



Analysing the Security of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the Context of the US - Iran Conflicts Through the Lens of Regional Security Complex Theory

Rebin Siyamand Mola¹ - Shoker Abobeker Aziz²

rsm108e@irel.soran.edu.iq shoker.abobeker@soran.edu.iq

¹⁺² Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Law, Political Science and Management, Soran University, Soran, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

Abstract:

This paper discusses the geopolitical rivalries between the United States and Iran, the United States as a global power and Iran as a regional power, in the context of security dynamics in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as a tool of analysis. Although constitutionally recognized, The KRI exists as a non-state actor in a contested sphere of influence within the broader Middle Eastern Security Complex. Using a qualitative methodology and discourse analysis of political statements and events, the paper explores the effects of the American military presence and Iranian proxy activities on the domestic security of the KRI. These findings reveal that the United States has been selectively offering military assistance without politically supporting Kurdish aspirations for independence, while Iran has been putting more pressure through its proxy militia groups, missile strikes and economic pressures. These tensions were further intensified by the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani, which significantly rendering the region's vulnerability to proxy related violence. RSCT offers a critical framework for understanding the sub-state vulnerabilities in complex regional conflicts and reveals how the security of the KRI is fundamentally intertwined with the dynamics of regional power politics. Moreover, the research provides to both theoretical and practical literature about the way in which regional conflicts undermine constitutionally autonomous actors like the KRI. Eventually, the paper demonstrates that the security situation in the KRI is shaped by its entrenchment in the broader geopolitical rivalries between global and regional powers.

Keywords: Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), U.S.–Iran Rivalry, Sub-State Security, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Middle East Geopolitics.

شیکردنه‌وهی ئاسایشی ههریمی کوردستانی - عێراق له چوارچۆیهی مملانی ئهمریکا و ئێران له روانگهی تیۆری ئالۆزی ئاسایشی ههریمییه‌وه

رئیسین سیامند ملا^۱ - شوکر ابوبکر عزیز^۲

^۱ بهشی سیاسهت و په‌یوه‌ندییه‌ نیوده‌وله‌تییه‌کان، فاکه‌لی یاسا و زانسته‌ سیاسییه‌کان و به‌رپه‌بردن، زانکۆی سووران، ههریمی کوردستان، عێراق.

پوخته

ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ کاریگه‌ری و به‌ریه‌ککه‌وتنه‌کانی نیوان ئهمریکا و ئێران له‌سه‌ر ئاسایشی ههریمی کوردستانی - عێراق له‌ چوارچۆیهی تیۆری ئالۆزی ئاسایشی ههریمییه‌وه‌ شیده‌کاته‌وه‌. توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه‌ له‌سه‌ر کاراکته‌ریکی ناده‌وله‌تی وه‌ک ههریمی کوردستانی - عێراق ده‌کات که‌ له‌ پوی ده‌ستورییه‌وه‌ دانپیدا‌نراوه‌ که‌چی له‌ چوارچۆیهی ژینگه‌یه‌کی پر ئالۆز و ئاله‌نگاری راگوزهر ده‌کات، له‌ناو جوگرافیا‌یه‌کی ئاسایشی ستراتیجی رۆژه‌لاتی ناوه‌راست. توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ پشت به‌ میتۆدی چۆنایه‌تی و کۆکردنه‌وه‌ی زانیاری له‌ توێژینه‌وه‌ ئه‌کادیمییه‌ جیاوازه‌کان و لیدوانی که‌سایه‌تییه‌ سیاسییه‌کانی ناوچه‌که‌ و جیهانی ده‌به‌ستیت بۆ لیکۆلینه‌وه‌ له‌ هه‌ردو رۆلی ههریمی کوردستان - عێراق، له‌لایه‌ک وه‌ک ناوچه‌یه‌کی ستراتیژی و له‌لایه‌کیتر بونی به‌ گۆره‌پانی جه‌نگیکی به‌ وه‌کاله‌ت له‌نیوان هه‌زه‌ جیهانی و ههریمییه‌کان، بۆ فه‌راهه‌مکردنی دیدگایه‌کی جیاواز. هاوکات ده‌ره‌نجامه‌کانی ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ ده‌ریده‌خه‌ن که‌ ویلایه‌ته‌ به‌گه‌رتوه‌کانی ئهمریکا له‌نیوان پالپشتی سه‌ربازی و پرسی سه‌ربه‌خۆیی بۆ ههریمی کوردستان ته‌نها هاوکاری سه‌ربازیان پێشکه‌شکردوه‌. له‌ هه‌مان کاتدا ئێران له‌ رینگای به‌کارهێنانی میلشیاکان، شه‌ری به‌ وه‌کاله‌ت، هه‌رشه‌ی موشه‌کی و ئابلۆقه‌ی ئابوری فشاری به‌رده‌وام و کاریگه‌ریان خسته‌وته‌ سه‌ر ههریم. له‌ دیوێکی تریش تیرۆرکردنی قاسم سوله‌یمانی له‌ ساڵی ۲۰۲۰دا په‌ره‌سه‌ندنێکی به‌رچاو بو له‌ به‌ ئامانج گرتنی ههریمی کوردستانی عێراق، و تیوه‌گلاندنی زیاتری له‌ به‌ریه‌ککه‌وتنه‌کانی ناوچه‌که‌دا. بۆیه‌ له‌ ئیستادا ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ له‌ چوارچۆیهی تیۆری ئالۆزی ئاسایشی ههریمییه‌وه‌ دیدگایه‌کی گه‌رنگمان پێشکه‌ش ده‌کات که‌ بریتیه‌یه‌ له‌وه‌ی ئاسایشی کیانیکی ناده‌وله‌تی به‌ قوڵی له‌ گه‌ل هه‌ر په‌ره‌سه‌ندنێکی سیاسه‌تی ده‌سه‌لاتی ناوچه‌که‌ په‌یوه‌ست بوه‌. سه‌ره‌رای ئهمه‌ش، توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ رۆنکردنه‌وه‌و به‌ژداریه‌کی کارا پێشکه‌ش ده‌کات بۆ تیگه‌یشتن له‌وه‌ی که‌چۆن مملانییه‌ ههریمییه‌کان کاریگه‌ری له‌سه‌ر کاراکته‌ره‌ ناده‌وله‌تییه‌کانی وه‌ک ههریمی کوردستانی-عێراق دروست ده‌کات.

وشه‌ کلیلیه‌کان: تیۆری ئالۆزی ئاسایشی ههریمی، ههریمی کوردستانی - عێراق، به‌ریه‌ککه‌وتنه‌کانی ئهمه‌ریکا- ئێران، جیۆپۆله‌تیکی رۆژه‌لاتی ناوه‌راست، ئاسایشی کاره‌کته‌ره‌ ناده‌وله‌تییه‌کان.

Introduction:

The Middle East remains one of the most volatile and contested strategic regions in the world. As part of this complexity, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq is constitutionally recognised. The KRI occupies a strategically significant location where regional and international security interests interconnect. It has been a central part of post-Saddam Iraq, ever since it became a political actor after the 1991 Gulf War, then after with its autonomy formally recognised in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution. Nevertheless, the KRI still faces conflicting influence from superpowers like the United States and Iran as a regional power (Nicola, 2024; Akturk, 2022).

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by the Copenhagen School, presents a comprehensive framework that can guide security issues linked together at the regional level. The RSCT focuses attention on geographical proximity across states, rivalries between states, and changes in alliances that establish longstanding tendencies of security interdependence (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003; Jarzabek, 2018). The given approach has found extensive application in such areas as the Persian Gulf, South Asia as well as the Levant, which indicates the importance of sub-state actors and the compensatory results of outside interventions (Airlangga et al., 2024; Issa & Qader, 2021; Grabowski, 2020). Despite being theoretically powerful, research on Middle East conducted through the lens of RSCT has had the tendency to favour the state level, thus are commonly negligent of the role played by sub-state players such as the KRI.

The literature often assumes that the KRI is a passive beneficiary of intervention instead of an active subject within the regional security framework (Lawson, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2016; Bakhawan, 2024). This lapse has created a significant gap in knowledge of how external rivalries, especially between the United States and Iran influence the internal security dynamics in the KRI. Strategic instrumentalism is highly stressed in the literature regarding U.S. relations with the Kurdish. The U.S. policy has been shifting between tactical assistance and political prudence, which was evident when the U.S. denied the Kurdish independence request in 2017 despite a significant number of security-related cooperation efforts against ISIS (Romano et al., 2017).

The historical analysis, in turn, shows a trend of short-lasting alliances with sudden cancellations, such as the Algiers Agreement of 1975 (Mertek, 2020; Sari, 2019). Finally, Iran has mixed the more rational approach of providing support with more coercive methods to maintain regional leverage. Since 2003, Tehran has increased its influence in Iraq through Shia politics and militant groups (Krylov et al., 2024). Besides this, the KRI has been the specific target of over 50 missile and drone attacks by Iran between 2020 and 2024, as the KRI has also collaborated with the U.S. and Israel (Rasul & Bakhawan, 2024). Notwithstanding several compelling research undertakings, a definite lacuna exists in methodically studying how the U.S. and Iran geopolitical conflict exerts pressure on the KRI's internal security structure through the prism of Regional Security Complex Theory. Although scholars have reported Iran's mobilization (Wastnidge & Mabon, 2023; Uzun et al., 2023) and the U.S. use of selective military alliances (Romano et al., 2017), there are fewer systematic

empirical studies that use RSCT on the KRI. Such a dearth of theoretical and empirical integration presents an obvious gap (Issa & Qader, 2021; Jarzabek, 2018).

The present study attempts to bridge this gap by employing Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to examine the role of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as a non-state actor in the Middle East Regional Security Complex. The empirical evidence includes documented tendencies such as Iranian missile and drone attacks on the KRI (Rasul & Bakhawan, 2024), political marginalization by Baghdad and the United States, the strategic ambivalence of the U.S after the 2017 referendum (Palani & Fazil, 2023). This research empirically confirms this situation by relating these occurrences to theoretical propositions of RSCT especially those concerning of buffer zones and security interdependence (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003) which claims that the KRI is both a target and a player in regional security dynamics. Lawson (2014) covers regional spillover effects resulting from the Syrian civil war; but it fails to integrate the significant sub-state actors like Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Similarly, (Jarzabek, 2018) describes the Middle East as being dominated by ongoing conflicts, without actually examining the non-state actor such as the KRI. The study by Grabowski (2020) uses RSCT to the Persian Gulf region and is oriented selectively in the state-centered aspects of oil security and interstate competition. As much as (Issa and Qader, 2021) contribute by explaining the vulnerabilities of the Kurds after 2017, the authors are quite limited in their coverage and, therefore, not put into the bigger picture of the strategic duel between two powers, i.e., between the United States and Iran.

Despite these observations, little effort has been made to analyze the impact of U.S. Iranian Geopolitics in creating competing pressures in the security framework of the KRI from the prospective systemic framework. Addressing this gap is crucial, as it would enable our understanding to better comprehend techniques that have been used by sub-state actors to become targets as much as to target in complex regional security dynamics. This paper aims to address such a gap by using the Regional Security Complex Theory to examine the role of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It also focuses on how the geopolitical conflict between Iran and the United States influences the political and military security environment of the KRI. The main question in this chapter is the following: How does the U.S. - Iran geopolitical rivalry affect the political and military security of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the context of Regional Security Complex Theory? Through analysing military interventions, proxy warfare, political marginalisation and economic coercion, this study presents an integrated, factually supported examination of the KRI security status within a very interdependent regional system.

Methodology:

The interpretive approach to research supports the qualitative methodological approach adopted in this study, as it is considered suitable for explaining complex social and political phenomena, particularly those related to regional security processes. This approach adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance and focuses on subjective political and security processes within the Middle East affected by individual understandings and connections. The following analysis takes

discourse analysis of political histories, official report, and secondary academic sources into consideration. The objective of this study is not to draw generalizable conclusions but rather to provide an in-depth analysis of how global and regional powers, particularly the United States and Iran, may influence the political security dynamics of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRI) within the context of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

Purposive sampling methodology was adopted, whereby particular political statements relevant to the U.S.–Iran conflict, official reports, policy documents, and scholarly studies regarding the topic of U.S.–Iran rivalry and proxy war, and the security of the KRI, were selected. The specific scope of the study mainly focuses on the time frame from January 2020 until the end of 2024, with the key landmark event in regional security being the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. Following this event, Iran drastically increased its missile and drone attacks on KRI territory, with over 50 attacks during this period. The period allows the analysis to focus on retaliatory violence, proxy warfare, and coalition building that have shaped the security of the KRI.

Non-state actors, including regions or autonomous territories, are sub units that involve in international relations through the practice of paradiplomacy, allowing them to pursue their own engagements in trade negotiations, cultural exchange, and even diplomatic representations. The KRI is also an example of this, as it is constitutionally recognized as an autonomous region that manages its foreign relations within the framework of Iraq's federal system (Dolamari, 2021; Munir et al., 2024). States engaged in multilevel diplomacy challenge state-centric narratives.

A proxy war refers to a type of military conflict in which states fight through the involvement of third parties in order to minimize risks and loss of life. In this situation, sponsors equip their proxies with weapons, political support, and these actors act in the interest of their sponsor and in most cases, they pursue their own interests (Ahmadzada, 2024; Snyder, 2023). Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is preferred because it captures security interdependence at the regional level, which cannot be fully explained either by global systemic theories such as neorealism or by domestically oriented approaches alone. Unlike realism, which emphasizes the logic of the state-centric balance of power in the international system, RSCT highlights interlinked security dynamics among geographically proximate actors. This approach also allows for a combination of systemic, regional, and unit-level analysis. Thus, it is useful for understanding the complexity of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRI) within the context of the rivalry between the United States and Iran and its position within the broader Middle Eastern security environment.

The study contributes to the theoretical literature by utilizing the concept of RSCT to examine non-state vulnerability, as well as the competition among international and regional powers to influence the internal security landscape of the KRI. It further explores both discursive and material securitization practices that have transformed the region into a proxy-war battleground within a contested sphere of influence shaped by ongoing geopolitical competition.

Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

The research employs Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as the main analytical tool, in order to understand the security dynamic of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), with particular reference to the geopolitical conflict between the United States and Iran. RSCT views the KRI not only as a passive object of external power but also as an active and contested subunit located within overlapping spheres of influence marked by regional patterns of interdependence and threats. First described by Buzan in his landmark book *People, States, and Fear* (1983), and further conceptualized in *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, RSCT emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional paradigms, which frequently operate within global systemic or state-centred frameworks. For example, realism tends to assume that state actors are unitary, while downplaying regional subsystems and the complex interweaving of local rivalries. Conversely, RSCT argues that security interdependence is strongest at the regional level, with states and non-state actors sharing threat perceptions as well as long-standing patterns of friendship and hostility (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003).

RSCT attempts to bridge the gap between systemic theories and unit-level analyses by highlighting the interconnected nature of conflicts and the ways they are shaped by both internal and external developments. It demonstrates that security often tends to cluster geographically based on both internal and external rivalries within regional security complexes. Furthermore, this regional security framework provides insight into how local conflicts are not isolated events but rather components of broader regional security complexes. This perspective plays a pivotal role in understanding the dynamics of regional conflicts and the need for cooperation in specific geographical conflict areas (Sadurski, 2022).

RSCT assumes that geographically adjacent states and actors constitute regional security complexes (RSCs) characterized by security interdependence. Therefore, the security structure of any state cannot be studied in isolation from that of other states (Chawvin, 2024). These interconnections are influenced by factors such as common borders, historical rivalries, territorial disputes, and strategic alliances.

RSCT categorize actors into 5 categories:

- The Global Powers, which possess the capability to project influence beyond their regions and tend to intervene in other security complexes (e.g., the United States, Russia, and China).
- Regional powers, whose interests and capabilities influence the balance of power within their respective regional complexes (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel).
- Insulators (buffer zones), which are geopolitical spaces located between adjacent complexes and do not possess highly internalized security connections but serve to buffer pressures between complexes.

- Proto-complexes, which are territories where security interdependence has begun to develop but has not yet stabilized or become institutionalized in terms of patterns of friendship and hostility.
- Sub-state Actors are sub-state entities that no matter being outside sovereign control are deeply integrated into the processes of the region and frequently play the role of vital nodes or buffer spaces in soaking up the spillage of regional conflicts.

This category is important in the study. Within the overlapping spheres of influence in the region, the KRI represents the category of sub-unit of a larger state that is strategically located within competing and overlapping sphere of influence, where great powers make it central point of proxy's warfare, military penetration, and diplomatic maneuvering (Issa & Qader2021; Stuni & Yatiban, 2018).

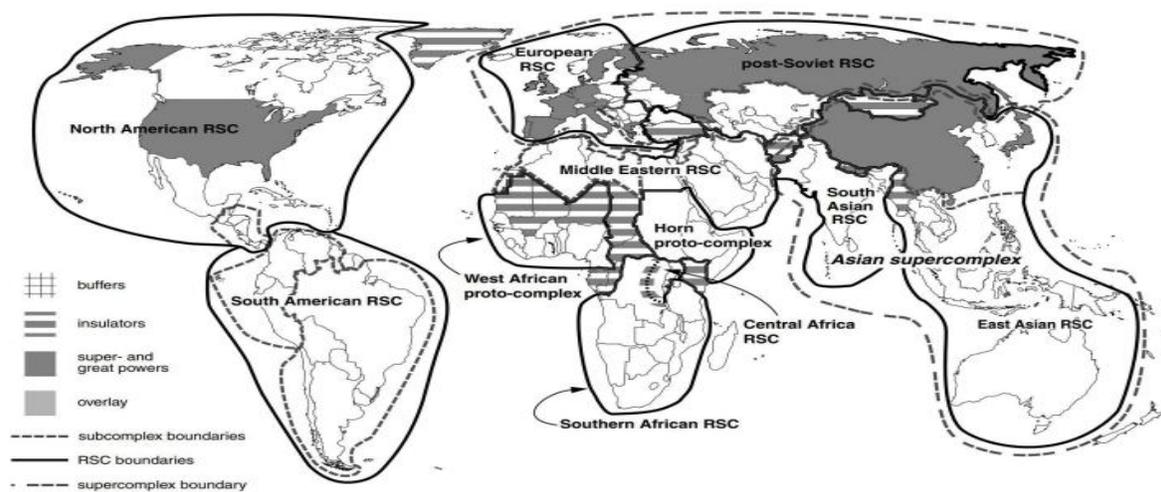


Figure 1. The world's regional security complexes map available at <https://pasqamuhamad.wordpress.com/2012/10/21/security-complex/>

Figure 1 explains the map of the World RSCs, graphically portraying them as a set of security complexes with borders of interdependence. More established complexes RSCs by e.g., (North American, European, Middle Eastern and South Asian) complexes have been represented by their borders, which underlines their relative autonomy but ongoing systemic interconnection. Global powers are followed with their capability and influence all around the world, whereas insulators are represented as entering to show their role as geopolitical buffers. Proto-complexes, such areas as the Horn of Africa and Southeast Asia, highlight in vulnerabilities in security structures. Conflict areas are identified as the areas with underscore in the areas of incessant violence whereby they destabilize the local and regional security orders. The map qualifies the argument by RSCCT that the threats to security, alliances, and rivalries are both globally and regionally located (Buzan & Waver, 2003).

The analytical strength of RSCT to discuss the role of external penetration in the development of the local security. For the KRI, this is apparent through the continued American military presence, deployment of the US army, and strategic ambiguity, particularly regarding Kurdish aspirations for independence. At the same time, Iran has pursued a policy of exerting pressure on the KRI through proxy militias, missile strikes, and indirect economic influence via Baghdad (Issa & Qader, 2021; Jarzabek, 2018). These forms of external penetration are not incidental; rather, they are structurally embedded within the Middle East regional security complex (RSC), where patterns of security interdependence simultaneously generate both cooperation and conflict. In addition, Moreover, RSCT emphasises that internal fragmentation among political actors within sub-state entities increases their vulnerability to external manipulation. In the KRI, such fragmentation has often been exploited by external actors seeking to advance their strategic objectives. This has weakened the region's ability to present a coherent position during negotiations and has made it more susceptible to proxy warfare (Stuni & Yatiban, 2018). By addressing these dynamics, RSCT moves beyond a purely descriptive account of external intervention and instead highlights the structural and relational foundations that render sub-state actors such as the KRI particularly exposed to regional security dilemmas

Other theoretical frameworks appear less adequate for analysing security dynamics in the Middle East. Realist approaches, for instance, often fail to account for proxy conflicts and the influence of sub-state forces, as they typically assume states to be unitary actors (Valensi, 2015). Liberal institutionalism tends to overestimate the presence and effectiveness of cooperative mechanisms, which remain limited in the region (Lawson, 2016). Constructivist perspectives provide valuable insights into identity formation and discursive practices; however, they may offer less comprehensive structural explanations of power relations and external intervention compared with RSCT. Without sufficient attention to local conflicts, external involvement, and patterns of regional interdependence, these approaches struggle to fully explain the security dynamics that bind the region together (MacKay & Levin, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by showing that Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) can also be applied to sub-state actors, an area that remains relatively underexplored. It demonstrates that regions such as the KRI are not only shaped by regional security dynamics but also actively contribute to them. Furthermore, the study addresses critiques that RSCT overemphasises regional coherence or overlooks local agency by highlighting the fragmented nature of alliances and strategic balancing within the Middle East. Overall, the findings reinforce the value of RSCT as a robust framework for understanding how the security conditions of sub-state actors are constructed through processes of regional interdependence. These insights deepen our understanding of the volatile security environment of the KRI and reaffirm the relevance of RSCT in analysing complex regional security systems.

Middle East as a Regional Security Complex (RSC)

The Middle East can be considered one of the most analytically valuable examples of a Regional Security Complex (RSC), making it a useful case to demonstrate the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. Regional interactions represent the best way to observe security dynamics through the lens of RSCT, where states that are geographically linked together tend to exhibit mutually dependent threat perceptions (Buzan & Waever, 2003). In this context, the Middle East has been categorized as a perennial conflict formation, whereby rivalries, ideological conflicts, and endemic arrangements of insecurity are consistently present (Buzan & Waever, 2003, pp. 187-218). It is this conceptual foundation that prevents simple solutions to security concerns in the region, which is highly interdependent. Most importantly, RSCT also concerns non-state actors.

RSCT redefined the study of security by shifting attention from mainly focusing on a state-centric approach to one that emphasizes the role of non-state actors as well. Security threats and interactions are not restricted only to states but also extend across sub-state actors, transnational movements, and non-state forces that may significantly impact regional stability. These include non-state actors such as semi-autonomous regions, insurgent groups, and transnational militant groups, which Buzan and Waever (2003) noted as significant to the functioning of regional security complexes. These actors exert considerable influence over behavioural patterns through their positions and interventions. They are analytically significant because their involvement often creates new dependencies and enables threats to spread across borders (Buzan & Waever, 2003, pp. 40-42).



Figure 2. The regional security complexes of the Middle East and conflict zones.

Available at: <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2023/03/04/iraq-and-syria-kurdish-autonomous-regions-under-threat/>

Figure 2 indicates the key roles of Middle Eastern actors predominantly Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia all of which have strategic positioning that allows them to exert much influence beyond the regional boundaries. These states centres of the region often involve proxy wars and ideological battles particularly in Iraq and Iran where there exist intermingling spheres of influence that add to security tensions. The dynamics of the Middle East RSC is greatly enhanced by the rivalry between the United States and Iran, especially within the territory of Iraq. Since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq and mainly the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has become a central strategic zone of contention between the United States and Iran.

Iran has deployed proxy militia including the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) to extend their control and oppose the United States presence. On the other hand, the U.S., has determined Kurdish forces in order to safeguarding the region and restriction the influence of the Iranians. The other important escalation point occurred during the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, which prompted the Iranian retaliatory measures through sending missiles and drones to target Kurdish regions perceived as pro-American and aligned with Israel interests (Rasul, 2024 ; Qadir,2024). This competition has a detrimental impact on the greater Middle Eastern regional security complex of furthering the sectarian and geopolitical divisions. Iran's reliance on their proxies and coercive diplomacy adds to the regional security dilemma, the strong influence of the neighboring states is making them modify their security policies.

Besides, the Middle East RSC is further complicated by ethnic and sectarian fragmentation. The region has various identity groups like the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Jews, and Kurds, and splinted along the sectarian Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. These identity cleavage act to be lines that fueling rivalries and proxy wars. The polarization of ideological and circulations of transnational interference continue in exploiting these divisions (Hinnebusch, 2016 & Kumarasamy et al. 2024). The Middle East has also consistently positioned collective security mechanism due to ongoing hostilities such as the Arab Israel conflict, inter-Arab wars, Kurdish insurgencies, and the rivalry among the Gulf States. The Arab Spring (2011-2013) further emphasized the point that how internal conflict in one country can easily spread to become a regional conflict (Lawson, 2014). This illustrates one of the fundamental RSCT assumptions: intra-state shocks frequently causing wave consequences throughout entire regional security complex, which involving both regional and external powers.

Also, involvement of external powers further sustaining the Middle East as a functioning RSC. Whereas RSCT focuses on the geographical proximity, but it is aware of the external penetration. Historically, The United States and the Soviet Union have had a significant participation in the conflicts that have been going on in the Middle East such as the Gulf War of 1991 and the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003. These interventions changed the power structures in the regions but did not halt the inherent security interdependence of the region (Grabowski, 2020). Rather, external interventionism usually intensified the present tensions, which proves the fact that the security complex persists despite the external pressures.

To sum up, the Middle East can be described as a case of the structural properties of an RSC: the existence of constant war, cleavage of identity, geopolitical conflict, and the presence of extensive foreign intervention. These features make it a complete security complex. The interdependence of the region is well represented by the RSCT which points out regional and international political and security outcomes, as inextricably interconnected.

To sum up, the Middle East can be described as a case of the structural properties of an RSC: the existence of constant war, cleavage of identity, geopolitical conflict, and the presence of extensive foreign intervention. These features make it a complete security complex. The interdependence of the region is well represented by the RSCT which points out regional and international political and security outcomes, as inextricably interconnected.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region as a unit of the Regional Security Complex Theory in the Middle East.

Although the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRI) is constitutionally recognised as a political actor within the Iraqi state, it also enjoys a significant geopolitical relevance as a sub- unit within the greater Middle East Regional Security Complex (RSC). Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) states that the regional security dynamics emerge from a high degree (Buzan & Waeber, 2003). These characteristics of the KRI clearly reflect important elements of the RSCT framework, as it is located between four interrelated states involved in conflict, namely Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. It also faces both internal and regional rivalries.

The KRI occupies overlapping spheres of influence determined by geography, multi-ethnic identity, and strategic positioning. The Kurdish population spans several states, reinforcing the connection between ethnic identity, state security, and regional stability (Bakhawan, 2022; Rasul, 2024). The Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria have long been epicentres of domestic unrest and cross-border conflict, destabilizing national borders and often aggravated by external interventions. The KRI, specifically, is a strategically contested area and has been targeted by different regional and global powers, including the Iranian IRGC, Turkish military forces, U.S. troops, and Iranian-backed militias.

Although the KRI does not have formal sovereignty, it has achieved extraordinary geopolitical importance within regional security systems (Stuni & Yatiban, 2018). Its location within the broader U.S.–Israel versus Iran conflict has increased its strategic value. The symbolic construction and political portrayal of the region as aligned with Israel, despite the lack of a direct Israeli presence, depend largely on such perceptions. In addition, Iran has launched over 50 missile and drone attacks on KRI and U.S. positions since 2022 (Rasul, 2024).

This pattern reflects the RSCT concept of external overlay, whereby local agency is constrained by larger strategic competitions. The sub-unit status of the KRI in a regional security complex subjects it to increased securitisation when it is perceived to serve the interests of foreign powers. This

construction of the KRI as part of an external adversarial alignment makes it a soft target within an inherently unstable security environment (Issa & Qader, 2021).

Internally, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have also been divided, which has undermined military and political unity (Grabowski, 2020). These internal differences make the region more vulnerable to external manipulation, reducing its ability to maintain coherent policies and stable security structures. Such intra-state conflicts are not only a domestic governance challenge but also contribute to regional vulnerability, especially when external powers exploit these divisions to exert influence.

To sum up, the KRI as a conflict-prone sub-unit involved in overlapping spheres of influence fits well with the RSCT conceptualisation of regional security interdependence. It illustrates central aspects of the theory, including strong connections with external power relations, exposure to strategic overlay, and internal fragmentation that invites external influence. The region's pivotal location, combined with structural vulnerabilities, guarantees that it will remain a central component of the Middle Eastern RSC. Consequently, RSCT provides a powerful analytical approach for understanding the pressures and vulnerabilities shaping the security environment of the KRI; however, it may need to be complemented by other perspectives that capture the deeper political and identity-based dimensions of internal conflicts that RSCT alone may not fully explain.

U.S. Relations with the Kurds

The United States as a global super power, has had a significant impact on the security process of the Middle East, especially following the toppling of the Baath regime in Iraq in 2003. This intervention changed the balance of powers in the region and moved the Iraqi Kurdistan Region to the orientation of satisfying the American strategic interests. Within this extensive geopolitical context, the Kurdish question particularly relates to the Iraqi Kurdish arises as a major, but complicated, aspect of the American involvement in the region.

Historically, The United States policy towards the Kurds has always been influenced by the combination of strategic, political and humanitarian concerns. Such contradicting priorities have resulted in contradicting results, representing the tensions between geopolitical expediencies and Kurdish demands of autonomy (Romano et al., 2017; Charountaki, 2010). Such tensions are also defined by the shift in levels of support and conditional alliances, which are based on strategic calculations and also in line with neorealist and client supporter relations theories.

During the Cold War period, The American policy towards the Middle East was influenced and dominated largely by the rationale of Soviet influence. As a result, the U.S. making alliances with local powers including Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. At this time, The Kurdish issues was not importance in the U.S. calculations. It was only when the Iraqi Russian Friendship Treaty went through in 1972, the Kurdish question truly began to gain some traction by using the Kurdish as insurgency not to support Kurdish self-determination, but instead to destabilize a Soviet backed government by providing covert (Sari, 2019). This reflected a classic realist approach, balance of power logic,

anticipation of short-term tactical advantage over securing normative commitments (Mertek, 2020).

The transactional character was strictly exhibited in 1975, when the Algiers Agreement signed between Iran and Iraq prompted Tehran discontinue its material assistance to the Kurdish rebellion. As such, the U.S. in turn, takes back its undercover support, instead left Kurdish forces at the mercy of a retaliatory violence executed by the Baathist regime. This sudden retirement severely hurt the Kurds trust and revealed the weakness of non-state actors that rely on the fluctuating relationships with the superpowers (Mertek, 2020; Sari, 2019). This trend is like that of the United States involvement with other sub state actors, in the case of YPG in Syria, tactical value often supersedes long term investments.

A significant shift took place following the 1991 Gulf War, when a no-fly zone was set up over northern Iraq and helped to create an autonomous Kurdish territory. This development, was later formalized with the establishment of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Between 1991- 2003, furthered international engagement employs as a strategic humanitarian support, where the humanitarian activities were strategically interrelated with linked to maintenance geographic stability. During this period, Washington helped in the self-governance of the Kurdish but left the ambiguity regarding complete independence (Romano et al. 2017; Charountaki, 2010). This ambiguity reflected American concerns that alienating Turkey could destabilize its NATO ally, jeopardized, Iraq's territorial integrity, and struggle the U.S. to support its allies in the Kurdish forces with the maintain its alliances in the region as a whole. From 2003-2011, the U.S. invasion of Iraq further strengthening political and military standing of the KRG, allowing it to exercise significant role in a divided Iraq state. However, this empowerment was not unconditional. U.S. policy still continued to assess the Kurdish ambitions based on the issue of regional stability, a stance later illustrated in its opposition on the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. Although the Kurdish forces have been helping in the anti-ISIS campaign, the U.S. diplomacy have emphasised on Iraqi territorial integrity. This reflects the strategic conditionality aligned with the perspectives of the alliance theory, confirmed by broader systematic geopolitical consideration (Palani & Fazil, 2023).

The rise of ISIS furthermore developed the Kurd's reputations as effective battlefield partners. The Peshmerga made a great success in the counterterrorist operations, and they were honoured worldwide because of their contributions. Nevertheless, these operational alliances failed to generate the political support that lasted U.S. reluctance to support Kurdish independence reflected not only its interest to creating friction with a NATO ally Turkey but also its interest in the Iraq's territorial integrity (Charountaki, 2010 & Blanchard, 2017). Such a pattern illustrates of high dependence of the Kurdish on the U.S., whose alliances has much more geographical and strategic interests than by normative or ideological commitments. Ultimately, the Kurdish relations with the U.S. have been typified by cyclical and calculated strategic interactions as opposed to long-term ideological solidarity.

Finally, institutional difference in the U.S. foreign policy further contributes to an ambivalent and conditionally of its supports for the Kurds. This replicates of wider trends in U.S engagement with Substate actors, highlighting their complexities and contradictions that are inherent in U.S involvement in fragmented regional security orders.

Period	Key events / policy	Analytical Layer
1945-1990	Covert Support for Kurdish insurgency against Baathist regime: withdrawal after 1975 Algiers Agreement	Cold war Realism
1991-2003	Establishment of No-fly zone: mediation in Kurdish civil war: Washington Agreement.	Strategic Humanitarianism
2003-2011	US. Lead invasion: consolidation of Kurdish autonomy: Control of Kirkuk oil fields	Tactical Alliance under Neorealism
2011-2024	Fight against ISIS: 2017 independence referendum: ambivalence toward Kurdish autonomy	Conditional Strategic Alliance

Table 1: Key events and policies in US. – Kurdish relations (1945-2024)

Iran's as a Regional Power in the Middle East: Historical Relationships and Rivalries with the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

Iran possesses a long history of prominent roles in the Middle East region, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) experienced Iranian impact, and it is of important geopolitical interests. In the Regional Security Complex (RSCT) framework, with mission's hegemony through both military and ideological means, articulated of such tactic such as the "Axis of Resistance" and the "Shia Crescent". This dual strategy encompasses military influence which are manifested through proxies of militias, direct interventions, and ideological influence based sectarian solidarity towards Shia populations around the region (Bongers, 2012; Giovannangeli, 2018). Moreover, Iran's influence is therefore does not characterized by their geopolitics alone but rather, by wider common security interest and regional calculations. Its role as a hegemonic actor in the region expanded mainly following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and has been increased immediately in the aftermath of October 7, 2023, Hamas-Israel confrontation.

Historically, Iran had a policy of hostility toward the Iraqi Kurdistan because of its enmity with the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. In helping Kurdish groups, Tehran was keen not to encourage Kurdish nationalism in a manner that would encourage unrest among Iranian Kurds (Bongers, 2012; Giovannangeli 2018). This strategy has been referred to as strategic ambiguity since it tried to support resistance movements in Iraq on one hand and limit the ambitions of the Kurds on the other. The consequence relationship was ambiguous and usually short-term, more characterized by tactical cooperation than partnership.

The collapse of Saddam Hussein in 2003 led to a major shift in the Iranian position in Iraq commonly known as the “Rise of Iran”. The failure of the Baath regime left a vacuum that Tehran could exceptionally easily fill given a multidimensional approach: the building of alliances with Shia political elites and paying off militia networks and the economic interdependence of entrenchment. The fact that Iran supported organizations like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist movement made it more stable in the process of becoming a power broker (Cepoi & Lazar, 2013; Felter & Fishman, 2008; Jathoom, 2024). This expansionist policy was to contain the American dominance and influence the new order in Iraq. In the case of the KRI, it referred to working in a rather complicated environment, where the influence of Iran started to coincide more with Kurd political autonomy and Kurd security interests.

The emergence of ISIS in 2014 gave Iran another opportunity to extend its security strategy to the region. Iran has consolidated its military presence in Iraq by bolstering its military hegemony with the Axis of Resistance and the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). For the KRI, it meant increased regional security interdependence: PMU intervention activity across its border reinforced the exposure of KRI as a subunit that has been compromised in the RSC framework (Wastnidge & Mabon, 2023). The Iraqi Kurds referendum in 2017 presents one of the most significant events that further intensified regional securitization. Perceiving the Kurdish independence to be an existential threat to regional order and state sovereign, Iran worked very closely with Baghdad and Ankara to isolate the KRI in terms of economy and diplomacy. Such an event highlighted the structural weakness of the KRI’s sovereignty, highlighting its limited political activities within the larger regional system which dominated by grater regional actor (Navasardyan et al., 2023).

Iran’s respond to the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, and the further escalation of Israel Gaza again confirmed its status as the leader of the Axis of Resistance Tehran was able to extend its influence through its proxies, many of which are situated close to the KRI territory, and those are contributing to the instability in the region. The use of the PMU along the Kurdish borders with Iraq and Syria provides an indication of how the RSCT dynamic is being influenced by external powers: U.S. tensions with Iran consume local agency and place the KRI in the path of conflicts outside of its control (Rudolf & Krylov, 2024).

Furthermore, these strategies exemplify the asymmetric and ideological warfare that Iran purports to influence the region security climate without direct occupying. For the KRI, this produces a fragile security context: as the region constantly threatened with external attacks and internally weakened due to its loss of independent security ability. The strategic orientation regarding the KRI among Iran lies deep beyond its perception of Shia Crescent a geopolitical crescent which links Tehran to Lebanon and is activating in form of Axis of Resistance. This international group, functioning in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, serves as the expansion of the Iranian ideology and security spreading. In particular, such sectarian solidarity as the mobilization of Shia is a key part of the strategy which relegates Sunni and Kurdish actors to the backburner (Uzun et al., 2023). In the case of Kurdistan, the ideological spread has been limited because of

ethnic and political divisions, and Iran has had to resort more to coercion than soft power. However, the KRI would continue to be a pivot of Iran regional considerations.

To sum up, the transformation of Iran into a regional hegemon military, ideologically, and geopolitically has had a strong impact on the security and political dynamic in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Whether in opposing Saddam Hussein to playing a proxy network after the defeat of ISIS, Iranian policy has been grounded in pragmatism, ideology, and geopolitical ambition. All these pivots of 2003, ISIS in 2014, referendum in 2017, and after the war in 2023, demonstrated that how Iran's strategies are shifted within the frameworks of the Shia Crescent and Axis of Resistance. With regional tensions intensifying, the KRI are therefore structurally weak, caught between its aspiration of independence and the geopolitical ambition of a hegemonic neighbour. Iran's role will therefore continue to be central in analysing the complicated regional power dynamics, identity struggles, and interdependence of security in the Middle East.

U.S.–Israel Strategic Alignment against Iran in the Middle East.

An important aspect of the Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex (RSC) is the evolving strategic relationship between the United States and Israel, which is primarily focused on countering Iran and has intensified since 2020. According to Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), regional security is the result of patterns of amity and enmity among geographically proximate actors. Within this framework, it is possible to observe regional polarity in which Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia function as different poles (Divsallar, 2023). This strategic tightening of cooperation between the U.S. and Israel has therefore had important regional repercussions, strengthening Israel's position relative to Iran and changing alignments in ways that impact non-polar actors such as the KRI.

The expansion of Iran's nuclear capacities, missile capabilities, and its large network of regional proxies, including Hezbollah, the PMU, Iraqi militias, and the Houthis, has led both the United States and Israel to perceive Iran as an existential threat. This has resulted in intensified defense collaboration, command-sharing mechanisms, and closer political coordination, particularly through the increasing integration of Israel into U.S. Central Command operations (Jahanbani & Levy, 2023). These developments reflect key characteristics of RSCT, which describe security interdependence as actors aligning in response to common threats. Combined covert operations and integrated defense systems demonstrate increasing retaliatory dynamics in response to perceived threats initiated by Iran, thereby magnifying the risks of escalation.

Iranian activities have also transformed regional alignments, with the Abraham Accords opening the possibility of unprecedented cooperation between Israel and several Sunni Arab states (Rohulia, 2023). This shift represents changing dynamics in the region that have produced a clearer strategic axis between the U.S., Israel, and some Sunni states against Iran's regional influence. In this context, sub-units such as the KRI are transformed into spaces of indirect securitization, where spillover effects from heightened regional rivalries are absorbed. The KRI is perceived as being

protected by the U.S., which in turn increases the likelihood of Iranian proxy attacks, as Tehran views this subunit as an increasingly vulnerable target within the broader U.S.–Israel confrontation (Rasul & Bakhawan, 2024).

To conclude, the strengthening of U.S.–Israel strategic relations after 2020 reflects RSCT's conceptualization that regional polarity and security interdependence contribute to the reconfiguration of regional security arrangements in response to heightened threat perceptions, particularly regarding Iran. As a result, subunits such as the KRI become indirectly securitized and function as frontier zones that absorb the spillover effects of broader strategic confrontation.

The Consequences of the Iran-US Conflict on the political and military security dynamics of the KRI.

Following the fall of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has emerged one of the most securitized subunits of the within the Middle Eastern regional security complex. Its strategic value rose even more when it was absorbed into the U.S. Counterterrorism strategy against Al-Qaeda and subsequently ISIS. In the meantime, Iran attempted to counter the influence of the U.S. by gaining political leverage in Baghdad and mobilizing the proxy militias, at the cost of Kurdish interests (Abrahms, 2023; Issa & Qader, 2021). This indicates the structural logics of Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex (RSC) in which subunits such as the KRI belong to threat diffusion system which is influenced by alliances structure as well as regional insecurities.

A major turning point was during the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani in the January 2020. Iran responded with direct missile attacks on American facilities in Iraq, including some in KRI, thus opening the region to the threat of foreign security overlay. In the period between 2020 and 2024, there have been more than 50 drone and missile attacks on Kurdish territories (Rasul & Bakhawan, 2024). As presented in Table 2, these were artillery bombardments on the borders, drone and missile attacks on opposition forces and the high profile missile attack on Erbil in January 2024 that hit a residential area and killed civilians including a prominent Kurdish businessman.

IRGC Iraq Attacks (2020-2024)				
Date	Location	Attack Type	Target (Claimed)	Actual Impact
2020	Borders areas in Erbil and Sulaimani	Artillery, Shelling & drone strikes	KDPI, Komala, PJAK Bases	Border villages damaged, civilian displaced
Sep 28, 2021	Choman, Sidekan (Erbil)	Drones & Artillery	Kurdish Opposition groups	Damage to rural areas; civilian evacuation

Mar 13	Erbil near U.S. Consulate	Ballistic Missiles (Fateh-110)	Alleged Mossad Base	Building damaged; no confirmed intel presence
Sep 28-29, 2022	Koya, Sulaimaniyah, Erbil outskirts	Drone & missile bombardment	KDPI & Komala HQ's	14 Killed, including women and children, wounded many others
Nov 14-20, 2022	Erbil & Sulaimaniyah	Drone and missile strike	Iranian Kurdish armed groups	Camps hit; civilian homes damaged; multiple injures
Late 2023	Border regions	Artillery	PJAK cells claimed	Ongoing fear & displacement; no major casualties reported
Jan 15,2024	Erbil residential area	Missile strike	Alleged Israeli intelligence site	4 civilians killed , including Kurdish notable Businessman

Table 2 IRGC Attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan (2020-2024)

This timeline of the attack indicates an escalatory trajectory: from artillery bombardments in 2020 to increasingly followed by bombardments with precision missiles strikes in 2024. Each step of violence indicated the increasing cohesive infiltration and political military pressure of Iran on Erbil.

The assassination of Soleimani also triggered Iran's to use a soft coercion, through making demands to the Iraqi parliament to seek withdrawal of US forces. In January of 2020, the Shiite parties passed a resolution demanding the withdrawal of the U.S. forces, which boycotted by the Kurdish political parties (Rasul, 2024). This, along with the Iranian threats, marginalization the Kurds in Iraq and Iran's potential of to exercise soft coercion by using institutional manipulation.

The January 15, 2024, missile attack on the Iraqi Kurdish capital Erbil that was officially justified as an attempt to strike an Israeli intelligence center was symbolically valuable. Neutrality does not provide immunity: the message that Tehran conveyed (Qadir, 2024). It highlighted the readiness of Iran to violate the territory of KRI in the name of deterrence and the boundaries of the Kurdish neutrality. In addition to the military pressures, Iran employed economic means, namely, the control over the oil exportation and the holding of budgetary expenditures at bay, further limiting the autonomy of the KRI (Abrahms, 2023). This dual approach coercion military, political, and economic, claims RSCT's insights that the regional powers utilize a diversity instruments of enforce threat to securitize subunits.

Despite these factors, the KRI tried to establish itself as an independent negotiator between Washington and Tehran, not to be turned into a proxy. Its semi-independence and low sovereignty

were the factors that restricted its capability to resist foreign aggression. The continuity of IRGC attacks, over 50 in 2020-24, shows that the KRI is not just a spectator in the Iran-U.S. rivalry but an institutionally embedded battleground of the proxy war (Issa & Qader, 2021; Bakhawan, 2024).

Finally, regional escalations, particularly October the 2023 Hamas Israel conflict have further destabilized the KRI by exacerbating Iranian pressure and broadening the spectrum of regional insecurities. These revelations affirm the KRI's status as a contested sub state area within the transnational security architecture, aligning with RSCT's conception of regional security interdependence is profoundly interdependence. In conclusion, the Iran-US conflict has turned KRI into a more unsecure and vulnerable western ally, which is being bombarded with missiles, economically coerced, and institutionally isolated. Hence, these developments confirm RSCT's insight that subunits autonomy within the Middle Eastern RSC and confirms that the KRI security is continuously recalibrated by external pressures rather than internal agency.

Conclusion

In this study, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) was utilised to examine the transformations political and military security landscape of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) within strategic geopolitical rivalry between the United States and Iran. The KRI, as a semi-autonomous region and subunit, is structurally vulnerable within the Middle East security complex, a condition that renders it highly susceptible to coercive and opportunistic intervention by external powers. The research question examines how security dynamics and political interventions in the KRI have been shaped in the context of the Iran–U.S. rivalry and the broader regional security environment. Through qualitative analysis and event mapping, the study demonstrates that the KRI has become a strategically penetrated subunit characterised by overlapping regional security dynamics.

The findings indicate that the KRI operates in an environment marked by persistent patterns of amity and enmity. Its cooperation with U.S. interests has triggered Iranian retaliation on military, political, and economic fronts. The influence of Iran-affiliated militias has created an external security overlay that has embedded the KRI within transnational threat networks beyond its direct control. In contrast, American intervention has been selective in providing military support while remaining politically cautious, particularly regarding Kurdish aspirations for independence following the war against ISIS. This asymmetry has intensified the KRI's security interdependence within the regional security complex, where domestic security challenges cannot be separated from broader regional rivalries.

The assassination of Qassem Soleimani in 2020 marked a turning point that led to a series of escalating threats and attacks, including more than fifty missile and drone strikes by late 2024. These developments effectively transformed the KRI into a proxy-war battleground. This pattern reflects the RSCT concept of threat diffusion, illustrating not only the geographical exposure of subunits but also their limited agency within coercive regional systems. At the same time, the chapter recognises the limitations of RSCT. Although the framework is effective in explaining how

the KRI is shaped by regional instability, other state-centric theoretical approaches fail to capture identity-based political dynamics, such as Kurdish nationalism and internal political divisions. Furthermore, RSCT often underestimates the potential for desecuritisation, whereas the KRI has occasionally sought to reduce tensions through diplomatic balancing and economic normalisation with regional actors. Overall, the study argues that the KRI's security posture has been continuously renegotiated as a result of its incorporation into the Iran–U.S. rivalry. Although constitutionally recognised as an autonomous region, the KRI remains operationally constrained in the face of regional interventions and international uncertainty. Its capacity to maintain autonomy is likely to remain limited as long as Iraqi federal institutions remain contested and geopolitical competition between Iran and the United States persists

In conclusion, RSCT provides a valuable framework for analysing how sub-state actors such as the KRI can simultaneously be both products and producers of instability within the regional security arena. Its conceptual tools, particularly those related to subunit dynamics, security overlay, and threat interdependence, help explain the structural conditions within which the KRI operates. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive understanding of Kurdish security requires engagement with perspectives that extend beyond RSCT, especially those addressing identity politics, intra-regional rivalries, and mechanisms of political integration. Ultimately, the Iran–U.S. conflict has drawn the KRI more deeply into the wider regional security complex, where it functions both as a participant in and a contributor to ongoing security processes. The security of the KRI, therefore, cannot be analysed in isolation but must be understood as closely intertwined with the strategic interests and conflicts of dominant regional powers in the Middle East.

References

- Abdallah, N.A.A., 2022. *The implications of Qassem Soleimani assassination on US-Iranian relations: مجلة العلوم الاقتصادية والإدارية والقانونية. تداعيات اغتيال قاسم سليمانى على العلاقات الأمريكية الإيرانية*, 6(4), pp.141–157. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.26389/ajsrp.r040821>.
- Abdullah and Salih, 2020. *America's position on Soviet influence in Iraq (1969–1974)*. *Journal for Political and Security Studies*, 3(6), pp.155–180. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31271/jopss.10042>.
- Abdullah, A. A. (2021). *Geopolitical Perspective, in the Relations of the U.S. And Iraqi Kurdistan Region Since 2003*. 6(2), 985–1002. <https://doi.org/10.25212/LFU.QZJ.6.2.36>
- Abrahms, M., 2023. *The US-Iran Showdown: Was it Smart for President Trump to Authorize the Assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani?* In: *Springer Studies on Populism, Identity Politics and Social Justice*, pp.239–256. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36343-6_10.
- Ahmadzada, K. (2024) „Asymetryczny interwencjonizm Iranu: analiza dynamiki wojny proxy od 2011 roku”, *Przegląd Politologiczny*, (3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.14746/pp.2024.29.3.2>
- Ahmadzada, K. (2024), “Iran’s Asymmetric Interventionism: The Analysis of the Proxy Warfare Strategy Since 2011”, *Przegląd Politologiczny*, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, No. 3, pp. 27–39, doi: <https://doi.org/10.14746/pp.2024.29.3.2>
- Airlangga PH, A.R., Saputri, W.A. and Nurhakim, P.R., 2024. *Socio-religious behaviour on consumption pattern during Israel and Palestine conflict in Muslim society*. *IAS Journal of Localities*, 1(2), pp.138–152. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.62033/iasjol.v1i2.22>.
- Akbarzadeh, S. and Gourlay, W. (2023), “Proxy Wars in the Middle East”, *Informa*, pp. 326–339, available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003174066-30>
- Akturk, A.S., 2022. *Kurdish Autonomy and US Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change*. In: Eccarius-Kelly, V. and Gunter, M.M. (eds.) *Middle East Policy*, Peter Lang, p.252. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12612>.
- Akturk, A.S., 2022. *Kurdish Autonomy and US Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change*. *Middle East Policy*, 29(1), pp.176–178. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12612>.

- Bakhawan, 2024. *وهه زێکی نوێ له په یوه نهدیه کانی نیوان ئێران و هه رێمی کوردستان*. Zaman Press. [Accessed: 12 March 2025]. Available at: https://www.zamenpress.com/Detail_wtar.aspx?jimare=6439.
- Balanche, 2023. *Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat*. Groupe d'études géopolitiques. [Accessed: 13 March 2025]. Available at: <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2023/03/04/iraq-and-syria-kurdish-autonomous-regions-under-threat/>.
- Bilgin, P. (2019). *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315204123>
- Blanchard, C.M., 2017. *Kurds in Iraq Propose Controversial Referendum on Independence*. Available at: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=803927>.
- Bongers, R., 2012. *Iran's foreign policy towards post-invasion Iraq*. Available at: <http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/assets/files/students/student-journal/ug-winter-12/130213-win12-rob-bongers-4.pdf>.
- Buzan, B. and Wæver, O., 2003. *The Middle East: a perennial conflict formation*. In: *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, pp.187–218. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buzan, B., 2003. *Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World*. In: Söderbaum, F. and Shaw, T.M. (eds.) *Theories of New Regionalism*. International Political Economy Series. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403938794_8.
- Cengiz, S., 2022. *Dynamics of Saudi Arabia–KRG Relations: From 2003 Iraq War to 2017 Referendum and Beyond*. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 9(3), pp.321–340. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989221099342>.
- Cepoi, E. and Lazar, M., 2013. *The Iranian Influence in Iraq: Between Strategic Interests and Religious Rivalry*. 13(2), pp.273–285. Available at: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=246347>.
- Charountaki, M., 2010. *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203842614/kurds-us-foreign-policy-marianna-charountaki>.

CHAUVIN, E. (2024). *Security Regions*. 111–126 <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781394284375.ch8>

Coggins, B. (2011). Friends in High Places: International Politics and the Emergence of States. *International Organization*, 65(3), 433–467. Cambridge

Del Sarto, R. A. and Soler i Lecha, E. (2024) 'Regionalism and Alliances in the Middle East, 2011-2021: From a "Flash in the Pan" of Regional Cooperation to Liquid Alliances', *Geopolitics*, 29(4), pp. 1447–1473. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2268542>

Divsallar, A., 2023. The Militarization of Iran's Perception of Saudi Arabia. *The Muslim World*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12465>.

Eahya, H.A., 2020. *Iraqi-Kurds from Political Stability to Political Upheaval: 2005–2017*. *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalisation*, 96, pp.34–37. Available at: <https://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JLPG/article/download/52491/54223>.

Fazal, T.M. (2018). *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation*. Princeton University Press. Princeton

Fernando, H., Abdullah, I. and Yusuf, M., 2021. *Religion and the pandemic trap: Muslim worship post-COVID-19 in Indonesia*. *Culture and Religion*, 22(4), pp.398–415. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2023.2288344>.

Floyd, R. (2024) 'Non-state Actors and the Obligation to Securitise', in *The Duty to Secure: From Just to Mandatory Securitization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 124–147.

Floyd, R. (2024) 'Non-state Actors and the Obligation to Securitise', in *The Duty to Secure: From Just to Mandatory Securitization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 124–147. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009468947.005>

Giovannangeli, C., 2018. *La République islamique d'Iran et la question kurde: entre pensée stratégique de défense et géopolitique régionale*. 113. Available at: <https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-02539160>.

Grabowski, W., 2020. *Application of the Regional Security Complex Theory for Security Analysis in the Persian Gulf*. 68(4), pp.18–31. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.15804/ATHENA.2020.68.02>.

Hinnebusch, R., 2016. *The sectarianization of the Middle East: transnational identity wars and competitive interference*. [online] Available at: <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/9840>.

- Holt, B.D., 2014. *The Gold Standard: U.S.–Israel Military Relations*. *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 36(2), pp.111–118. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920.2014.905366>.
- Issa, S. and Qader, P., 2021. *Analysis of Military and Political Security Issues in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq Based on Barry Buzan’s Theory After 2017*. *Qalaa Zanist Scientific Journal*, 6(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25212/lfu.qzj.6.2.12>.
- Jahanbani, N. and Levy, S.W. (2023), “Iran’s Proxy War Strategy”, Informa, pp. 340–353, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003174066>
- Jarżabek, J., 2018. *The Theory of Regional Security Complexes in the Middle Eastern Dimension*. 12, pp.155–170. Available at: http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-04b92a93-42fd-439d-b10b-4f04b1c4ebe6/c/Wschodnioznawstwo_2018_2_do_druku-155-170.pdf.
- Jathoom, S., 2024. *Iran’s Foreign Policy Towards Iraq Post 2003*. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i03.23503>.
- Krylov, G.L., 2024. *Shia paramilitary groups as an instrument of Iranian influence in Iraq*. *Obshchestvennye Nauki I Sovremennost*, 1, pp.120–131. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31857/s0869049924010097>.
- Kumarasamy, A.M., Ghazal, E., Alrefai, E., Mabon, S. & Nasirzadeh, S. (ed.) (2024) *Sectarianism, De-Sectarianization and Regional Politics in the Middle East: Protest and Proxies across States and Borders*. London: I.B. Tauris. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780755639205> (Accessed: 18 July 2025).
- Kuznetsov, A.A., 2024. *The Shi’a Paramilitary Units “Al Hashd al Shaabi” in Iraqi and Regional Policy*. *Asia and Africa Today*, 6, pp.34–41. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31857/s032150750031035-0>.
- Laipson, E., & Ollivant, D. (2024). A Delicate Balance: Iraq’s Security Culture between Iran and the United States. *Survival*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2332063>
- Lawson, F.H. (2016). *International relations theory and the Middle East*. In *International Relations of the Middle East* (4th ed., pp. 21–43). Oxford University Press. Available at : https://www.academia.edu/41301770/International_Relations_of_the_MIDDLE_EAST#page=35

- Lawson, F.H., 2014. *Implications of the 2011–13 Syrian Uprising for the Middle Eastern Regional Security Complex*. Social Science Research Network, Center for International and Regional Studies. [Online] Available at: <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/707938/CIRSOccasionalPaper14FredLawson2014.pdf?sequence=5>.
- Lemke, D., 2005. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security. Perspectives on Politics*, 3(01), pp.197–198. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/regions-and-powers-the-structure-of-international-security/255E30870249ACA94043A08577A1ADDD>.
- MacKay, J., & Levin, J. (2018). A Hegelian realist constructivist account of war, identity, and state formation. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21(1), 75–100. <https://doi.org/10.1057/JIRD.2015.24>
- Mertek, S., 2020. *US and Iraqi Kurds' Relations between 1945 and 2011: An Interest-Based Policy*. *Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi İktisadi Ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 7(2), pp.252–275. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.30798/makuiibf.524881>.
- Navasardyan, N., 2023. *Resumption of the Kurdish Card in Iranian-Iraqi Relations: Complex Interplay, Pre-Referendum Realities*. *Contemporary Eurasia*, pp.31–45. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.52837/2579-2970-2023.12.2-31>.
- Nicola, S., 2024. *A Tale of Two States? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq Caught Between Conflict and Cooperation with Central Iraq (1991–2020)*. *Polish Journal of Political Science*, University of Warsaw - Interdisciplinary Research Center IDS, pp.96–126. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.58183/pjps.0402SI2024>.
- Palani, K. and Fazil, S., 2023. *Fluid State-Building in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Taking Advantage of the 2003 U.S.-Led Invasion*. *International Peacekeeping*, 30(5), pp.642–667. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2023.2236925>.
- Qadir, R., 2024. *پالنه‌ره‌کانی هێرشێ موشه‌کی ئێران بۆ سه‌ره‌هه‌رمی کوردستان*. [online] Available at: <https://rudawrc.net/sorani/article/palnerekany-hersh-mwwsheki-eran-bo-ser-heremi-kwrdsan-2024-01-17> [Accessed 23 March 2025].
- Qu, S. and Wang, J. (2024), “Sub-state Actors in International Organizations: Analysis of Local Government Involvement and Influence”, [https://doi.org/10.52152/22.1.175-195\(2024\)](https://doi.org/10.52152/22.1.175-195(2024))

- Raine, J., et al., 2024. *Iran and Israel: Everything Short of War*. *Survival*, 66(3), pp.79–90. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2357485>.
- Rasul and Bakhawan, 2024. هه‌ره‌شه ناوخۆیی و هه‌رتیمی و ده‌ره‌کییه‌کانی سه‌ر هه‌رتیمی کوردستان بۆ سالی ٢٠٢٤. *Harem News*. [Accessed 22 March 2025]. Available at: <https://haremnews.com/detailsWtar/7069>.
- Rasul, 2024. هه‌ره‌شه ناوخۆیی و هه‌رتیمی و ده‌ره‌کییه‌کانی سه‌ر هه‌رتیمی کوردستان بۆ سالی ٢٠٢٤. *Harem News*. [Accessed 13 March 2025]. Available at: <https://haremnews.com/detailsWtar/7069>.
- Rauta, V. (2020). Proxy warfare and the future of conflict: take two. *RUSI Journal*, 165(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2020.1736437>
- Rohulia, K. (2023), “The Impact of the Abraham Accords on Geopolitical Dynamics of the Middle East”, *Mediaforum*, Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, No. 13, pp. 270–287, doi: <https://doi.org/10.31861/mediaforum.2023.13.270-287>
- Romano, D., Hussein, R. and Rowe, S., 2017. *The United States and the Kurds of Iraq: Strange Allies*. In: *Between State and Non-State*, pp.177–195. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-60181-0_10.
- Roumina and Bidar, M., 2018. *The Impact of U.S Strategy on Iraqi Kurdistan from 1971 to 2014*. *Geopolitics Quarterly*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.35682/jjlp.v15i4.590>.
- Roumina, E. and Taher Bidar, M., 2018. *The Impact of U.S. Strategy on Iraqi Kurdistan from 1971 to 2014*. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 14(50), pp.1–20.
- Rudolf, I., 2024. *The war on Gaza and Iraq’s resistance state*. *Mediterranean Politics*, pp.1–12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2024.2439695>.
- Sadoon, H.B., 2023. *The Islamic State and the independence referendum: The role of foreign policy in maintaining the de facto Kurdish entity in Iraq*. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 23(3), pp.336–354. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12404>.
- Sadurski, L. (2022). Regional Security Complex Theory: Why Is this Concept Still Worth Developing? *Athenaeum*, 75(3), 137–153. <https://doi.org/10.15804/athena.2022.75.08>
- Sari, İ., 2019. *The United States Foreign Policy Towards Kurds*. 11(2), pp.278–299. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/927005>.

Shiddiqy, M.A.A., Lugo, D.S. and Novarizal, R., 2024. *Regional Security Complex (RSC) in the Security Complexity of the Southeast Asia Region*. *International Journal of Religion*, 5(11), pp.1244–1253. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.61707/zy74jy81>.

Shukri, N.A., 2017. *Explaining U.S. Foreign Policy towards the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (2003–2015)*. PhD thesis. Available at: <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.706086>.

Snyder, R. (2023), “Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis”, *Journal of Global South Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/gss.2023.a917383>

Snyder, R., Zorri, D., Sadri, H., & Ellis, D. (2023). Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis. *Journal of Global South Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1353/gss.2023.a917383>

Stansfield, G., 2017. *The Evolution of the Political System of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. In: *Between State and Non-State*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp.61–76. Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-60181-0_4.

Stuni, A.A. and Yatiban, B., 2018. *The US Foreign Policy Towards the Iraqi Kurds in the Middle East After Emergence of ISIS*. *Qalaai Zanist Scientific Journal*, 3(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25212/lfu.qzj.3.1.39>.

Uzun, E., 2018. *The Axis of Resistance: The Role of Religion in Iranian Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://research.sabanciuniv.edu/36771/>.

Valensi, C. (2015). Non-state actors: A theoretical limitation in a changing Middle East. *Military and Strategic Affairs*, 7(1), 81–97. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/26698760/Non_State_Actors_A_Theoretical_Limitation_in_a_Changing_Middle_East_Carmit_valensi

Voller, Y., 2023. *The Iraqi Kurds and the Cold War: Regional Politics, 1958–1975*. *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review*, 14(1), pp.110–112. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5325/bustan.14.1.0110>.

Wastnidge, E. and Mabon, S., 2023. *The resistance axis and regional order in the Middle East: nomos, space, and normative alternatives*. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 51(5), pp.954–971. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2179975>.