



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Iraq Kurds 1961–91

Executive Summary

In 1958, Kurdish leader Mustafa al-Barzani returned to Iraq from exile in the Soviet Union, where he had been since leading a failed Kurdish nationalist uprising in 1943.¹ Upon his return, al-Barzani assumed leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).² In 1961, another Kurdish uprising was sparked by Iraqi Prime Minister ‘Abd al-Karīm Qāsīm’s refusal to honor pledges to grant Iraq’s Kurds political rights and recognize them as one of two nations in Iraq. Fighting broke out between Iraqi government forces and Kurdish fighters known as the *peshmerga*. In response, the Iraqi government launched air assaults into the Kurdish region, destroying entire villages.

In 1963, a coup by the small Ba‘ath Party (backed by the CIA and Egypt) overthrew and executed Qāsīm, and the Nasserist Colonel ‘Abd al-Salām ‘Ārif was installed as president of Iraq. In late 1969, the Ba‘ath Party and Mustafa al-Barzani reached an agreement that led to Kurdish autonomy and governmental representation within four years.³ Despite the agreement, tensions persisted over the *peshmerga*’s duties, command structure, and conscription policies.⁴ Al-Barzani expanded the *peshmerga* forces and began a conventional war with Iraqi government forces in 1974 with the support of Iran, Israel, and the United States.⁵ The Iraqi government’s counterattacks led to the *peshmerga*’s defeat and forced many of the fighters and the KDP leadership to flee into the mountains and neighboring Iran.⁶

In March 1975, the Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq drove Barzani and many of his followers into exile in Iran. In July 1975, al-Barzani’s absence led to the formation of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) by Jalal Talabani, with Ali Askari taking over command of the *peshmerga*. Mas‘ud Barzani, Mustafa’s son, took over leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Party.⁷ Clashes between the two groups took place between 1976 and 1978, which resulted in the death of Askari.⁸ In 1987, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan united under the Kurdistan National Front (KNF).⁹ The Iraqi government, under the control of Saddam Hussein since 1979, resorted to extreme brutality to suppress the KNF threat, including the use of chemical weapons and the torture of *peshmerga* prisoners.¹⁰ An estimated 200,000 Kurds were killed, and at least 4,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed.¹¹

After Hussein’s attempt to annex neighboring Kuwait collapsed in 1991 following US military intervention, the Iraqi government withdrew from Kuwait, sparking uprisings among the Shiites in southern Iraq and the Kurds in northern Iraq. Despite its losses in Kuwait, the Iraqi military suppressed the Shiite rebellion and regained control over the south. In the north, heavy artillery and the renewed use of chemical

weapons overpowered the Kurdish *peshmerga*, and it lost control of the region's major towns and cities.¹² The fighting forced almost 1.5 million Kurds to seek refuge in Iran and Türkiye.¹³

In April 1991, the United Nations passed Resolution 688, which condemned the Iraqi government's repression of the Kurds, authorized humanitarian intervention in northern Iraq, and designated Iraq north of the 36th parallel a no-fly zone. Resolution 688 led to Operation Provide Comfort, supported by nine countries (Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United States), to establish havens for the Kurds.¹⁴ This intervention led to a return of many displaced Kurds and, with US support, the first democratic elections in 1992 and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government.¹⁵

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Iraq during this time was subdivided by ethnicity and religion. The Kurds are an ethnic group that made up about 20 percent of the population and have long identified as separate from Iraq, including the Arab Sunni Muslims who share a religious identity with Kurds. Shia Muslims constitute 60 percent of the population, but Iraq was ruled by Sunni Muslims despite accounting for only 20 percent of the population.¹⁶ The Kurdish population alone brought the level of national identity in Iraq below 85 percent.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. From 1963 to 2003, Ba'athist Iraqi governments suppressed the Shi'ite population, which constituted more than 50 percent of the population.¹⁷ In 1991, following the US intervention, an uprising among the Shi'ites in Iraq led to the seizure of several key southern cities.¹⁸ Similarly, Kurds rejected the government in northern Iraq. Consequently, the government was deemed illegitimate by more than 70 percent of the population.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes → No. Despite the initial defeat of the Kurdish uprising, the Iraqi government lost control of the major cities of southern Iraq to the Shi'ite majority. In northern Iraq, the no-fly zone allowed the KDP and PKU forces to bring important cities like Arbat, Chawar Qurna, Duhuk, Erbil, Kirkūk, Ranya, and Sulaymāniyyah under *peshmerga* control.¹⁹ As the Shi'ites comprise 55 to 60 percent of the population of Iraq, and the Kurds make up another 20 percent of the population, the government of Iraq clearly did not have security control over 85 percent of the population.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. The Kurds were consistently aided by the bordering state of Iran giving sanctuary and weapons to the secessionist movement. Iran's goals, however, were to weaken the Iraqi government, and rendering aid to the Kurds was a method to accomplish this goal.²⁰ Although Iran and Iraq agreed to cease supporting the other's insurgents, this truce was temporary, as the Iran-Iraq War began in 1980. With the peace dissolved, Iran again provided support to the rebelling Kurds.²¹ In addition to Iran, the Kurds were also significantly aided by the United States, which hoped to destabilize Iraq but withdrew

with Iran.²² Nonetheless, American support was instrumental in establishing a Kurdish autonomous zone in 1991 through Operation Provide Comfort.²³

5. **Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

Yes. The Iraqi government has had an established military force, comprised of an army, air force, and navy, since 1921.²⁴ By 1961, the army had engaged in several conflicts, including the Anglo-Iraqi War, the Arab-Israeli wars, and the Yom Kippur War. Iraq's army was the fifth-largest military in the world in 1991.²⁵

Outcome

The Iraqi government lost. The Kurdish independence movement outlasted multiple Iraqi governments and continues to this day. Following the humanitarian assistance and the establishment of the haven by the United States and other countries, Kurds gained an autonomous territory and held elections. Nevertheless, clashes between the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led to a civil war. Soon after, terrorist organizations that opposed both the Kurds and Iraqi government emerged. This case supports the Five Factors analytical model.

IRAQ KURDS 1961–91	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	YES → NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

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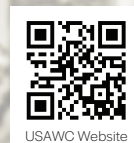
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