Study of the Geopolitical Challenges to the Independence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

Understanding the geopolitical problems and constraints of states, as well as identifying their positive and negative variables, and determining the status of states at both regional and global levels, has always been a key concern for those interested in and researchers in political science and international relations. Following the collapse of the bipolar system and the defeat of Saddam Hussein by coalition forces, the issue of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq emerged as a significant geopolitical phenomenon in the region and the world, leading to the formation of a government with self-rule within Iraq. The issue of the Kurdistan Region's independence remains an unresolved puzzle. This study aims to outline the geopolitical challenges facing the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, employing a descriptive and analytical methodology and collecting data from books and documents. The primary question of this study concerns the obstacles and constraints facing the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in its pursuit of independence. The results of the study showed that although the policy of cultural and ethnic genocide practiced against the Kurds in Kurdistan Iraq in the twentieth century has intensified their desire for independence from the central government, the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the West Asia region is not possible due to existing economic, political, and geographical constraints.

Introduction

Generally, any geopolitical change in the global and regional structure can lead to tension and the emergence of changes in the political-geographical landscape. Following the collapse of the Baath Party in this country, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been able to participate in Iraq's administration and has made some progress towards state-building. What is essential in this context is the historical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic relations of Kurdistan Iraq with the four countries: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, and that the trend towards an independent state can turn for Kurdistan into an arena of conflict and confrontation with the traditional fronts in the region and thus form a state of political instability in the area.

The adoption of the Iraqi constitution in 2005, the establishment of the federal government in Iraq, and the creation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which enjoys a high degree of autonomy, have had significant effects on neighboring countries. The proximity of the Kurdish

areas in Iraq to the countries of Iran, Turkey, and Syria has led to security threats for these countries, which has made the mentioned countries, along with the central government in Iraq, take special account of the issue of the independence of Iraqi Kurds in the region. However, the pressure of these countries is not the only reason for the non-formation of an independent state in Kurdistan Iraq; there are other factors such as geopolitical constraints in the political, economic, and geographical fields that have become among the factors affecting the non-availability of the necessary conditions for the formation of an independent state in Kurdistan Iraq. This study aims to investigate the geopolitical constraints of Kurdistan, Iraq, which pose an obstacle to the formation of an independent government in the region.

1. Geopolitics

The issue of 'geopolitics' dates back to the distant past of human history, indicating that political geography has been significant since humans first sought land and security. Many leaders of battles in the distant past were interested in the concept of political geography in their plans. Still, from a scientific point of view, this interest emerged in Boston in 1890 through a study presented by the sailor Alfred Mahan, who is renowned as one of the most influential American strategists of the nineteenth century. The study was titled 'The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660–1890' (Moyer, 313–379: 1660–1890).

Political geography is one of the factors influencing the national and international policies of all countries. This term was first proposed in 1899 by Rudolf Kjellén, a professor of political science and a member of the Swedish parliament (Taqavi Asl, 26:1384). Since that time, the term has faced significant controversy, as it has not been settled within a specific framework and has lacked relative transparency and stability. In the definitions presented so far about political geography, the upper hand has been with those who have tried to limit it to the science of studying the one-sided and empirical relationship between geographical factors and politics (Hafeznia, 72:1379, 19:1384). The concept of political geography developed in the first half of the twentieth century as a result of the progress of political science, some of which focused mainly on the role of geographical conditions in shaping power and global strategies. Mackinder's Heartland theory, Mahan's sea power theory, and Rimland's air power theory presented specific patterns that affected the concept of power and global domination (Hafeznia, 74:1379). Considering that geopolitical theories were presented within

the framework of policies of hegemony or racial discrimination, they have been presented in several forms and definitions, including:

1. Geopolitics is understanding the facts of the geographical environment to reach power, so that one can enter the international game through its widest doors and preserve national interests and national life; in other words, political geography is: the science of discovering the relationships of the geographical environment and their effect on the political fate of nations (Izzati, 7:1388).

2. Geopolitics, or the study of political geography, examines the effects of environmental factors and forms, such as geographical location, terrain, rare natural resources, communication and transportation facilities, and educational means, on political decision-making, especially at regional and global levels (Mujtahid Zadeh, 128:1381).

3. Political geography is the science of studying the mutual relationships between geography, power, and politics, as well as the actions resulting from the integration of these elements (Hafeznia, 37:1384).

What is understood from the above definitions is that political geography can play a positive or negative role in the pursuit of the external political affairs of states; therefore, countries interact positively and negatively with other countries in terms of access to open waters, geographical location, size and shape of land or natural resources, proximity to powerful countries, population, ethnic composition... etc., and this causes a country with a suitable geopolitical location to have weight and geopolitical status at the regional and global levels, while another country with a low geopolitical location does not enjoy high weight and status at the regional and global levels.

2. Geopolitical Challenge

A geopolitical challenge involves creating a position for a government or state based on constant or variable geopolitical factors, influencing the country's policy by utilizing geographical variables and factors. In other words, the geopolitical challenge involves activating a state's national policy and strategy through the use of geographical values or using geography against a rival state (Hafeznia, 121:1385). It can also be said that the political-geographical

challenges of a government or country can, over time, lead to geopolitical isolation, reducing or severing a country's connections with other countries at both regional and global levels.

Therefore, geopolitical challenges and the resulting geopolitical isolation of a country can expose it to disintegration and collapse. Conversely, state units seeking independence from the central state, if they face geopolitical problems and obstacles, cannot easily separate themselves from the central government and achieve independence. Hence, the issue of political geography, including attention to its components and the correct and appropriate use of geopolitical variables, is among the concerns of states.

3. Ethnicity and Minorities

The term 'ethnicity' was first used in 1953 by David Riesman. But its linguistic root is much older and is derived from the Greek word 'Ethnos,' which in ancient Greece referred to nomadic tribes that had not yet settled in cities; therefore, in this concept, the word 'Ethnos' reveals a striking contradiction between sedentary and non-sedentary life and the difference between the faith of citizens in God and the irreligion of peoples. Until the fourth decade of the twentieth century, the word and concept of ethnicity carried a negative value influenced by racist and non-European ideologies. However, since the advent of this decade and the establishment of national governments in colonized countries, ethnicity has become a fundamental concept in the social sciences. It remains a crucial subject in applied studies and research to this day (Gholam Hosseini, Liali, Dalvandfar, Qorbanian, 139–140:1389).

A. Definition of Kurds: They are people who feel a sense of belonging to a shared culture and heritage, although social perceptions of ethnicity may influence their relationships. Local identity is closely related to national identity, so that local identity can be considered part of ethnic identity. The roots of the term

'ethnicity' originates from a Greek word meaning 'individuals' or 'nationality,' and it is also closely related to cultural characteristics such as language (Braden, Shli, 137–138:1383).

The term 'ethnicity,' compared to terms such as 'population,' which is either very general and vague, or to general terms like 'people,' 'tribe,' or others that carry negative connotations, is a superior term. Therefore, the term 'ethnicity' is used in a broader sense to refer to certain

human groups that have been subjected to doubts about their existence or are considered a minority in society, due to ambiguity in their boundaries, a lack of regional institutions, underdevelopment, narrow geographical boundaries, and, ultimately, kinship. The minority in most cases refers to human groups that live in marginal conditions, often resulting from their small size, whether in terms of population or their political, social, economic, and even cultural status. The truth is that the minority requires the group to be in an inferior and modest position from both a legal and social perspective, and this, in turn, is a quantitative and varied reality that is influenced by conditions of dependence or the perception of them (Pishgahi Fard, 54–579:1386).

Generally, it can be said that, from the point of view of land and living environment, minorities are divided into two groups: attached minorities who possess land and a geographical area for a long historical period, and which can be interpreted as environmental minorities. There are landless minorities who lack internal harmony and suffer from dispersion among the majority, and can be interpreted as integrated social minorities. Minorities emerge in different forms, regions, and sizes. The common characteristic of minorities of all kinds is an internal desire and a sense of concern for their values and characteristics. Suppose the minority has a significant geopolitical weight compared to the surrounding majority. In that case, it will feel self-reliant and the necessity of separation and obtaining political independence. Its demands from the majority will rise, such as self-rule, ruling authority, equal citizenship rights, and finally political independence (Hafeznia, 92–93:1385).

B. The status of minorities in the Hagt model: In 1993, fewer than 15% of countries were considered national states. Therefore, multinational countries are the most common type of country. In 40% of countries, there are at least five ethnic groups, and in 31% of countries, there is no majority national group (Muir, 83:1379).

The relationship between the minority and the dominant group may be different and is often embodied in either a state of complete harmony or a demand for secession. In governments that prioritize justice and fairness in their dealings with minorities and grant them self-rule to practice their cultural and linguistic customs, instability or political tensions are less likely to be observed. Of course, the presence of the minority in the country has its effects. In this context, if the minority group lives in one geographical location in a concentrated manner,

or if it is scattered throughout the country, or lives in the marginal areas of society, or near the political center of the country, the implications of each of these cases are entirely different (Miri Haider, 54:1378).

To facilitate an understanding of the roots of conflict and points of difference related to geographical origins between countries, Bert Haggett imagined a hypothetical state and investigated the roots of tension within it. In the Huggett model, a geographical source of stress is mentioned (Haggett, 372:1392), with four of these related to minority groups, indicating that a third of the geographical tensions leading to clashes between governments are related to ethnicity. The overlap of four sources of ethnic tension in the Haggett model with the other roots mentioned in this model will increase the intensity of ethnic disturbances. For example, the presence of rich oil resources in Kirkuk, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, was one of the main reasons for the continuation of the crisis in Kurdistan, Iraq. Because the Kurds call it the holy house of Kurdistan, Turkey also considers the Kurds' access to the city of Kirkuk a prelude to the independence of Kurdistan, Iraq, which would cause many repercussions in eastern and southeastern Turkey. Therefore, the state of Turkey is one of the obstacles to the annexation of Kirkuk to the Kurdistan Region on the pretext of the presence of the Turkmen minority in this city. Thus, the presence of minorities in countries is a contributing factor to the occurrence of some geopolitical issues within them. Minority groups appear in various forms in different countries, and each can be a source of tension (Khalidi, 24–25:1388).

C. How ethnic separatism becomes stronger and creates ethnic movements: Regardless of the level of differences, the expected achievements of activists remain unchanged, while the expected gains decrease negatively with the increase in the level of differences. However, some structuralists argue that differences in dictatorial regimes alone do not necessarily lead to the mobilization of ethnic movements, as observed in many Developing countries. Ethnic political organizations in these societies confront the central government only when they believe they have sufficient capability and also think they can win this conflict. Several quantitative variables and a few qualitative variables typically determine the strength of ethnic political organizations. Human, manual, and intellectual resources are among the primary resources provided for political organizations. These resources can be created internally or obtained externally in various forms, such as political, financial, military, and intelligence

support. The political awareness of different nationalities and their solidarity with each other, centered around their ethnic policies, are relatively essential factors in determining the strength of ethnic political organizations. In particular, ethnic groups that can form stronger and more effective political organizations, and have high political awareness, solidarity, and ethnic activity in practicing their rooted traditions, occupy a better position compared to others.

The ideological commitment of the political organization is significant. Political organizations considered to belong to the two main parties in the country, specifically those on the extreme left, are generally weak and unable to garner the support of ethnic groups. On the contrary, political organizations with transparent, comprehensive, and democratic policies and programs committed to ethnic nationalism enjoy high popularity among the national population. They are likely to grow strongly if they carry out a peaceful revolution. Additionally, the geographical location of ethnic populations is a crucial factor in determining the strength of their ethnic political organization. Historically, the populations of small lands in outer or mountainous regions, or provinces adjacent to other provinces with similar ethnic populations, have established ethnic political movements more effectively than the populations of provinces in central areas and on vast plains and plateaus. As the gap between the national population and the central government increases, as a result, resentment and the intensity of escaping from submission to the authority of the central state increase, and thus the level of similarity between ethnic groups and the national population also has a profound effect on the strength of ethnic political organization. The lower the level of ethnic similarity between them, the stronger the national political organization.

Ethnic similarity may appear in one of the following four forms or more:

a) **Acculturation:** i.e., the process through which national populations lose their cultural distinction and accept the dominant culture of the larger unit, and the ethnic group may be forced to ignore its historical heritage, language, or religion for the sake of union.

b) **Intermarriage:** the process through which the biological distinction of national populations is destroyed through intermarriage between ethnic groups.

c) **Identity determination:** a primarily psychological process through which ethnic groups possess the idea of belonging to a homogeneous society. This new society is a blend of its

predecessors.

d) **Integration:** occurs in a place where ethnic divisions are removed and ethnic groups agree on economic, political, and civil rights and privileges; thus, full integration is a factor in reducing ethnic differences to a minimum.

The different forms of ethnic political movements depend on the intensity of ethnic or class differences in the region, the relative strength of the ethnic political organization, the historical background of the demands of ethnic populations, the material and geographical capabilities to achieve those demands, and the level of ethnic deprivation and the expectation of the government's ability or inability to remove deprivation.

The four general forms of ethnic movements are: self-rule movements, separatist movements, regional uprisings, and policy-based movements aimed at forming a unified front during the voting process. The first two types typically occur in places where ethnic identity is stronger than class distinction. At the same time, the latter two appear in the absence of ethnicity and in areas where social class division is clearly defined.

Distinctive independent movement: It is embodied in the conflict between the local elites (who may be state officials) and the central government over the limits of participation in political decision-making. This movement advocates for decentralization, but strongly refrains from demanding a redistribution of power. The separatist movement shares similar reasons with the movement demanding self-rule, but its goals extend beyond state management; the primary goal of secession is to establish an independent state that generally advocates for fundamental redistribution of power.

When an ethnic political organization is relatively strong and holds a more ideological stance, secessionist demands are likely to emerge within it, provided that they possess historical and methodological legitimacy. Otherwise, ethnic movements demand self-rule within a unified and centralized government. The difference between self-rule movements and separatist movements, on the one hand, and regional uprisings and policies based on forming unified fronts during voting, on the other, lies in the fact that the roots of the latter two are less closely tied to economic and social problems. In general, democratic political systems witness the formation of voting coalitions, whereas in dictatorial systems, regional

uprisings often emerge. The policy of creating a unified front during the electoral process aims to mitigate ethnic differences by altering political representation in the electoral process. In contrast, ethnic uprisings are formed to overthrow the central government and transform the entire economic and social system (Amiri Ahmad, 217–218:1377). As can be seen in Table No. 1 (Qasemi, 77:1389):

Table No. 1: The extent of ethnic conflicts in the world

Region	Number of Groups	Political Discrimination	Economic Discrimination	Cultural Discrimination	Demand for Self-Rule	Protests	Crises
West Asia and North Africa	14	86	64	57	57	23	17
Asia	31	43	77	64	78	17	35
Former Soviet Bloc	26	44	38	54	63	15	12
Latin America	12	67	92	75	67	8	19
Western Democracies	8	37	62	50	37	25	-
Africa	14	43	71	29	57	33	23

4. Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Kurdistan is a high-altitude geographical region in West Asia, and from an ecological perspective, it forms the environment and homeland of the Kurds. This highland area encompasses parts of western and northwestern Iran, eastern and southeastern Turkey, northern and northeastern Iraq, and Syria, as well as the western Caucasus, and overlooks the surrounding lowlands.

Living in the highlands has led the Kurds to be known among neighboring tribes as friends of the mountains. That is, Turks, Iranians, and Arabs consider the Kurds friends of the mountain environment. And based on that, they sometimes take a negative stance towards the Kurds. On the other hand, the Kurdistan Region is among the five states present in West Asia; namely Iran, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Armenia, and between the four civilizational and cultural structures, and between the four plateaus; namely Iran, the Arabian Peninsula,

Anatolia, and the Caucasus, and it is located along the crossing route between the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa (Abdullahpour, 88:1390).

The area of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is approximately 74,000 square kilometers and is home to nearly six million people, encompassing the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Nineveh, which collectively constitute about 20% of Iraq's total area. Examining the map of Kurdistan, the geopolitical and geostrategic situation of Kurdistan is clear. In addition to containing oil reserves and water, or areas overlooking them (Abdullahpour, 89:1390).

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is that part of the Kurdistan region that became part of the borders of Iraq after World War I. Most of the population in this region is Kurdish, and it differs from the areas of Iraq and other countries in terms of ethnic and religious coexistence. This region includes all four provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, and Dohuk, as well as all the cities of Mosul governorate, except for the cities of Mosul (the capital of the governorate), Baaj, and Hadr, as well as the cities of Khanaqin, Mendeli, and Kifri except for the Baladruz district in Diyala governorate and the center of Badra city in Wasit (Kut) governorate (Haji Mirjahan, 11:1390).

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and analytical methodology. The required information was collected through libraries and by consulting reliable sources, including articles and books. The purpose of this article is to study and analyze the most important geopolitical challenges that prevent the formation of an independent state in Kurdistan, Iraq.

Previous Studies

Title (Translated)	Author	Year
University Thesis: The Role of the Kurdistan National Union in Establishing the Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Zareh Narsallah	1393
Book: The Kurdish Movement	Translated by Ismail Falih	1377
Book: Geography of Iraq Focusing on Geopolitical Issues	Nami and Muhammad Pour	1387
Book: The Future of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Salahi	1383
Article: The Soft Threats of Self-Rule to Kurdistan Iraq and Its Impact on Iranian Kurds	Mehrani and Pour Eslami	1393
Article: The Plan to Separate Kurdistan Iraq and Its Impact on the Political Geography of the Region and Iranian Security	Mohammadi, Reza and Motaghi, Afshin	1394
Article: The Strategy of American Foreign Policy in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Qorbani and Qadimi	1390
Article: Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Sazmand and Nouri	1390
Article: Factors Affecting the Political Geography of Iraq and Its Impact on Iranian National Security	Hashemi, Seyed Mostafa and colleagues	1395
Article: The Demand for the Independence of Kurdistan Iraq and Its Impact on the Islamic Republic of Iran	Pishgar, Hamid and Nikoui, Hajat	1397

Research Results

1. Important Geopolitical Factors Preventing the Formation of Kurdistan, Iraq as an Independent State

A. Political Challenge: The Kurds of Iraq can be considered the most active Kurdish group in political affairs among the countries of the region, and they faced the greatest amount of military resistance and repression by the previous regime. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is somewhat divided between two currents, the Sorani and the Badini, which have two distinct Kurdish dialects. The Sorani dialect has been influenced by the Talabani clan, which spans Qaladze, Mount Sinjar, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and extends to Khanqin. As for the Badini dialect, its center is Zakho, which is the area of the Barazani clan, and it extends to Turkey. Both of them try to encroach on each other's areas, and there is often military conflict between them. In all these areas, Kurdish youth have to join the ranks of the Peshmerga within the framework of the conscription law (Hoshmand, 21:1383). The Barazani clan controls the

Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the Talabani clan dominates the Kurdistan National Union.

After Iraq gained independence in 1930, the Kurds began to form their government. And in April 1969, the new regime (Iraq) began the fourth war against Kurdistan, Iraq, which ultimately led to the signing of an agreement on March 11, 1970, which consisted of 15 articles to determine the rights of the Kurds and how to resolve the conflict and other issues related to Kurdistan. Of course, the Iraqi regime never implemented the terms of the agreement. And at the end of 1988, the self-rule region had established a form of political organization, as outlined in the 1970 self-rule agreement between Kurdistan and Baghdad.

After the Kuwait-Iraq war, in 1991, Iraqi Kurds were able to practically form their government as a result of the no-fly zone in Iraq up to the 23rd parallel. By resolving bilateral disputes and rebelling against the Baath government, they took control of the Kurdistan region in a revolution called 'Raperin' in Kurdish circles. Between 1994 and 1998, the party differences between the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Barazani, and the Kurdistan National Union, led by Talabani, were significant, which led the Barazanis to lean towards the central government in Baghdad, while the Talabanis leaned towards Iran.

The differences reached their peak between 1996 and 1998. And after two years, Masoud Barzan. Then, Jalal Talabani finally went to Washington in September 1998 and signed an agreement under the auspices of Albright, in which the joint administration of the Kurdistan Region was determined. Free Kurdistan was divided into two governments with their capitals in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil under the control of Talabani and Barazani. After ten years and with the American invasion of Iraq, the Kurds officially declared self-rule for the federal republic of Iraq in the north and northeast of Iraq, which is known as Kurdistan, Iraq. The most significant Kurdish parties are the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Masoud Barazani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, led by Jalal Talabani. Additionally, in the current regional situation, new Kurdish parties have been formed (Hakim, 343:1381). The situation between the two governments in Kurdistan, Iraq, continued until the 2003 war, when the main nucleus in the two Kurdish parties attempted to capitalize on the new developments prevailing in Iraq at that time. They presented themselves to the region and the world, confirming their legitimacy. The model that Kurdistan was seeking was a federal model, alongside respect for Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

With the overthrow of Saddam's regime and the support of the Kurds in the process of forming the government after Saddam, essential positions such as the presidency of the republic went to Talabani, and the federal leadership of Kurdistan went to Masoud Barazani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party to manage the government of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil together. However, this process did not enable the Kurdish parties to gather around one table. Their differences still occasionally emerge. The conditions may be prepared at any moment for the occurrence of party conflicts in Kurdistan, Iraq.

The differences in Kurdistan, Iraq, are not limited to the level of the two main parties; sometimes, these differences are between the people and the government of the Kurdistan Region. The Kurdistan Democratic Party may be in a strong position from a security, economic, and military perspective. Still, in terms of politics and enhancing its popularity among Kurdish citizens, as well as ensuring its political survival, it is undergoing a period of stagnation and requires fundamental changes. The differences within the Barazani tribe have also become more pronounced, as voices of protest and resentment can be heard from the Badinan and Dohuk areas, which may have remained hidden and unheard until now (Tabnak). The different Kurdish parties have not shown a willingness to meet around one table with the Democratic Party led by Barazani, and this in itself indicates the flawed policies of the Kurdistan Regional Government, which has created a political division in the region. In most Kurdish cities, protests emerged demanding the removal of the president of the Kurdistan Region (the same source). They require the removal of the premature statement, which was intended to silence the protesters; otherwise, the prevailing opinion among the protesters was not in favor of the independence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. At the same time, Jalal Talabani described the independence of Kurdistan as a beautiful dream. Therefore, the formation of an independent Kurdistan state faced an obstacle represented by the profound differences between the democratic parties and the national unity of Kurdistan, which led to the stumbling of Kurdistan's independence not only in Iraq but also in other countries. It appears that the political differences within the Kurdish group in Iraq will be unlikely to be easily resolved, posing a clear geopolitical challenge to the independence of Kurdistan.

The ethnic and religious issues that have been fluctuating in the Iraqi internal affairs since 2003 have made America and its allies, along with NATO, record a striking presence in this

country; the American military invasion of Iraq in March 2003 can be considered a new turning point about the security and strategic role of the Atlantic Alliance in the region. The United States works in the field of organizing and involving regional countries in security agreements in a manner that first seeks to establish patterns of institutional participation. Through this process, the ground is provided for their activity in defense diplomacy. Defense diplomacy can be considered an inevitable necessity to convince regional countries of international mechanisms and relations (Mousavi, Barzegar, Qavam, Zakerian, 169:1395). The state of Iraq is one of the Islamic countries that has witnessed a serious presence of NATO member states that have provided themselves with the necessary conditions for long-term survival. The invasion of Iraq by a coalition consisting of different countries (some of them members of NATO) led by the United States in March 2003 began, and NATO as an organization did not play a significant role in the process of making decisions related to providing security in Iraq (Kagan, 2004, 12). The truth is that the crisis has become an integral part of the foreign and security policy processes of the countries in West Asia, and the intervention of the great powers is one of the primary factors in shaping this process (Rozoff, 2009, p. 5).

B. Geographical Challenge: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is located in a geographical area that carries, at the same time, attractive and repulsive elements represented by three cultural and civilizational fields: Persian, Arab, and Turkish; these fields with their special ideological characteristics reduce the ability of the Kurds to tip the balance of attraction. After the 1991 war, the Kurds found the conditions in Iraq favorable for their interests and tried to get themselves out of isolation.

The Kurdistan region is located between five countries in West Asia, namely Iran, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Armenia, and between four civilizational and cultural structures, and four plateaus; namely Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus, as well as representing the crossing route between the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. Thus, the closed geographical location of Kurdistan is its biggest geopolitical challenge (Abdullahpour, 88:1390). Therefore, the Kurds are forced to seek satisfaction and cooperation with neighboring countries such as Iran and Turkey due to their closed geographical location and their inability to access open waters or their lack of common borders with countries that support them. The division of Kurdistan among the countries of West Asia has also led to the Kurdish

areas in these countries having a marginal geographical status (Hafeznia, 12:1385). From a realistic perspective, we find that Kurdistan is a hypothetical landlocked state, and its biggest geopolitical dilemma is its geographical isolation, which enables neighboring countries to oppose its independence and subject it to their decisions (Hafeznia, 12:1385). For this reason, after the United States attacked Iraq in 2003, Kurdistan, Iraq, continued to exist in a federal form with wide and official privileges based on Articles 113, 4, and 1 of the constitution.

After the ISIS occupation of parts of Iraq in 2014 and its control over the city of Kirkuk, the Peshmerga forces affiliated with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq declared their control over this oil-rich city and that they would not return these areas to secure their desired geography; however, economic goals were taken into account when controlling the city of Kirkuk. This is a fact that the Kurdistan Regional Government and its men realize. Still, they deny their keenness on the idea of establishing an independent Kurdish state, although they sometimes use it in speech to pressure the central government in Iraq. c)

C. Economic Challenge: Kirkuk is a city that receives special attention from the Kurdish people and holds great importance for the central government. The ethnic mix and the presence of oil reserves have always placed it at the heart of ethnic and political crises. The Kurdistan Region has become the focus of ethnic and political crises due to the mixing of ethnicities and the presence of oil reserves in it (Jannati Mohib, 159:1391). The city of Kirkuk is the capital of the Iraqi Nationalization Governorate, which is located 250 kilometers north of Baghdad. According to 2013 statistics, the population was 880,000 people. The city of Kirkuk was the meeting point of Masoud Barazani, leader of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party, as the heart of Kurdistan. Jalal Talabani, leader of the National Union, considers it a holy place for the Kurds. From the perspective of Turkey and the United States, it is regarded as the largest oil field in West Asia (Jannati Mohib, 160:1391). The existence of oil reserves in the city of Kirkuk is the basis for creating a crisis that is not only regional but also has significant implications for international relations. According to Article 140 of the Iraqi Federal Constitution of 2007, the status of the city of Kirkuk must be clarified through a referendum and a census among its population. However, the security challenges that arose around this issue delayed the referendum in the city of Kirkuk (Jannati Mohib, 161:1391).

Currently, the city of Kirkuk has ten percent of Iraq's oil resources. By recognizing this issue, we can see that the Kirkuk issue is more than just an ethnic issue because access to such enormous resources outside the ethnic equation is tempting for both the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central government. On the other hand, considering the long-standing differences between the Kurds in Syria and Turkey, the location of Kirkuk and its possession of a vast oil reserve can be used as a pressure factor on the governments of Syria and Turkey regarding the issues of the Kurds in this region (Jannati Mohib, 168:1391); therefore, according to the authors, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is trying to achieve its desired geography by controlling the city of Kirkuk and accessing the oil-rich areas that provide ten percent of Iraq's energy sources and thus establish and strengthen its economic structure more than before. Therefore, the Kurdistan Region's control of the city of Kirkuk aims to achieve two simultaneous objectives: geographical and financial. An economy that can strengthen Kurdistan more than it has in the past and is considered a mechanism of pressure on neighboring countries, on the other hand, can also attract the attention of international circles and powerful regional countries towards it. By controlling this city, the Kurdistan Region can address its geopolitical weaknesses and strengthen the state-building process.

Characteristics of Greater Kurdistan as a State

1. From the perspective of hydropolitics, Kurdistan, Iraq, is considered the heart of the land in West Asia, and it possesses the richest water sources in this region. Examining the tributaries from which the Tigris and Euphrates rivers originate reveals that most of the water that feeds these two rivers originates from the Kurdish areas. Therefore, considering the history of Kurdish conflicts in southeastern Turkey (where the GAP project is being implemented to store and transfer water in northeastern and western Iran and northern Iraq), the importance of these regions will increase; in other words, the geopolitical status of the Kurds will increase day by day. Moreover, the reaction of central governments to the movements of the Kurds is likely to be different from the past. Robert Kaplan, in an article entitled 'Crises of the Future,' considers the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds more dangerous than the crisis between Arabs and Israel.

In general, the Kurdistan Region is the source of many rivers and freshwater sources in West Asia. Many rivers, such as the Tigris, Euphrates, Aras, Qizil Irmak, Sefidrud, Sirwan,

and the Little and Great Zab, originate from Kurdistan. The water resources of the Kurdistan Region flow into the Caspian Sea, the Gulf, Lake Urmia, and the Black Sea; on the other hand, the surrounding landlocked areas of Kurdistan Iraq provide their water needs from its water tributaries, so we find that Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iraq, Syria, and Kuwait depend on the waters of Kurdistan.

The increase in population, economic development, and rising living standards are all factors that lead to increased water consumption and increase the necessity of proximity to borders with areas that have renewable water resources. Kurdistan, Iraq, enjoys a high geopolitical status; accordingly, Kurdistan is the new heart of West Asia in terms of water politics. In general, the importance of Kurdistan in terms of water sources in West Asia can be mentioned within the following points:

a) A distinguished position in West Asia due to its possession of an appropriate amount of rainfall, and as a result, it is the source of many rivers and freshwater sources in West Asia.

b) The presence of dry areas surrounding Kurdistan that need water.

c) The dependence of no less than seven countries in the region on the waters of Kurdistan.

d) The absence of an alternative area for water supplies in West Asia (Khalidi, 57–58:1388).

2. The region of Kurdistan is situated among several ancient civilizations, including the Iranian, Turanian (Turkish), Arab, and Semitic civilizations. Additionally, its geographical proximity to countries such as Iran, Syria, and Turkey holds particular significance for the United States.

3. Iraqi Kurdistan has significant oil resources; therefore, from a geopolitical perspective, energy is vital. In terms of natural resources, Kurdistan enjoys fertile soil, water, oil, gas, and other minerals, which were underutilized during the era of Iraqi rule. The Kurdistan Region contains 45 billion barrels of oil reserves and 127 trillion cubic meters of gas reserves. Estimates indicate that the oil production capacity of the Kurdistan Region in 2016 was one million barrels. In 2013, Kurdistan exported 35 million barrels of oil through the Kirkuk pipeline to Iskenderun, which could be increased to 50 million barrels annually. (Mousavi, Barzegar, Ghavam, and Zakerian, 2016: 169).

4. The Kurds of Iraq inhabit a mountainous region of approximately 74,000 square kilometers, which accounts for 17% of Iraq's territory, and have a population of around six million people. This area includes the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Nineveh. It is noted that the jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Regional Government spans approximately 643.40 kilometers, with a population of around four million people, and its capital is Erbil (Hawler) (Qorban Sheikhan Shin and Qadami, 2012: 60).

5. The support of Germany, France, and the United States for the establishment of a Kurdish state in Western Asia.

Map No. (1) shows that the Kurds are present along the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The autonomy or independence of the Kurds in northern Iraq could confront Turkey, Iran, and Syria with severe crises and uprisings by the Kurds residing in these countries, leading them to raise similar demands that threaten the territorial integrity of these states. (Ikhwan Kazemi and Azizi, 2011: 148).
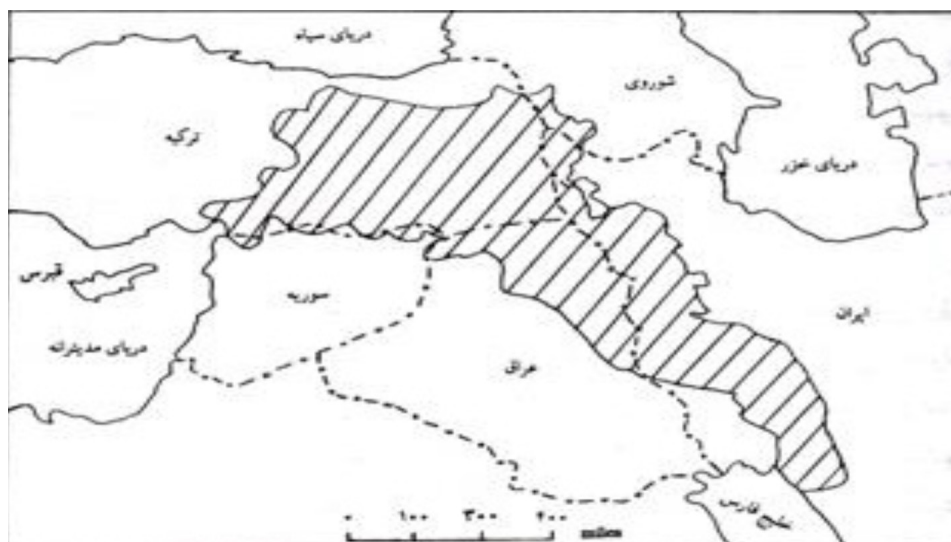
Conclusions

1. Based on the Heartland Theory, Kurdistan is considered the heartland of the West Asia region in terms of hydroelectric energy and possesses the richest water resources in that area. A brief examination of the tributaries from which the Tigris and Euphrates rivers originate reveals that most of the water feeding these two rivers originates from Kurdish regions.

2. The Kurdistan region is situated between several ancient civilizations, including the Iranian, Turanian (Turkish), Arab, and Semitic civilizations. Its geographical proximity to countries such as Iran, Syria, and Turkey is of special importance to America.

3. Kurdistan, Iraq, has significant oil resources; therefore, energy is crucial from a geopolitical perspective. In terms of natural resources, Kurdistan enjoys fertile land, abundant water, oil, gas, and other minerals, which were underutilized during the era of Iraqi rule.

4. The Kurds of Iraq occupy a mountainous area of approximately 74,000 square kilometers, which accounts for about 17% of Iraq's total area, and their population is around six million people.

5. Germany, France, and the United States support the formation of a Kurdish state in West Asia.

6. The Kurdish lands are located along the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It is expected that the Kurds obtaining self-rule in northern Iraq will lead to the emergence of the Kurds living in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Syria and the raising of similar demands and thus many dangerous crises between them and those countries whose territorial unity is threatened (Ikhwan Kazemi, Azizi, 148:1390).

7. The Kurdish people in Kurdistan, Iraq, are characterized by distinct features and advantages in terms of ethnicity, language, and culture, and share significant similarities with Iranian provinces such as West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, and Kurdistan in Iran.

Compared to other parts of Iraq and other regions of Iran, these commonalities have provided a significant backdrop and opportunities for the development of commercial and economic relations at the provincial, regional, and even national levels.

8. The population of this region is approximately 7.5 million, accounting for about 10% of Iraq's total population. Its capital is the city of Erbil, with a population of roughly 3.5 million people. The Sulaymaniyah governorate, adjacent to it, is considered the most critical governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, after Erbil governorate, which has a population of about two and a half million people. The provinces of Dohuk and Halabja, along with other provinces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, offer opportunities to meet many of the people's needs in various fields, including food and agricultural products, through Iranian exporters. The provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Kermanshah share borders with Iraqi Kurdistan, which has approximately nine border crossings and markets with Kurdistan. Notably, the Parvizkhan crossing in Piranshahr connects West Azerbaijan with the Erbil governorate. Additionally, the markets of Sardasht and Oshnavieh are situated on the common border between this governorate and the region.

Based on the results of the research, the following points can be determined:

1. To develop trade relations with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as much as possible, given its special location and the existence of a suitable work environment and economic stability, as well as freedom of communication and appropriate economic and commercial infrastructure for this region, which in some past years reached about 70%, and in recent years, up to 50% of Iran's trade with Iraq has been carried out through this region. Iranian companies have also been actively present in the field of technical and engineering services in the Kurdistan Region.

2. For years, the Islamic Republic has provided the appropriate foundations for political and social relations between Iran and the Kurdistan Region through the establishment of consulates in the cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The Iranian Trade Development Organization, within the framework of developing economic and cultural relations with the Kurdistan Region, has adopted various programs and plans that it has included on its agenda.

3. The formation of a joint commercial and industrial committee to implement previous agreements, and it seems necessary to form a committee to settle commercial disputes between the merchants of the two countries in the Chamber of Commerce.

4. Joint companies for road and direct cargo transportation to the region should be established.

5. All these capabilities and possibilities should be leveraged through cooperation with other relevant institutions, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, Iranian Customs, and the private sector, which can transform challenges and threats into opportunities in the political, economic, and cultural spheres.

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