



Kardo Rached¹

E-mail: Kardo.rached@uhd.edu.iq

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8015-8163>

Kawther Fattahi²

E-mail: kawsar.fattahi@gmail.com

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4555-0071>

¹University of Human Development in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

²English–Persian translator and freelance journalist whose work has appeared in The New York Times.

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Iranian foreign policy in the Middle East: The KRG as a case study

ABSTRACT

This study applies James N. Rosenau's Foreign Policy Analysis framework to examine the evolution of Iran's policy toward the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) from the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq in 1991 to the post-2017 independence referendum period. The main objective is to identify the factors that have shaped shifts and continuities in Iran's approach toward the KRG and to assess the explanatory value of Rosenau's idiosyncratic, role, governmental, societal, and systemic variables. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and historical-analytical approach based on the review of academic literature, official statements, policy documents, and secondary sources concerning Iran–KRG relations. The findings reveal that Iran's policy has evolved from a predominantly ideological orientation rooted in the principles of the Islamic Revolution toward a more pragmatic and increasingly preemptive security strategy driven by national security concerns, regional power competition, and domestic stability considerations. Particularly, the 2017 KRG independence referendum marked a critical turning point, prompting Iran to adopt a more assertive and preemptive coercive position, including the targeting and elimination of perceived threats within KRG territory, as a primary instrument of its security-centered regional policy. The analysis further demonstrates that, despite variations in presidential leadership styles from Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to Masoud Pezeshkian, Iran's core objectives remained largely consistent due to the decisive influence of the Supreme Leader and security institutions, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The study concludes that governmental and systemic variables exert a greater influence than individual leadership traits in shaping Iran's long-term policy toward the KRG, and that the preemptive security dimension of this policy has become its defining feature in the post-referendum period.

Keywords: Iran foreign policy; Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG); James N. Rosenau; foreign policy analysis; pragmatism and ideology shift; preemptive security policy; coercive threat elimination; IRGC regional strategy.

Política exterior iraní en Oriente Medio: el gobierno regional del Kurdistán (GRK) como caso de estudio

RESUMEN

Este estudio aplica el marco de análisis de política exterior de James N. Rosenau para examinar la evolución de la política de Irán hacia el Gobierno Regional del Kurdistán (GRK) desde el establecimiento de la autonomía kurda en el norte de Irak en 1991 hasta el período posterior al referéndum de independencia de 2017. El objetivo principal es identificar los factores que han configurado los cambios y las continuidades en el enfoque de Irán hacia el GRK y evaluar el valor explicativo de las variables idiosincrásicas, de rol, gubernamentales, sociales y sistémicas de Rosenau. Metodológicamente, el estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo e histórico-analítico basado en la revisión de literatura académica, declaraciones oficiales, documentos de política y fuentes secundarias sobre las relaciones entre Irán y el GRK. Los hallazgos revelan que la política de Irán ha evolucionado desde una orientación predominantemente ideológica arraigada en los principios de la Revolución Islámica hacia una estrategia de seguridad más pragmática y cada vez más preventiva, impulsada por preocupaciones de seguridad nacional, competencia por el poder regional y consideraciones de estabilidad interna. En particular, el referéndum de independencia del KRG de 2017 marcó un punto de inflexión crítico, impulsando a Irán a adoptar una postura coercitiva más firme y preventiva, que incluye la identificación y eliminación de las amenazas percibidas dentro del territorio del KRG, como instrumento principal de su política regional centrada en la seguridad. El análisis demuestra además que, a pesar de las variaciones en los estilos de liderazgo presidencial desde Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani hasta Masoud Pezeshkian, los objetivos centrales de Irán se mantuvieron en gran medida consistentes debido a la influencia decisiva del Líder Supremo y las instituciones de seguridad, en particular el Cuerpo de la Guardia Revolucionaria Islámica (CGRI). El estudio concluye que las variables gubernamentales y sistémicas ejercen una mayor influencia que los rasgos de liderazgo individuales en la configuración de la política a largo plazo de Irán hacia el KRG, y que la dimensión de seguridad preventiva de esta política se ha convertido en su característica definitoria en el período posterior al referéndum.

Palabras clave: Política exterior de Irán; Gobierno Regional del Kurdistán (GRK); James N. Rosenau; análisis de política exterior; pragmatismo y cambio ideológico; política de seguridad preventiva; eliminación de amenazas coercitivas; estrategia regional de la CGRI.

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A política externa iraniana no Médio Oriente: o governo regional do Curdistão como estudo de caso

RESUMO

Este estudo aplica a estrutura de Análise da Política Externa de James N. Rosenau para examinar a evolução da política do Irão em relação ao Governo Regional do Curdistão (GRC) desde o estabelecimento da autonomia curda no norte do Iraque em 1991 até ao período pós-referendo de independência de 2017. O principal objetivo é identificar os fatores que moldaram as mudanças e continuidades na abordagem do Irão em relação ao GRC e avaliar o valor explicativo das variáveis idiossincráticas, de papel, governamentais, sociais e sistémicas de Rosenau. Metodologicamente, o estudo adopta uma abordagem qualitativa e histórico-analítica baseada na revisão da literatura académica, declarações oficiais, documentos de políticas públicas e fontes secundárias sobre as relações Irão-GRC. Os resultados revelam que a política do Irão evoluiu de uma orientação predominantemente ideológica, enraizada nos princípios da Revolução Islâmica, para uma estratégia de segurança mais pragmática e cada vez mais preventiva, impulsionada por preocupações com a segurança nacional, a competição pelo poder regional e considerações de estabilidade interna. Em particular, o referendo de independência do Governo Regional do Curdistão (GRC) de 2017

marcou um ponto de viragem crítico, levando o Irão a adoptar uma postura coerciva mais assertiva e preventiva, incluindo a orientação e a eliminação das ameaças percebidas dentro do território do GRC, como instrumento principal da sua política regional centrada na segurança. A análise demonstra ainda que, apesar das variações nos estilos de liderança presidencial, desde Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani a Masoud Pezeshkian, os objectivos centrais do Irão permaneceram amplamente consistentes devido à influência decisiva do Líder Supremo e das instituições de segurança, particularmente a Guarda Revolucionária Islâmica (IRGC). O estudo conclui que as variáveis governamentais e sistémicas exercem uma influência maior do que as características individuais da liderança na formação da política de longo prazo do Irão em relação ao GRC, e que a dimensão de segurança preventiva desta política se tornou a sua característica definidora no período pós-referendo.

Palavras-chave: Política externa do Irão; Governo Regional do Curdistão (GRC); James N. Rosenau; análise de política externa; pragmatismo e mudança ideológica; política de segurança preventiva; eliminação coerciva de ameaças; estratégia regional da Guarda Revolucionária Islâmica (IRGC).

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INTRODUCTION

Iran, encompassing approximately 1,648,195 square kilometers, shares borders with Iraq and Turkey to the west, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the south, and Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Caspian Sea to the north (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023). Its strategic geographic location positions the country as a crucial link between South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Among its neighboring states, Iraq occupies a particularly important place due to the 1,458-kilometer shared border and the extensive political, economic, and security interactions that characterize bilateral relations (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023).

A significant portion of this border intersects with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which encompasses parts of the Iraqi provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok. These territories play a central role in regional trade, energy exchange, and political influence. Iran has strategically utilized the KRG as an entry point for advancing its political and economic interests in Iraq while simultaneously preserving a favorable regional balance of power (Mehregan, 2020, pp. 45–57). Consequently, the KRG has emerged as a critical component of Tehran's regional calculations.

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran adopted an isolationist foreign policy grounded in anti-imperialist discourse (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2011). However, the end of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) marked the beginning of a gradual transition toward a more pragmatic and multilateral foreign policy orientation. During the 1990s, Tehran sought to improve relations with neighboring countries and expand its participation in international institutions as part of a broader strategy of postwar reconstruction and economic recovery.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq significantly altered the regional security environment. In response, Iran reemphasized key ideological components of its foreign policy, including support for regional resistance movements and opposition to U.S. influence in the Middle East. This period reflected a selective revival of revolutionary principles combined with continued engagement in multilateral diplomacy (Ekşi, 2017).

The evolution of Iran–Iraq relations provides an important lens through which to analyze these broader foreign policy transformations. During the Iran–Iraq War, Tehran supported Kurdish militias and employed them as strategic instruments against the Iraqi government (Van Bruinessen, 1986, pp. 14–27). Although Iran did not achieve a decisive military victory, it succeeded in strengthening the position of Iraq's Shi'a population while incurring substantial economic and human losses.

Following the cessation of hostilities in 1988 and the bilateral commitment to discontinue support for Kurdish armed groups, Iran increasingly embraced pragmatic diplomacy. Under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), Tehran prioritized economic reconstruction, regional engagement, and efforts to normalize relations with neighboring states and Western countries, including the United States (Hiro, 1991, p. 277; Gunter, 1999, p. 18; Ganji, 2013, pp. 24–38).

Regional dynamics shifted further after the Gulf War of 1991, particularly with the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq, which facilitated the emergence of a de facto autonomous Kurdish region. This development transformed the regional balance of power and compelled Iran to reassess its strategic approach toward Iraq and the Kurdish question (Olson, 2010, pp. 250–263).

Iran's engagement with Iraq intensified during the post-2003 period and continued throughout the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021), particularly in relation to Shi'a-led governments in Baghdad. Tehran strongly supported the administration of Nouri al-Maliki because it viewed a unified Shi'a-led Iraq as a bulwark against both Kurdish separatism and Sunni insurgency (Vatanka, 2014; Van Veen & El Kamouni-Janssen, 2017). Iran's military and political influence in Iraq expanded further after the rise of the Islamic State in 2014.

The 2017 Kurdish independence referendum represented a critical turning point in Iran's policy toward the KRG. Iranian authorities feared that Kurdish independence in Iraq could encourage similar separatist aspirations among Iran's own Kurdish population. Support for the referendum among Iranian Kurds intensified these concerns and prompted Tehran to adopt a more coercive approach (Jooghi et al., 2024, pp. 193–215). Measures included drone strikes against Kurdish opposition organizations such as the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), restrictions on Kurdish air traffic, economic pressure, and diplomatic coordination with Iraq and Turkey to oppose the referendum (Taleblu, 2018).

This paper contributes to the field of Iranian foreign policy analysis by highlighting the KRG as a significant yet underexplored sub-state actor within Iran's regional strategy. Existing scholarship has largely focused on Iran's bilateral relations with sovereign states or on its networks of influence among Shi'a actors in Iraq. By contrast, this study examines Tehran's engagement with a non-Arab, predominantly Kurdish political entity occupying a unique position within the regional order.

Drawing on James Rosenau's multi-level Foreign Policy Analysis framework (Rosenau, 1966, pp. 27–92), this research argues that Iran's policy toward the KRG between 1991 and 2017 reflected a dynamic interaction between ideological commitments and pragmatic adaptation. Tehran's strategy evolved in response to systemic pressures, domestic institutional considerations, and leadership calculations, leading to alternating patterns of cooperation, accommodation, and containment.

The analysis demonstrates how major regional developments—including the post-Gulf War order, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the rise of ISIS, and the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum—shaped Iran's strategic behavior toward the KRG. By positioning the KRG as a central rather than peripheral actor in Iran's regional policy, the study contributes to a broader reconceptualization of Iran-Kurdish relations within the literature on Middle Eastern foreign policy.

1991–2003: Emergence of the KRG

Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the subsequent defeat of Iraqi forces by the U.S.-led coalition during the Gulf War (January–February 1991), Iraq faced severe international sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council (Freedman & Karsh, 1993). These developments significantly weakened Baghdad's authority and created the conditions for the emergence of Kurdish self-rule in northern Iraq.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was formally established in 1992, creating both opportunities and challenges for Iran. While Tehran supported Kurdish efforts to weaken Saddam Hussein's regime, it remained concerned about the potential impact of Kurdish autonomy on its own Kurdish population (Danish Immigration Service, 2024). Consequently, Iran adopted a cautious approach that combined cooperation with strategic containment.

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Kurdish uprisings in northern Iraq prompted a harsh military response from Saddam Hussein's government. Tens of thousands of Kurdish families fled to neighboring countries, including Iran and Turkey. The establishment of a United Nations no-fly zone in April 1991 enabled many displaced Kurds to return to their homes, facilitating the consolidation of Kurdish self-administration in northern Iraq (McDowall, 2004, pp. 360–365).

The Kurds and Iran in the Post-Kuwait War Era

Between 1992 and 1994, Iran sought to expand its influence within the newly formed KRG by cultivating relations with both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Although Tehran maintained stronger ties with the PUK due to ideological affinities and long-standing cooperation under Jalal Talabani, it also engaged with the KDP to preserve regional balance (Gunter, 2011, pp. 124–126).

Iran's closer alignment with the PUK was motivated by strategic considerations. The PUK's anti-Saddam stance, socialist orientation, and skepticism toward Turkish influence made it a valuable partner for Tehran. Moreover, both actors shared concerns regarding developments within the Kurdish movement in Turkey (McDowall, 2004, pp. 360–361; Kalam, 2025).

At the same time, Iran avoided supporting any single Kurdish faction to the extent that it could dominate the region. Tehran viewed political balance between the KDP and PUK as essential for preventing the emergence of a unified Kurdish entity capable of threatening Iranian interests or aligning too closely with rival powers (Gunter, 2002, pp. 553–567).

Relations with the KDP were therefore equally important. Despite ideological differences, Iran recognized that engagement with Masoud Barzani's movement contributed to regional stability and reduced the likelihood of external actors, particularly the United States and Turkey, gaining excessive influence in Iraqi Kurdistan (Jaff & Qadir, 2010, pp. 456–457).

Ultimately, Iran's policy sought to maintain a fragile equilibrium within Iraqi Kurdistan. By supporting both factions, Tehran aimed to preserve influence, prevent excessive Kurdish political cohesion, and ensure that the KRG did not evolve into a platform for adversarial regional powers (Anaghiz & Poostchi, 2022, pp. 39–67).

KRG and Iran During the Civil War Period

The Kurdish Civil War (1994–1998) between the PUK and KDP represented a critical phase in Iran's policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan. Concerned about instability along its western borders, Tehran assumed an active mediating role. Following unsuccessful U.S.-sponsored initiatives, Iran hosted negotiations between the rival Kurdish factions in Tehran, seeking to prevent further escalation and strengthen its regional influence (Better Evidence Project, 2022).

During the conflict, Iran deepened its cooperation with the PUK, whose territory bordered Iran. This relationship enabled Iranian security forces to conduct operations against Iranian Kurdish opposition groups operating from northern Iraq, particularly the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan.

Between 1994 and 1998, Iranian authorities carried out several cross-border operations targeting Komala members and infrastructure within PUK-controlled areas. These actions formed part of a broader strategy aimed at suppressing armed Kurdish opposition movements and limiting their ability to challenge the Islamic Republic from outside Iranian territory (IranWire, 2023).

As a result, Komala faced increasing security pressures, including surveillance, infiltration, ambushes, and targeted killings of its members. Tehran considered these measures necessary

to prevent Iraqi Kurdistan from becoming a sanctuary for anti-Iranian Kurdish groups (Abdorraahman Boroumand Center, n.d.).

Between 1998 and 2001, Iran adopted what can be described as a strategy of monitoring and containment. Growing U.S. involvement in Iraq, particularly following Operation Desert Fox in 1998, heightened Tehran's concerns about the possibility of closer cooperation between the KRG and Washington (Brzezinski et al., 1997). Consequently, Iran intensified its surveillance of political developments in northern Iraq while seeking to limit emerging threats to its regional interests.

Post-Saddam Era and Iran's Policy toward the KRG

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 fundamentally transformed the regional security environment. Although the intervention was justified by allegations that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, such weapons were never found. For Iran, the collapse of the Ba'athist regime simultaneously removed a longstanding adversary and generated new security concerns due to the extensive American military presence on its borders (Heiran-Nia, 2023).

The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq eliminated Iran's two principal regional threats but also created a strategic encirclement that increased Tehran's perception of vulnerability. As a result, Iran sought to adapt its regional strategy to counterbalance U.S. influence while consolidating its own position within Iraq.

Following Saddam Hussein's removal, Iran's primary objective was to prevent the emergence of a hostile government in Baghdad. To achieve this goal, Tehran strengthened its relationships with political allies, armed groups, and proxy actors inside Iraq, while simultaneously working to reduce American influence in the country (Heiran-Nia, 2023).

The post-2003 environment also provided Iran with an opportunity to advance a broader regional vision centered on strengthening Shi'a political influence and establishing a security framework more favorable to its geopolitical interests.

The Rise of ISIS in Iraq and Iran's Reaction

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) between 2013 and 2014 represented one of the most significant security challenges in the region. Exploiting political instability and weak state institutions, ISIS rapidly expanded its territorial control, culminating in the capture of Mosul in June 2014 (Katzman, 2018, pp. 15–17).

Iran viewed ISIS as a direct threat to both its national security and the Shi'a communities it sought to protect throughout the region. The group's anti-Shi'a ideology and military advances raised concerns that regional instability could spread toward Iran's borders.

In response, Tehran increased its involvement in Iraq by supplying military advisers, intelligence support, weapons, and logistical assistance to both the Iraqi government and Kurdish forces confronting ISIS (Knights, 2020). Iranian-backed actors also contributed to the defense of key cities such as Baghdad, Samarra, and Tikrit (Wehrey et al., 2014, pp. 9–11).

Iran framed its intervention as part of the broader "Axis of Resistance" strategy. Beyond combating terrorism, this policy aimed to preserve regional allies, limit opportunities for renewed U.S. influence, and reinforce Iran's position as a decisive regional actor (Alfoneh, 2014).

Post-Referendum Period

The 2017 Kurdish independence referendum marked a turning point in Iran's relations with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Tehran interpreted the referendum as both a domestic and regional threat. Internally, Iranian leaders feared that Kurdish aspirations for independence

could encourage similar demands among Iran's Kurdish population. Externally, they viewed the referendum as a challenge to the existing regional order (Ali, 2017).

Consequently, Iran coordinated closely with Iraq and Turkey to oppose the referendum and prevent any move toward Kurdish statehood (Jooghi et al., 2024, pp. 193–215). This cooperation reflected a shared commitment to preserving existing borders and limiting separatist movements across the region.

In parallel, Iran launched military exercises near the KRI border involving both the regular armed forces (Artesh) and units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These exercises included live-fire drills and the deployment of tanks, drones, and artillery near sensitive border areas, signaling Tehran's willingness to employ coercive measures if necessary (Nadimi, 2017a).

Diplomatic coordination also intensified. During Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Tehran shortly after the referendum, Iranian and Turkish leaders reaffirmed their opposition to Kurdish independence. Iranian officials emphasized the inviolability of regional borders, while Erdoğan dismissed the referendum as illegitimate and internationally isolated (Erdogan & Rouhani, 2017; Euronews, 2017).

Iran's response extended beyond diplomacy and military signaling. In 2018, Tehran launched coordinated missile and drone strikes against Iranian Kurdish opposition groups operating within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Knights & Nadimi, 2019). These operations coincided with heightened tensions surrounding Kurdish political activism, including the execution of Komala member Ramin Hossein Panahi (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

The strikes represented a significant evolution in Iran's security doctrine. By employing advanced missile and drone capabilities beyond its borders, Tehran demonstrated an increased willingness to project military power against perceived threats. This shift reflected a more assertive approach toward Kurdish movements and underscored the growing importance of deterrence within Iran's regional strategy.

Another dimension of Iranian security policy toward the KRG was the shift that occurred in the post-referendum period. Iran's response to the 2017 independence referendum evolved through successive stages, from diplomatic pressure and economic coercion, through political subversion and proxy engagement, to an ultimately preemptive military posture directed at eliminating perceived security threats within KRG territory (Badawi, 2022).

Methodology

This qualitative study examines Iran's foreign policy toward the KRG from 1991 to the 2017 referendum, using historical research techniques and documentary analysis. The study uses secondary sources that shed light on the political, economic, and security aspects of Iran-KRG ties, including scholarly books, journal articles, official reports, and archival documents. The collected data were systematically analyzed to identify major themes, patterns, and shifts in Iran's foreign policy. Perspectives from Iranian, Kurdish, and international sources were compared to ensure a balanced, multifaceted understanding of the topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between Iran and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has received considerable scholarly attention within the broader context of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Existing studies generally agree that Iran's policy toward the KRG has been shaped by a combination of security concerns, ideological considerations, and pragmatic calculations. However, the relative importance of these factors has varied across different historical periods, reflecting changes in regional dynamics and Iran's strategic priorities.

Several studies argue that Iran's approach to Iraqi Kurdistan has been characterized by short-term pragmatism and strategic adaptation. Entessar (2018, pp. 73–84) emphasizes that the 1990–1991 Gulf War constituted a turning point in Iran's regional policy. Although Tehran

opposed the fragmentation of Iraq and therefore resisted recognizing the KRG as a fully sovereign actor; it simultaneously maintained communication channels with Kurdish authorities to address border security issues and contain anti-Iranian activities originating from Iraqi Kurdistan.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 further transformed Iran–KRG relations by creating new opportunities for political and economic influence. During this period, Tehran expanded its engagement with both Baghdad and the KRG through institutional, diplomatic, and commercial mechanisms. The opening of Iranian consulates in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, together with the establishment of a KRG representative office in Tehran, reflected the growing institutionalization of bilateral relations and Iran's recognition of the KRG as an important regional actor (Entessar, 2018, pp. 73–84).

Economic cooperation also intensified after 2003. Cross-border trade, infrastructure projects, and investment flows strengthened economic interdependence between Iran and the KRG. These developments not only expanded Tehran's influence in northern Iraq but also integrated the Kurdish region more closely into Iran's economic sphere, reinforcing a relationship based on mutual interests rather than ideological affinity alone.

Security considerations remain one of the most frequently cited explanations for Iran's policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan. Akraminia (2020, pp. 20–21) argues that Tehran perceives U.S. military and political engagement in the KRG as a direct threat to its national security. Iranian policymakers have expressed concerns regarding American-led security arrangements, alleged Israeli intelligence activities, and the potential encouragement of separatist sentiments among Iranian Kurds.

In response to these perceived threats, Iran has consistently sought to limit the activities of Iranian Kurdish opposition groups operating from the Kurdistan Region. According to Van Wilgenburg (2023), Tehran has employed a combination of diplomatic pressure, intelligence operations, and military actions to prevent these groups from using Iraqi Kurdistan as a base for anti-regime activities. This security-oriented approach has remained a constant feature of Iran's regional strategy.

Historical analyses further reveal a pattern of instrumental engagement with Kurdish actors. During the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), Iran alternated between supporting and distancing itself from Kurdish factions according to changing strategic circumstances. Chomani (2022) notes that the creation of the Kurdistan Front exemplified Tehran's attempt to coordinate Kurdish groups under its influence while simultaneously weakening Baghdad's position and advancing Iranian interests.

The 2017 Kurdish independence referendum represented another critical turning point in Iran–KRG relations. Chomani (2022, pp. 85–87) and Chatham House (2020) argue that the strong opposition of Iran, Turkey, and the Iraqi federal government contributed significantly to the referendum's failure and the subsequent restoration of federal authority over disputed territories, including Kirkuk. The outcome reinforced the KRG's dependence on neighboring regional powers.

Turkey and Iran shared concerns regarding the referendum, although their motivations differed. Erdoğan viewed Kurdish independence as a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and feared that it could strengthen Kurdish nationalism among Turkey's Kurdish population (Knights, 2017). Iran's opposition was equally strong but driven primarily by concerns over domestic Kurdish mobilization and the potential erosion of its strategic influence in northern Iraq (Al Jazeera, 2017).

Some observers also noted the emergence of narratives linking the referendum to alleged Israeli involvement. Turkish and Iranian officials cited media reports of Israeli flags displayed during referendum-related events in Erbil (Ynetnews, 2017). However, field observations reported by analysts present in the region found little evidence supporting these claims,

suggesting that such narratives may have served broader political and strategic purposes (Knights et al., 2017).

Another important dimension of the literature concerns the evolution of Iran's foreign policy doctrine. Saghafi-Ameri (2009) argues that the revolutionary objective of exporting the Islamic Revolution, which strongly influenced Iranian foreign policy during the 1980s, gradually gave way to a more pragmatic approach. In contemporary Iraq, Iran increasingly relies on political alliances, economic integration, and security cooperation as instruments for preserving influence and advancing national interests.

Regional competition with Turkey also constitutes an important theme within the literature. Both states have historically used Kurdish actors as instruments for shaping political developments in Iraq and influencing Baghdad's policies. As Entessar (2018, p. 75) notes, the "Kurdish card" has remained an important component of the strategic rivalry between Iran and Turkey, particularly in northern Iraq.

Research Gaps: Identification and Future Directions

Despite the extensive literature on Iran-KRG relations, important analytical gaps remain. Most existing studies focus on security concerns, regional competition, economic interests, and ideological factors while paying limited attention to the internal decision-making structure of the Iranian state. As a result, key variables that shape Tehran's foreign policy are often underexplored.

One of the most significant omissions concerns the role of the Supreme Leader (SL). Unlike conventional political systems, Iran's foreign policy is heavily influenced by a governance structure in which ultimate authority over strategic decisions rests with the Supreme Leader. Consequently, understanding Iran's behavior requires moving beyond traditional state-centric approaches and examining the institutional hierarchy that governs foreign policy formulation.

For example, studies such as Entessar's *Uneasy Neighbors: Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government* and Akraminia's *Iran's Security Strategy in Iraqi Kurdistan* provide valuable insights into Iran's interactions with the KRI. However, neither study systematically incorporates the role of the Supreme Leader as an explanatory variable, despite his decisive influence over major foreign policy decisions (Entessar, 2018, pp. 45–56; Akraminia, 2020).

Future research should therefore examine how the Supreme Leader's strategic preferences shape Iran's relations with the KRG and interact with other domestic and international variables. Incorporating this dimension would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Iranian foreign policy behavior and improve existing explanatory frameworks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rosenau's Theory of Foreign Policy Analysis

James N. Rosenau is widely recognized as one of the pioneers of comparative foreign policy analysis. In his influential work *Pre-Theories and Theories of Foreign Policy* (1966), Rosenau proposed a multidimensional framework designed to explain foreign policy behavior through the interaction of variables operating at different levels of analysis (Rosenau, 1966).

According to Rosenau, foreign policy decisions are shaped by five categories of variables: idiosyncratic, role, societal, governmental, and systemic factors. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how states formulate and implement foreign policy.

Idiosyncratic variables refer to the personal characteristics of decision-makers. Individual experiences, beliefs, values, leadership styles, and perceptions influence how policymakers interpret international events and choose among alternative courses of action.

Role variables concern the institutional positions occupied by decision-makers. Political leaders are constrained by the expectations, responsibilities, and norms associated with the offices they hold, which shape their behavior independently of personal preferences.

Societal variables encompass domestic social factors that influence foreign policy. These include historical experiences, geography, ideology, political culture, public opinion, and other societal characteristics that affect national decision-making processes.

Governmental variables refer to the institutional structure of the state. Constitutional arrangements, political systems, bureaucratic organizations, and the distribution of authority within government can either facilitate or constrain foreign policy choices.

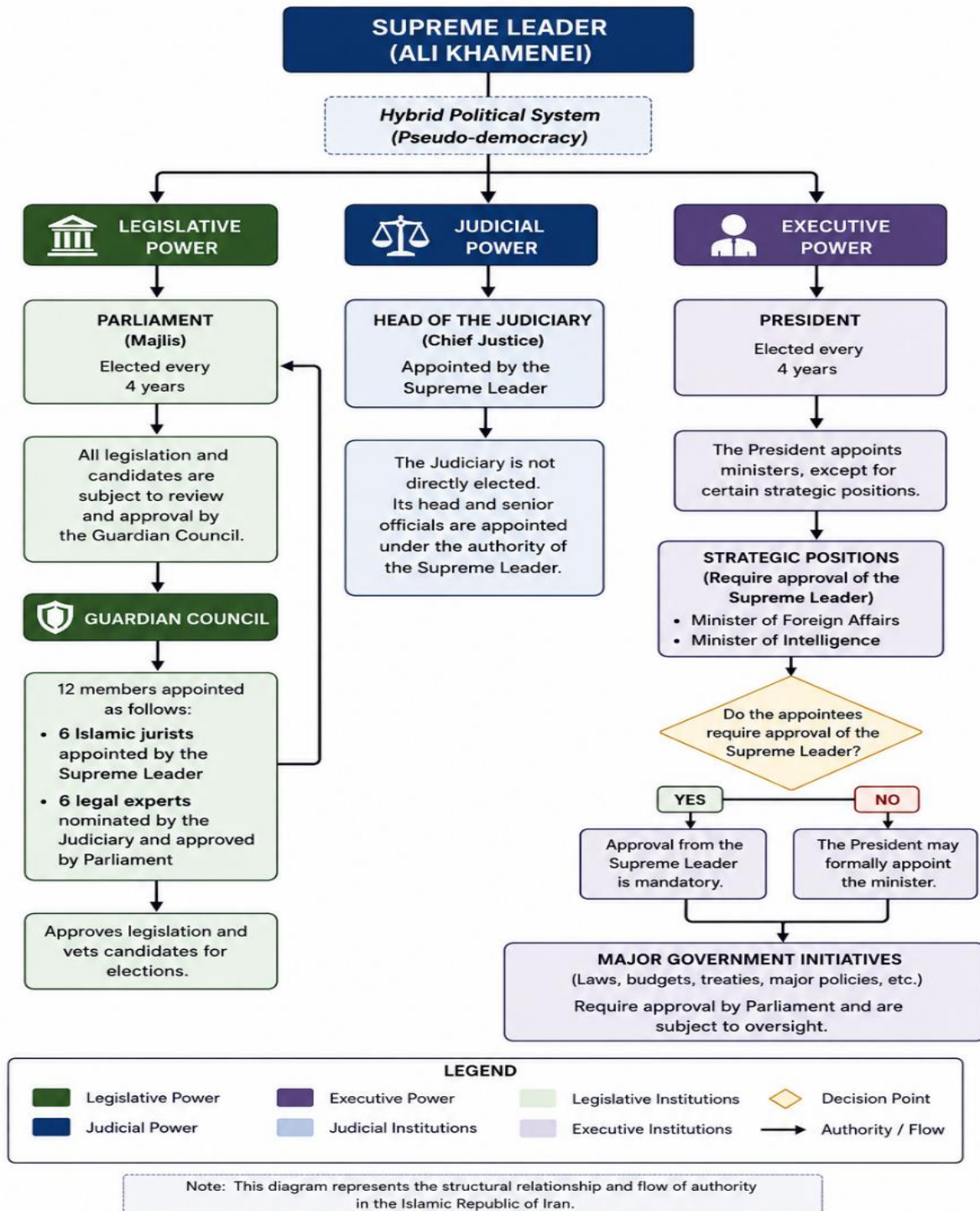
Systemic variables involve external factors originating from the international environment. These include the distribution of power, regional conflicts, alliances, security threats, and broader geopolitical dynamics that influence state behavior.

Rosenau's framework addresses two central questions: how foreign policy is formulated and how domestic and international environments interact to shape state behavior (Rosenau, 1966, p. 45). Given its multilevel perspective, the model provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining shifts in Iran's policy toward the KRG across different historical contexts.

Accordingly, this study analyzes Iran's foreign policy toward the KRG through three critical periods: (1) 1991–2003, following the Gulf War and the emergence of the KRG; (2) 2003–2014, marked by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraqi politics; and (3) the post-2017 referendum period, characterized by Iran's response to Kurdish independence aspirations and its efforts to preserve the regional status quo.

Figura 1.

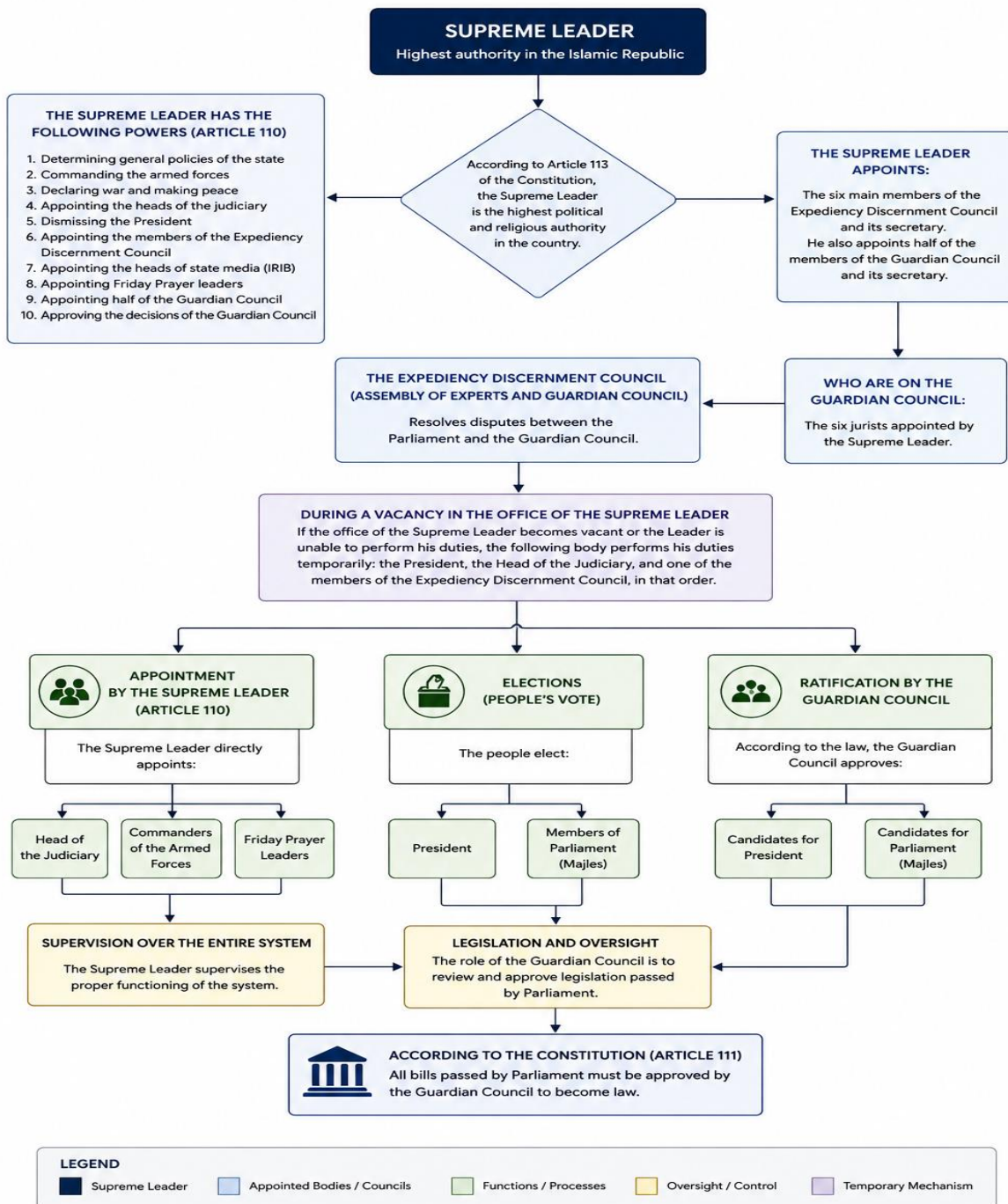
Estructura simplificada del sistema político de la República Islámica de Irán



Nota. El gráfico presenta una representación simplificada de las relaciones institucionales entre el Líder Supremo, los poderes Legislativo, Judicial y Ejecutivo, así como los mecanismos de supervisión ejercidos por el Consejo de Guardianes y otras instituciones clave del sistema político iraní. Elaboración propia con base en la Constitución de la República Islámica de Irán.

Figura 2.

Centralización del poder político y mecanismos de control institucional en la República Islámica de Irán



Nota. La figura muestra la posición jerárquica del Líder Supremo dentro de la estructura política iraní y su influencia sobre los principales órganos de gobierno, supervisión electoral, administración de justicia y resolución de conflictos institucionales. Elaboración propia a partir de la Constitución de la República Islámica de Irán y literatura especializada sobre el sistema político iraní.

Analysis

Idiosyncratic Variables

According to James N. Rosenau's Foreign Policy Analysis framework, the personal characteristics of decision-makers constitute an important explanatory variable in understanding foreign policy behavior (Rosenau, 1966). In the Iranian case, this dimension requires consideration of the country's unique political structure, where formal institutions coexist with a highly centralized system of authority. Although Iran incorporates republican institutions such as elections and a presidency, ultimate political authority resides with the Supreme Leader, whose influence extends across the executive, legislative, judicial, and security sectors (Rasmussen, 2009, p. 2; Ganji, 2013).

The predominance of the Supreme Leader makes individual leadership preferences particularly relevant for explaining foreign policy outcomes. Since assuming office in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has exercised decisive influence over Iran's regional strategy, including its policy toward Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. While different administrations have adopted varying diplomatic styles, all have operated within strategic parameters defined by the Supreme Leader and the broader security establishment.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997)

Following the Iran–Iraq War, Iran faced severe economic challenges and social exhaustion, creating strong incentives for reconstruction and international engagement. Under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, foreign policy became more pragmatic, emphasizing economic development, regional cooperation, and reduced tensions with neighboring states (Soltani & Amiri, 2010, pp. 199–206). Rafsanjani sought to balance the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic with the practical requirements of postwar recovery.

Despite this pragmatic orientation, the Supreme Leader remained skeptical of rapprochement with the United States. Khamenei repeatedly rejected normalization efforts, arguing that concessions to Washington would neither resolve Iran's problems nor alter American hostility toward the Islamic Republic (Khamenei, 1993). This divergence illustrates how individual leadership perceptions influenced the boundaries of Iranian foreign policy during the postwar period.

Toward Iraqi Kurdistan, Rafsanjani's administration pursued a dual strategy. Iran strengthened relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under Jalal Talabani, viewing the organization as a useful partner against Saddam Hussein and as a mechanism for expanding Iranian influence in northern Iraq (Entessar, 2009, pp. 97–100). This cooperation reflected Tehran's broader objective of shaping political developments beyond its western border.

Simultaneously, Iran adopted a more coercive posture toward Iranian Kurdish opposition groups operating from Iraqi territory. Organizations such as Komala and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) were perceived as threats to national security and became targets of cross-border operations, intelligence activities, and political pressure (Bezwan, 2022; Bayat, 2008). The Mykonos assassinations in Berlin and the killing of Sadiq Kamangar exemplified this approach.

These policies demonstrate the interaction between pragmatism and security concerns within Iranian decision-making. While Tehran cooperated with Iraqi Kurdish actors when doing so served its regional interests, it remained uncompromising toward groups perceived as threatening domestic stability. This combination of engagement and containment became a recurring feature of Iran's policy toward the Kurdish question.

Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005)

Mohammad Khatami's presidency introduced a more reformist and internationally oriented approach to foreign policy. His "Dialogue of Civilizations" initiative sought to improve Iran's global image and promote constructive engagement with the international community

(Rasmussen, 2009, p. 27). From Rosenau's perspective, Khatami's intellectual background and reformist identity significantly influenced his foreign policy preferences.

However, Khatami's ability to reshape Iran's international position was constrained by the country's dual power structure. Strategic decisions concerning security and foreign affairs remained largely under the influence of the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Consequently, reformist aspirations often collided with institutional limitations and resistance from conservative actors (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2008).

The international environment also affected Khatami's policy choices. The attacks of September 11, 2001, initially created opportunities for limited cooperation between Iran and the United States in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, these prospects quickly disappeared after President George W. Bush identified Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002, reinforcing distrust between the two countries.

Toward Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran maintained a pragmatic strategy that combined cooperation with pressure. Tehran cultivated relations with both the KDP and PUK while simultaneously conducting intelligence operations and exerting pressure on Iranian Kurdish opposition groups operating from the region. This approach reflected the interaction of leadership preferences, institutional constraints, and security concerns identified in Rosenau's model (Maleki, 2005, pp. 255–265).

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013)

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency marked a shift toward a more confrontational foreign policy discourse. His populist leadership style, skepticism toward the West, and emphasis on Iran's nuclear program contributed to increased tensions with the United States and its regional allies (Sahimi, 2010). These personal characteristics influenced both Iran's rhetoric and its strategic behavior.

Under Ahmadinejad, Tehran viewed the Kurdistan Region with growing suspicion because of its potential role as a sanctuary for Iranian Kurdish opposition groups. As a result, Iranian authorities intensified intelligence operations and occasional cross-border actions against organizations such as Komala and the KDPI (Jazaeri, 2024; Danish Immigration Service, 2020).

At the regional level, Iran expanded its influence through support for Shi'a political actors in Iraq, particularly after Nouri al-Maliki became prime minister in 2006. Sectarian alignments increasingly shaped political competition in Iraq, enabling Tehran to consolidate its influence through networks of allied organizations and political partners (Milani, 2014).

The outbreak of regional instability following the Arab Spring further reinforced Iran's security-oriented approach. By the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Tehran had moved beyond political influence and economic engagement toward a more active role in supporting allied military actors throughout the region.

Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021)

Hassan Rouhani's presidency reflected an ongoing tension between diplomatic engagement and security priorities. Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif promoted regional dialogue, economic reintegration, and international cooperation, particularly following the 2015 nuclear agreement (Bassiri Tabrizi & Pantucci, 2016). Nevertheless, security policy remained heavily influenced by the IRGC and other institutions outside presidential control.

This duality was particularly visible in Iraq. While the Rouhani administration formally supported political stability and Iraqi sovereignty, Iran's security apparatus continued to exercise substantial influence through militia networks and strategic alliances established over previous decades (Mansour & Jabar, 2017, pp. 12–18).

Iran cooperated with both Baghdad and Erbil during the campaign against ISIS, viewing stability in northern Iraq as essential for border security (Natali, 2018). However, the 2017

Kurdish independence referendum triggered a more coercive response, as Iranian institutions prioritized territorial integrity and regional stability over diplomatic engagement.

Following the referendum, Tehran intensified pressure on Kurdish opposition groups operating near the border and adopted a more assertive and, at the same time, preemptive security posture. This development demonstrated that, despite Rouhani's moderate rhetoric, strategic considerations continued to dominate Iran's regional policy. The period illustrates how individual leadership preferences remained constrained by institutional and security imperatives (Milani, 2018).

Role Variables (Bureaucratic and Institutional Structures)

Rosenau's role variables emphasize the importance of institutional positions and organizational structures in shaping foreign policy behavior. In Iran, the constitutional authority of the Supreme Leader gives him ultimate control over strategic decisions, particularly in foreign and security affairs. Consequently, elected institutions often play a secondary role in determining policy toward Iraq and the KRG.

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the IRGC's Quds Force emerged as one of the principal actors directing Iran's engagement in Iraq. Under the leadership of Qassem Soleimani, the organization coordinated relations with Shi'a militias, political parties, and, when strategically advantageous, Kurdish actors such as the PUK.

As the IRGC's influence expanded, traditional diplomatic institutions gradually lost prominence. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained responsible for formal diplomatic representation, many substantive policy decisions were formulated and implemented through security networks and informal channels (Ostovar, 2016, p. 204; Nadimi, 2017b).

This institutional arrangement produced a dual-track foreign policy. The first track consisted of conventional diplomacy conducted through official state institutions. The second involved security-oriented activities led by the IRGC, including military coordination, intelligence operations, and support for non-state actors. Together, these tracks enabled Iran to pursue both diplomatic and coercive strategies simultaneously.

The strategic vacuum created by the 2003 U.S. invasion further strengthened the IRGC's position. As Iraq became central to Iran's regional security strategy, the institutional imperative to prevent instability and maintain influence reinforced the dominance of security institutions in policymaking (Matthews, 2019).

Societal Variables (Domestic Pressures and National Identity)

Societal variables highlight the influence of domestic social conditions on foreign policy decisions. In Iran, ethnic diversity constitutes an important factor shaping policy toward the Kurdistan Region. The presence of a substantial Kurdish population in western Iran has long generated concerns among policymakers that Kurdish autonomy in Iraq could encourage similar demands within Iran (Abdullah, 2017).

Iran's national identity also contributes to this dynamic. The ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic, rooted in political Islam and support for Shi'a political movements, have often contrasted with the secular nationalist orientation of Kurdish political organizations. This ideological divergence has influenced Tehran's alliances and strategic calculations throughout Iraq.

Domestic political unrest has further heightened Iranian sensitivity to Kurdish issues. Events such as the Green Movement in 2009 and the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests following Mahsa Amini's death in 2022 reinforced concerns regarding political mobilization and social instability, particularly in Kurdish-majority regions (Lob, 2024, pp. 317–322).

Although these protests were not primarily driven by ethnic separatism, Iranian authorities remained concerned about the possibility of cross-border Kurdish solidarity. Consequently,

societal pressures have consistently interacted with security considerations in shaping Tehran's approach toward the KRG.

Governmental Variables (Political Structure and Decision-Making Systems)

Governmental variables focus on how political institutions influence foreign policy behavior. Iran's political system combines elected institutions with powerful unelected bodies, creating a complex decision-making structure in which authority is concentrated in the hands of the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) (Ehteshami, 2002, pp. 28–32).

Although presidents and foreign ministers formally represent Iran internationally, strategic policy decisions regarding Iraq and the KRG are generally determined by these unelected institutions. This arrangement has produced a highly centralized approach to regional security and foreign affairs.

Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the role of the IRGC's Quds Force became increasingly prominent. Under Qassem Soleimani, Tehran's policy focused on limiting separatist tendencies, countering American influence, and consolidating relationships with Shi'a political actors and armed groups (Hasan, 2024).

This security-centered model reached its clearest expression during the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. Iran coordinated closely with Baghdad, organized military exercises near the border, and employed political and economic pressure to discourage Kurdish secessionist ambitions (Nasri & Rezaei, 2020, pp. 168–197). These actions reflected the influence of Iran's centralized and security-oriented political structure.

Systemic Variables (International Environment and Regional Dynamics)

Systemic variables refer to external factors that shape state behavior within the international system. Between 1991 and 2003, the emergence of the KRG under the protection of U.S.-enforced no-fly zones created both opportunities and challenges for Iran. While Kurdish autonomy weakened Saddam Hussein's regime, it also raised concerns regarding the activities of Iranian Kurdish opposition groups operating from northern Iraq.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq dramatically altered the regional balance of power. Tehran exploited the resulting vacuum by expanding its influence through Shi'a political coalitions and strategic partnerships with both the PUK and the KDP (Juneau, 2015, pp. 111–115). This period marked a significant expansion of Iran's political and security presence in Iraq.

Regional dynamics shifted again following the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. Iran, Turkey, and the Iraqi federal government formed a coordinated front against Kurdish independence, viewing it as a threat to regional stability and territorial integrity. The resulting pressure campaign demonstrated the importance of regional alliances in shaping Tehran's policy (Eisenstadt, 2017).

Iran's response increasingly relied on coercive instruments, including missile and drone strikes against Iranian Kurdish opposition groups operating in northern Iraq. These actions reflected a broader strategic shift toward deterrence and demonstrated Tehran's willingness to project military power beyond its borders.

The presidencies of Ebrahim Raisi and Masoud Pezeshkian illustrate the continuing influence of systemic factors. Raisi's administration emphasized deterrence, security cooperation, and pressure on Kurdish militant groups, reinforcing the priorities of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC (Washington Institute, 2023). By contrast, Pezeshkian has adopted a more pragmatic diplomatic approach while maintaining the core objectives of Iran's regional strategy.

During his first official visit to Iraq in 2024, Pezeshkian signed multiple cooperation agreements covering security, infrastructure, trade, and regional development. These initiatives suggest that, despite changes in diplomatic style, Iran continues to pursue long-

term influence in Iraq through a combination of security measures, political partnerships, and economic integration (Rudaw, 2024; Al-Arabiya, 2024).

He promoted multifaceted cooperation in political, economic, scientific, and cultural domains during his maiden foreign visit to Iraq, signaling Iran's commitment to building trust and shared progress, which can reassure the audience about future stability (Vatanka, 2025).

Table 1.

Evolution of Iran's Policy toward the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) under the Raisi and Pezeshkian Administrations (2021–Present)

President	General Iraq Policy	Policy toward the KRG
Ebrahim Raisi (2021–May 2024)	Iran maintained a more assertive and preemptive, security-centred regional posture consistent with the strategic vision of the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Security, deterrence, and resistance to Western influence took precedence over economic diplomacy. Iran further consolidated its partnerships with China and Russia while relying on allied militias to preserve its influence within Iraq.	Reaffirmed support for Iraq's territorial integrity and opposed any form of Kurdish separatism. Implemented security agreements aimed at restricting Iranian Kurdish opposition groups. Conducted cross-border military operations, including missile and drone strikes against bases associated with Komala, KDPI, and other Kurdish opposition organizations operating in northern Iraq.
Masoud Pezeshkian (July 2024–Present)	Preserved the core principles of Iran's regional strategy while adopting a more pragmatic and diplomatic style. Prioritized political dialogue, economic cooperation, and regional connectivity. His decision to make Iraq his first official foreign destination underscored the strategic importance of bilateral relations.	Became the first Iranian president to officially visit Erbil, signaling a more cooperative approach toward the KRG. Promoted economic, scientific, cultural, and security cooperation while describing the Iran–KRG border as a zone of peace and mutual development. Simultaneously maintained Iran's long-standing security concerns regarding Kurdish opposition groups.

Note. The table summarizes the main characteristics of Iran's policy toward Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) during the administrations of Ebrahim Raisi and Masoud Pezeshkian. The comparison highlights continuities and changes in diplomatic, security, and regional strategies based on official statements, policy actions, and secondary sources analyzed in this study. Compiled by the authors.

Table 2.

Application of Rosenau's Foreign Policy Variables to Iranian Presidential Administrations and Their Policy toward the KRG (1989–Present)

President	Idiosyncratic Variables	Role Variables	Governmental Variables	Societal Variables	Systemic Variables	Impact on KRG Policy
Rafsanjani (1989–1997)	Pragmatic, technocratic, reconstruction-oriented leader.	Viewed himself as the architect of post-war recovery.	Presidential authority remained subordinate to the Supreme Leader and key revolutionary institutions.	Public demand for reconstruction and economic stability after the Iran–Iraq War.	Regional power vacuum following Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War.	Combined support for Kurdish factions with efforts to prevent Kurdish nationalism from affecting Iran's territorial integrity.
Khatami (1997–2005)	Reformist, moderate, advocate of dialogue and international engagement.	Promoted the "Dialogue of Civilizations" initiative.	Reformist agenda constrained by conservative institutions, including the IRGC and	Growing demands for political reform among youth and intellectuals.	Post-Cold War environment with limited opportunities for détente with the West.	Expanded economic and diplomatic engagement with the KRG while maintaining security oversight of Kurdish opposition groups.

President	Idiosyncratic Variables	Role Variables	Governmental Variables	Societal Variables	Systemic Variables	Impact on KRG Policy
Guardian Council.						
Ahmadinejad (2005–2013)	Populist, nationalist, ideologically confrontational.	Presented himself as a defender of revolutionary values.	Increasing influence of the IRGC in foreign and security policy.	Economic pressures and nationalist sentiment.	U.S. occupation of Iraq, regional instability, and international sanctions.	Sought to maintain a balance of power in Iraqi Kurdistan while preventing the KRG from becoming a platform for anti-Iranian actors.
Rouhani (2013–2021)	Pragmatic, moderate, diplomacy-oriented.	Emphasized negotiation and international engagement, particularly through the JCPOA.	Foreign policy remained constrained by the Supreme Leader and security institutions.	Public expectations for economic improvement and sanctions relief.	Nuclear negotiations, regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia, and the rise of ISIS.	Combined cooperation with the KRG against ISIS with increasing security pressure after the 2017 independence referendum.
Raisi (2021–2024)	Conservative, security-oriented, aligned with revolutionary principles.	Defender of resistance-oriented regional policies.	Strong coordination with the Supreme Leader and the IRGC.	Domestic concerns regarding political stability and border security.	Intensified regional competition and declining U.S. influence in Iraq.	Adopted a coercive approach focused on deterrence, territorial integrity, and the containment of Kurdish opposition movements.
Pezeshkian (2024–Present)	Pragmatic, dialogue-oriented, reform-minded.	Promotes diplomatic engagement while preserving strategic continuity.	Security policy remains influenced by the Supreme Leader and the IRGC.	Demand for economic cooperation and regional stability.	Multipolar regional environment and expanding economic diplomacy.	Pursues deeper political and economic engagement with the KRG while maintaining traditional security red line

Note. The table applies Rosenau’s Foreign Policy Analysis framework to examine how idiosyncratic, role, governmental, societal, and systemic variables influenced the foreign policy orientations of successive Iranian presidents toward the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The analysis is based on evidence presented in the literature review and empirical findings of this study. Compiled by the authors.

Security Policy of Iranian Presidents toward the KRG

The comparative analysis reveals a significant degree of continuity in Iran’s policy toward the Kurdistan Region of Iraq despite changes in presidential administrations. While leadership styles and diplomatic approaches have varied—from Rafsanjani’s pragmatism and Khatami’s reformism to Ahmadinejad’s ideological assertiveness and Rouhani’s diplomacy—the core objectives have remained largely unchanged. These objectives include preserving Iraq’s territorial integrity, preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state, containing Iranian Kurdish opposition groups, and maintaining Iranian influence in northern Iraq.

From Rosenau’s perspective, the findings suggest that governmental and systemic variables exert greater influence than idiosyncratic variables in shaping Iran’s policy toward the KRG. Although presidential preferences affect diplomatic style and tactical choices, strategic decisions remain concentrated in institutions controlled by the Supreme Leader and the IRGC. Consequently, changes in leadership have produced adjustments in methods rather than fundamental transformations in policy objectives.

The transition from Raisi to Pezeshkian further illustrates this pattern. While Pezeshkian has adopted a more conciliatory and cooperative discourse, the essential pillars of Iran’s KRG policy—security, territorial integrity, and regional influence—have remained intact. This continuity supports the argument that Iran’s behavior toward the KRG is primarily driven by

enduring institutional and strategic considerations rather than by the personal preferences of individual presidents.

CONCLUSION

James N. Rosenau's five-level analytical model indicates that Iran's foreign policy toward the KRG from 1991 to 2017 encompassed intricate human, institutional, societal, governmental, and systemic factors. The unique approaches of Iranian presidents—Rafsanjani's pragmatism, Khatami's reformism, Ahmadinejad's confrontationalism, and Rouhani's strategic diplomacy—have significantly influenced Iran's relationship with the KRG. The rivalry between the IRGC and the Foreign Ministry shaped a dual-track policy, oscillating between assertive security priorities and cautious diplomatic engagement. Iran's apprehension over Kurdish nationalism—rooted in fears of separatism among its own Kurdish population—has led to a complex mixture of cooperation and repression in its dealings with the KRG. The Islamic Republic's dual power structure, with overlapping civilian and military authorities, has at times led to fragmented or even contradictory policies, particularly when ideological commitments clash with economic or strategic pragmatism.

External dynamics such as the U.S. presence in Iraq, the rise of ISIS, and the 2017 KRG independence referendum heightened Tehran's security concerns. They drove a securitized, often aggressive, posture toward the Kurdish region. Nonetheless, Iran has also recognized the economic and geopolitical importance of engaging with the KRG, especially amid shifting regional alliances. Beyond these dynamics, it is essential to acknowledge Iran's broader strategic objectives in the Middle East, which have consistently shaped its foreign policy posture—including toward the KRG. These include:

1. **Pushing the U.S. out of the region:** Iran's long-term goal is to reduce and eventually eliminate American military and political influence in Iraq and the broader Middle East, including through asymmetric means and proxy networks.
2. **Strengthening Shi'a power and influence:** Iran aims to bolster Shi'a actors and non-state actors in the region, from Lebanon to Iraq and Syria, as part of its ideological and strategic vision.
3. **Weakening or eliminating Israel:** Central to the Islamic Republic's foreign policy doctrine is the ideological opposition to Israel, which manifests through direct and indirect means of resistance, support for armed groups, and regional influence campaigns.

In this context, Iran's foreign policy—especially in border zones like Iraqi Kurdistan—functions as part of its broader regional doctrine. Its strategies often rely on asymmetric warfare, including the use of militias, intelligence operations, and economic influence, to achieve these three core objectives. Rosenau's theory allows us to understand that Iran's foreign policy is not static or monolithic. Instead, it is the result of a dynamic interplay between personal leadership traits, institutional rivalries, domestic pressures, and external constraints. The case of Iran and the KRG clearly illustrates how national security doctrine, ideology, and geopolitical calculations converge and conflict across multiple levels of decision-making.

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