KRI. Abu Dhabi, one of the largest investors in post-war Iraq with much of this funding directed towards Kurdistan, enjoys extensive diplomatic and political ties with the KRG. In 2014, Dubai's Chamber of Commerce launched an office in Erbil to assist Emirati companies already involved with the KRG. The UAE also provided humanitarian aid and assistance to the KRI, especially during the fight against ISIS. The UAE Red Crescent, the country's humanitarian agency, offered significant support to the KRI in terms of health care, education and infrastructure development. Qatar has demonstrated commitment to investing significantly in the KRI's burgeoning energy and infrastructure sectors (Cengiz, 2022). Furthermore, the GCC has formally invited the KRG to participate in its meetings, a gesture extended by GCC Secretary-General Jasem Al-Budaiwi during a meeting with Masrour Barzani at the World Government Summit in Dubai in February 2023 (Kurdistan 24, 2023). These developments signify the GCC's aspiration to assume a potentially significant and emerging role in Iraqi Kurdistan, perceived as a stable and prosperous region in which Gulf countries seek to invest.

A number of factors have contributed to the rapprochement between the GCC and KRI.

5.1 Counterbalancing Iran

The GCC countries perceive Iran as a regional rival and are concerned about its influence in Iraq. Engaging with the KRI provides an opportunity for the GCC states to counterbalance Iranian influence and expand their own spheres of influence. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf countries aspire to establish a foothold in Iraq, but Shia political factions influenced by Iran have impeded their access.

Following the Arab Spring uprisings, the GCC became increasingly concerned about the spread and influence of Shia political power in the region. The formation of the Hashd al-Sha'abi (Popular Mobilization Forces) Shia paramilitary group during the fight against ISIS in 2014, which quickly came to exert significant control over Iraq's political and military sectors, further heightened these concerns. The GCC has started considering strategies to weaken the power of Iraqi Shi'ites when necessary. In this regard, Iraqi Sunni Arabs and Kurds have been seen as potential allies, as they frequently find themselves in conflict with the central government in Baghdad. By aligning with these groups, the GCC hopes to offset the influence of the Iraqi Shias, and maintain its own interests in the region.

5.2. The fight against ISIS

The capture of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014 had a significant impact for the Kurds, as it required American policymakers to acknowledge the reality of the KRI as a strong partner and military force in the region. When ISIS began attacks on Erbil in August of the same year, it raised concerns among regional nations, especially Saudi Arabia, which also faced significant challenges from the terrorist group. This situation led to the formation of a new regional coalition comprising Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to operate in areas occupied by ISIS, including parts of the KRI. As a result, the fight against ISIS played a crucial role in strengthening the relationship between the KRG and Saudi Arabia (Ghahriyan, 2018). Given the regional security challenges and the proximity of the KRI to conflict zones, the GCC countries aim to enhance security cooperation with the KRG. This includes sharing intelligence, coordinating counter-terrorism efforts, and cooperating on border control to maintain stability and prevent the spillover of conflicts (GOV.KRD, 2025).

5.3. The dynamics of Qatar-GCC rift

Qatar's deviation from the mainstream of GCC policies after the Arab Spring, and its growing alignment with Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, led to a rift between Qatar and other GCC countries. This became particularly evident amid the economic sanctions and physical blockade imposed on Qatar by the GCC countries in 2017–21, when Turkey continued to cooperate with Qatar. The announcement of the establishment of a Turkish military base in Qatar,

and the deployment of military experts to Doha, exacerbated tensions. These actions were seen as acts of defiance by other Gulf countries, causing further strain in their relationship with Qatar. The conflict between Qatar and its GCC counterparts spilled over onto social media, with resonances for the relationship between the Saudis and the KRI. Saudi activists used hashtags like “Saudi Arabia with Kurdistan” to mirror the Turkish hashtag “Turkey with Qatar”, drawing on the enmity between Turkey and the Kurds (K24, 2017).

5.4.Reverberations of the KRI independence referendum

The KRI independence referendum held in September 2017, which achieved a very large vote in favour of independence, was a moment which made the position of many countries clear, not only towards the KRI, but also towards the Kurdish question in the region in general. The GCC countries, like all countries in the region (except Israel) and the international community, did not openly support the independence of the KRI from Iraq. However, evidence suggests that the Arab Gulf countries would prefer the KRI’s secession from Iraq to an Iranian-controlled Iraq. For instance, in 2015 Anwar Eshki, a Saudi retired major-general and chairman of the Jeddah-based think tank the Middle East Centre for Strategic and Legal Studies, argued that the establishment of an independent Kurdistan would mean “restricting the Iranian, Turkish, and Iraqi ambitions in the region” – i.e., the ambitions of Saudi Arabia’s geopolitical rivals (Cengiz, 2022). During the referendum campaign, there were rumours (mainly from pro-Iranian sources) that the referendum project was supported by the UAE and the UAE’s consul in Erbil Rashid al-Mansouri, although no evidence emerged to confirm this (Al-Alam News Network, 2017).

After the referendum, in early February 2020, the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies held an invite-only panel discussion entitled “Does the Kurdish nation have any friends other than mountains?” Among the Gulf nations, the Saudis appear to be particularly sympathetic towards Kurdish aspirations, as they view a strong KRI as a vital barrier against Iranian dominance in the region. Conversely, Iran has been a staunch critic of Kurdish independence. Following the referendum, there were pro-independence celebrations in Kurdish cities in Iran in areas with strong opposition to the Iranian government, such as Baneh, Sanandaj and Mahabad. Iran has also previously accused Saudi Arabia of supporting Kurdish militias that oppose the Iranian regime (Cengiz, 2022).

5.5. Energy collaboration and regional empathy

The GCC countries, being major oil and gas producers, seek to collaborate with the KRI in the energy sector. This includes exploring joint ventures, developing pipelines and expanding energy infrastructure to ensure a stable and diversified supply of resources. Gulf Arab countries have significantly contributed to the development of the KRI's oil and gas sector. In 2012, Abu Dhabi National Energy Company (Taqa) signed a deal with the KRG to invest over \$300 million in the Atrush field, aiming to produce 30,000 barrels of oil daily, despite lacking Iraqi federal approval. UAE-based Dana Gas and its partners are key producers of natural gas in the region, extracted over 150 million barrels equivalent from Khor Mor and Chemchemal fields (Dmitri Zhdannikov, 2017). However, disputes over payments led Dana Gas to file a case against the KRG in 2013, which was resolved in 2017 with a \$1 billion settlement. In 2018, Pearl Petroleum, a consortium including Dana Gas and Crescent Petroleum, signed a 10-year gas sales agreement with the KRG, committing to produce 80 million cubic feet of sales gas per day (Arabian Business, March 21, 2018). The Dana Gas on reported a five percent increase in its revenues for 2024, bringing in \$445 million from its operations in the Kurdistan Region and Egypt (Rudaw, 7 February 2025).

GCC countries also share similar cultural and religious backgrounds with most of the KRI’s population, who are primarily Sunni Muslims. Strengthening cultural and religious ties can foster social cohesion and deeper cooperation between these regions. In December 2024, the KRG, in an effort to strengthen relations between both sides, established a GCC Unit headed by Areen Masrouf Barzani.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that the Gulf countries' motives for establishing relations with the KRI are primarily political, followed by economic considerations. This is because Saudi Arabia and the UAE especially do not have the same opportunities to exert their influence in Baghdad as does Iran. By engaging with the KRI, the Gulf countries can address both political and economic factors to some extent.

However, it is important to state that the current relations are more tactical in nature, and largely a response to Iraq's policies towards the GCC, rather than being strategic. Moreover, it is worth noting that relations between Gulf Arab countries and Iran have recently improved significantly, which could have implications for GCC-KRI relations. After a China-brokered Saudi-Iranian agreement in March 2023, currently, all Gulf Arab states except Bahrain have either restored or intend to restore full diplomatic relations with Iran; even Bahrain, which has long accused Iran of inciting unrest among its Shia-majority population, has reportedly engaged in bilateral talks with Iran in recent months. Following the announcement of the Saudi-Iranian deal, Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani held meetings with top security and economic officials in the UAE, indicating a potential acceleration and broadening of UAE-Iran relations. (Bahgat, 2000). The Gulf countries' recent caution in relations with the KRI is indicative of their desire to avoid provoking Iran after this thaw.

The invitation of the KRG to GCC meetings in February 2024 is a significant development, which provides a good starting point for the KRI to benefit politically and economically and move away from its landlocked geopolitical status. However, it is important that the KRG should not have excessive expectations, and rather understand that this relationship alone may not bring about transformative change. Instead, the KRG should view its attendance of the GCC meetings as an opportunity to expand the KRI's political and economic options, diversify its alliances, and reduce its dependency on any single power (Cengiz, 2022).

6.The KRI's objectives in its relationship with the GCC (KSA and UAE)

In the context of sovereign states, the significance of international relations is widely acknowledged. For non-state entities like the KRI, characterized by its intricate geopolitical situation, diplomatic engagements with other nations assume heightened importance. Given its somewhat insecure political position within Iraq and the broader region, the KRI requires robust political and economic ties across the international spectrum, with particular emphasis on neighbouring states and regional powers. However, the KRI's landlocked status has been an obstacle to the KRG expanding its regional and international relations with other countries, except those with which the KRI borders.

In a way analogous to Gulf countries' strategic employment of their regional influence, the KRG can utilize its geopolitical status as leverage to shape the conduct of other nations. Hence, fostering relations with Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, serves not only as a means of strengthening bilateral cooperation, but also as a symbolic gesture, signaling to other countries the KRI's alignment with significant actors in the region. Additionally, amid mounting pressure from Iran and Turkey, enhanced relations with the Arab world and Gulf states are imperative for the KRI. Given the region's geopolitical constraints, fostering closer ties with Arab nations becomes not just desirable but an urgent necessity.

In terms of economics, GCC investment is very important for the KRI. As with its diplomatic relations, the situation regarding investment is difficult for the KRI. Because of the KRI's economic and political ties with Iraq, Baghdad has sometimes put pressure on companies not to invest in the KRI, as in the case of ExxonMobil, DNO, Genel Energy, Gulf Keystone Petroleum, HKN Energy and Shamaran Petroleum; many companies have stopped working in the KRI for this reason (Wahab, 2014). However, the UAE has played a particularly important role in this regard, especially in the energy sector. Former Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has repeatedly emphasized this, stating that "The GCC [in general] is very important for the Kurdistan Region, but our relations

with the UAE are closer.” (Charountaki , 2016). The UAE has invested \$2.5 billion in the KRI. In 2014, Hamad Buwamim, President of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce, said that 134 UAE companies were operating in the KRI. In 2021, about 128 UAE companies operating in the KRI, demonstrating the continuing importance for the UAE of its KRI investments (Wahab , 2014), particularly in the agriculture and livestock sectors. These investments are aimed at enhancing food security, strengthening the region's economic infrastructure, and meeting local needs. The UAE has also invested in oil and gas, including a major project with Dana Gas that adds significant gas and condensate to the region's production.

The UAE is the second-largest investor in the KRI, contributing 25% of its foreign direct investment, following China. Trade between the KRI and the UAE totals around \$3 billion annually (Salami, 2024). Historically, this trade heavily favoured the UAE. However, since 2022, due to efforts by the KRG to diversify exports beyond hydrocarbons, the UAE has emerged as a key market for Kurdish agricultural products. A significant milestone was the successful introduction of pomegranates as the first non-oil Kurdish product in the UAE. Additionally, in August 2023, the KRG finalized a deal to export 5,000 tons of potatoes to the UAE. Forecasts indicate that up to 90 percent of Kurdish potato output will soon be destined for the UAE market. The KRG also intends to export apples, grapes and other agricultural goods to the UAE and neighbouring Gulf markets. Certain UAE-based firms have initiated feasibility studies to explore opportunities for large-scale agricultural and livestock production in Kurdistan, as part of the UAE’s food security strategy (GOV.KRD, 20 Dec 2022).

These economic relations are opening the door to closer political and cultural relations between the UAE and KRI. Since 2019, Nechirvan Barzani has visited the UAE five times, and Masrour Barzani has also made five trips, holding meetings with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (The Presidency of the KRI, 2024). These visits, surpassing the combined number of their official visits to Baghdad, indicate a strategic initiative by the KRG to enhance economic relations and seek opportunities for trade and investment with the UAE. They also signify a shared interest in deepening bilateral ties and collaborating on regional challenges (Saeed, 2023).

The KRG hopes to learn from the experience of the UAE. The KRI, it believes, has all the economic and political potential to become a global trading centre like the UAE. The KRG leadership has taken inspiration from the UAE's prosperous growth and aims to replicate it. Politicians of the Barzani family, in particular, are determined to transform Erbil into another Dubai. They have initiated ambitious projects to this end, including the construction of airports, extensive highways, high-end shopping centres, upscale restaurants and lavish residential properties.

The KRI can also greatly benefit from the UAE’s support in combating terrorist organizations, particularly ISIS, which continues to pose a significant threat. Seeking military assistance from the UAE for the KRI’s Peshmerga armed forces, particularly in terms of weapons and ammunition, could significantly bolster the region’s defense capabilities. The UAE’s commitment to countering extremist Islamic organizations, evidenced by substantial annual investments, surpasses that of most regional counterparts. Notably, the UAE’s stance against the Muslim Brotherhood and its radical offshoots distinguishes it from countries like Qatar and Turkey (Nawzad , 2023).

However, establishing closer relations with the GCC is not without headaches for the KRI. For example, when Saudi Arabia opened its consulate in Erbil in 2016, Iran’s top military adviser Yahya Safavi said: “Barzani has allowed the enemies of the revolution to open a consulate in the KRI. The Kurds should know that they owe Iran ... The Kurds have historical ties to Iran. Getting involved in these political games will cause Iran to cut off their aid” (CNN, 2016). A representative from Iraq’s Fatih (Conquest) coalition, a Shia bloc which has close connections with Iran, publicly criticized a Saudi visit to the KRG in 2018, saying that Riyadh had “dirty hidden intentions by opening ties with Kurdistan.” (Rudaw, 2018). This official also urged Baghdad to take a firm stance against Saudi-Kurdish cooperation. Tehran shares the view that the KRG, aligned with the Saudi-

led axis in the Middle East, would be used as a means to destabilize Iran and harm its foreign interests. Tehran seeks complete control over all Iraqi groups, including the Kurds, and perceives the deepening relations between Riyadh and Erbil as a threat to its dominance in the region. (Ali, O., 2017).

7. Conclusion

Relatively new, significant relations between the KRI and GCC countries emerged following the downfall of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq. They offer potential for further development, but the level of GCC engagement with the KRI has fluctuated over time, driven by factors such as geopolitical dynamics, regional stability, internal politics and economic considerations. GCC countries have historically engaged with the KRI during periods of transition or crisis in Iraq. Leveraging Kurdish influence has been a strategic move to counterbalance Shia dominance, including during the tenure of Prime Minister Maliki, and in the aftermath of the Kurds' pivotal role in combating ISIS.

Saudi Arabia's pursuit of an elevated regional role, particularly in Iraq, has led to a keen interest in establishing closer ties with the KRI. This aligns with Saudi Arabia's goal of countering Iran's expanding regional influence, and Saudi increased regional influence after the Arab Spring, coinciding with the rising significance of the Kurds in Iraqi politics and the broader region.

However, Iran's heightened presence in Iraq has emerged as the most significant determinant of GCC-KRI relations, constraining the Gulf countries' political and economic influence in the country. Consequently, Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, have sought to engage with the Kurds to exert pressure on both the Shia government and Iranian dominance, given Iraq's historical role as a buffer against Iranian threats in the Gulf region. The primary drivers of GCC-KRI relations remain political, while economic objectives are also significant in the case of the UAE. Although it is difficult to make predictions given the fluid geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, it seems likely that relationships of all kinds between the GCC and the KRI will continue to grow in the years to come.

8. References

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په یوه نډیبه کانی نه نجومه نی هاریکاری که نډاو - ههریمی کوردستان: پړلی رکا بهری جیو پوله تیکی ئیران و عه ره بستانی سعودیه

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پوخته

په یوه نډیبه کانی ههریمی کوردستان (KRI) و ولاتانی که نډاو ده گه ریته وه بۆ دوی پوخوانی پړیمی سه ددام حوسین له سالی ۲۰۰۳. دوی پوخوانی به عس، نه نجومه نی هاریکاری که نډاو (GCC)، به تایبه تیش عه ره بستانی سعودیه و ئیمارات هه ستیان به جوړیک له نیگه رانی کرد سه بارت به داهاتوی عیراق. نه مه ش وایکرد په یوه نډیبه کانیان له گه ل ههریمی کوردستان گه شه پییدهن. به تایبه دوی هه لکشانی گزویی ناوچه ییبه کان و لاسه نډیبه کانی هاوسه نگی هیزی ههریمی له دژی ولاتانی که نډاو له به رژه وهندی ئیران، کیشه کانی ئاسایشی ناوه خوی ولاتانی که نډاو، و کاریگه ریی به رچاوی گروهه چه کداره شیعه کان به سهر ده زگا کانی دهوله تی عیراق.

تیگه یشتن له په یوه نډیبه ولاته کانی که نډاو له گه ل ههریمی کوردستان ده توانریت له ریگی دوو ئامانجی سه ره کیی سیاسه تی دهره وهی ولاتانی که نډاو له عیراقدا دیاری بکریت. یه که م، هه ولی عه ره بستانی سعودیه بۆ گزیرانی پړلیکی ههریمی له ناوچه که دا له دوی روخانی به عس، وهک ترسیک له هه لکشانی پیگه و کاریگه ریی ئیران و تورکیا زیادبونی ده ستوره دانیان له ناوچه که دا. دوو م، عه ره بستانی سعودی ویستی پشت به پیکه اته کانی غه یره شیعه به ستیت بۆ به رهنکاربوونه وهی زالبونی شیعه کان به سهر دهوله تدا. نه مه له کاتیکدا بوو که سوننه کان لاواز و دابه شیون، به لام کورد کاریگه رییبه کی به رچاویان له سهر پیره وهی پروسه ی سیاسی عیراقی دوی ۲۰۰۳ هه بوو، به تایبه تی له نیوان سالانی ۲۰۰۳ بۆ ۲۰۱۷.

نه و تویریته وهیبه گه یشتوته نه و دهره نجامه ی که کاریگه ری ئیران له عیراق وهک دیارترین فاکته ری گه شه کردنی په یوه نډیبه کانی ههریمی کوردستان و ولاتانی که نډاو بووه. نه مه وایکردووه که دهوله تانی که نډاو به تایبه تی سعودیه هه ول بدات په یوه نډیبه که گه ل ههریمی کوردستان دروست بکات، بۆ نه وهی فشار بخنه سهر هردو حکومتی زورینه شیعه له عیراق و هه ژمونی ئیران له ناوچه که دا. به واته یه کی تر په یوه نډیبه ولاته کانی که نډاو له گه ل ههریمی کوردستان (له و ماوه که دا) زیاتر له کاتی گورانکاریه سیاسی گرنه کان و قهیرانه کانی عیراقدا گه شه ده کات نه ک له سه قامگیری په یوه نډیبه کانی عیراق و ولاتانی که نډاو، به مه بهستی سوود وهرگرتن له کاریگه ریی و پیگه ی کورد له به غدا و ده سته ووتنی کارتیک بۆ گوشار له سیاسه تی ناوخواهی عیراق.

و شه سه ره که کان: عیراق، ئیران، عه ره بستانی سعودیه، ههریمی کوردستان، نه نجومه نی هاریکاری که نډاو

علاقات دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي مع إقليم كردستان: دور التنافس الجيوسياسي بين إيران والمملكة العربية السعودية

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المخلص

بدأت العلاقة بين حكومة إقليم كردستان ودول الخليج بعد سقوط نظام صدام حسين عام 2003. ومع سقوط صدام، ازداد قلق دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي بشأن مستقبل العراق، وصاغت تفاعلاتها مع حكومة إقليم كردستان بناءً على أهمية العراق ودوره في حساباتها السياسية والأمنية. وشهدت حقبة ما بعد عام 2003 توترات إقليمية متزايدة، مدفوعة بتوازن قوى غير موافق لمجلس التعاون الخليجي، وتحديات الحوكمة والأمن في العراق، والنفوذ السائد للجماعات الشيعية على مؤسسات الدولة العراقية.

يمكن تحديد تفاعل دول الخليج مع إقليم كردستان العراق من خلال هدفين رئيسيين للسياسة الخارجية لمجلس التعاون الخليجي في العراق. أولاً، سعت المملكة العربية السعودية إلى تأكيد دور محوري في السياسة الإقليمية، وخاصة في عراق ما بعد عام 2003، رداً على النفوذ المتصاعد لإيران وتركيا في المنطقة. ثانياً، هدفت المملكة العربية السعودية إلى موازنة هيمنة الشيعة داخل الدولة العراقية من خلال تعزيز التوازن بين الفصائل الرئيسية في العراق. بينما أظهر السنة ضعفاً وانقساماً، أثار الأكراد بشكل كبير على المسار السياسي للبلاد، وخاصةً بين عامي ۲۰۰۳ و ۲۰۱۷.

وصلت هذه الدراسة بأن العلاقة بين إقليم كوردستان العراق ودول مجلس التعاون الخليجي تتسم أكثر بالتدابير التكتيكية وردود الفعل، بدلاً من الرؤية الاستراتيجية البعيدة المدى. ترتبط هذه العلاقات ارتباطاً وثيقاً بسياسات النخبة السياسية العراقية تجاه دول الخليج في مرحلة ما بعد عام ۲۰۰۳. ويتجلى تفاعل دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي مع إقليم كوردستان العراق بشكل رئيسي خلال التطورات والأزمات السياسية المحورية في العراق، بهدف تعزيز النفوذ الكردي في بغداد وتأكيد دوره في السياسة الداخلية العراقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عراق، إيران، سعودية، إقليم كردستان، مجلس التعاون الخليجي