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# The Kurdish Dilemma in the Middle East

## Why a Structurally Similar Position to the Gulf Still Leaves the Kurds Bearing Additional Costs

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### Executive Summary

The Kurdish question remains a persistent Middle Eastern strategic dilemma. Given their demographic weight and geographic position, it is difficult to treat the issue as peripheral. Yet without a single state framework, it is often fragmented in international discourse. Kurdish dispersion across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran keeps the issue central to the regional landscape while limiting coherent political visibility.

Armed conflicts in spring 2026 brought this vulnerability back into view. Following U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28, a broader nexus emerged around negotiations, blockades, and control of the Strait of Hormuz. That nexus extended into Lebanon after Hezbollah's March 2 offensive. Despite an April 17 ceasefire, the sequence exposed how state actors, proxies, and maritime corridors continue to shape regional order. Within that order, the Kurds function less as a marginal leftover variable than as a geopolitical buffer space onto which external pressures are projected.

Kurdish conditions share structural parallels with those of the Gulf states. Both are embedded in the same Middle Eastern regional order, and both manage pressures generated by external powers rather than shaping that order themselves. As a result, both prioritize buffer maintenance, multi-alignment, and risk absorption over immediate gains.

The difference lies in shock-absorption capacity. Gulf states buffer uncertainty through sovereign capital and diversified diplomacy. Kurds, however, absorb similar shocks far

more directly. Without statehood, cohesive territory, or institutional safeguards, they face far more fragile conditions than their Gulf counterparts.

## **Why We Must Re-examine the Kurds Now**

The regional dynamics of the Middle East are undergoing rapid restructuring into a multilayered architecture. Armed conflicts between states, limited ceasefires, maritime passage control, proxy involvement, and external mediation are unfolding simultaneously. The recent standoff between the United States and Iran, marked by Pakistani mediation efforts, United States port blockades, and Iranian control over the Strait of Hormuz, illustrates how complex leverage mechanisms intersect. Similarly, the conflict on the Israeli and Lebanese front following the Hezbollah offensive has entered a ceasefire phase, yet critical challenges such as troop withdrawal, disarmament, and direct negotiations remain unresolved.

Within this geopolitical order, the Kurdish issue is often treated as secondary. The actual pattern points elsewhere. Changes in the strategy of external patrons, shifts in border-control regimes, revisions in proxy management, and the outcome of high-level bargains among major powers all bear directly on Kurdish autonomy, survival conditions, and bargaining power. Few communities in the region absorb changes in the external order as quickly, or as severely, as the Kurds do.

Consequently, the Kurdish issue is too complex to be categorized merely as a minority concern within specific states or through the singular frame of pan-Kurdish nationalism. The contemporary Kurdish issue is a highly structural product that combines fragmented geopolitical realities with the common condition of external exposure. Despite existing within distinct state orders across different regions, they share a structural homogeneity as a population segment most vulnerable to fluctuations in the external order.

## **What the Kurds Actually Seek**

Kurdish priorities do not line up in identical form across every theater. In some contexts, the demand for independent statehood remains strong. In others, autonomy, federal arrangements, cultural rights, or political representation take precedence. These differences reflect the distinct state structures, security conditions, and political calculations that shape each Kurdish arena.

Even so, a shared set of aims remains visible. The Kurds seek to avoid being reduced to a temporary tactical variable in regional power politics. They seek to prevent language and identity from being subordinated to security logics. They seek to avoid being instrumentalized in transactions among major powers and regional hegemons. And they seek institutional space, whether through autonomy, federalism, or guaranteed rights, that can support long-term political survival. Their demands therefore extend

well beyond the language of independence alone. They are also about bargaining power, institutional protection, and the avoidance of irreversible political depletion in relations with stronger actors.

## **Structural Parallels with the Gulf**

Comparing Gulf nations to the Kurds may initially appear incongruous, given the disparity in status between sovereign states and non-state actors. Yet, an analysis of their structural positions reveals a higher degree of similarity than one might anticipate.

Neither group stands outside the regional hegemonic competition in the Middle East, nor do they occupy a leading position capable of designing that order. The tensions between the United States and Iran, conflicts between Israel and non-state armed groups, the instability of maritime corridors, the reorganization of energy supply chains, and the broader competition for influence among major powers all act as core variables imposed upon them from the outside. Despite not being the architects of this order, their security and profit structures fluctuate fundamentally in accordance with its trajectory.

Under these conditions, survival depends less on offensive initiative than on limiting exposure. That logic helps explain the Gulf states' reliance on multi-alignment and risk-averse positioning. The Kurds have navigated a similar tension between external patronage and the pursuit of autonomy. Dependence on a single patron can open short-term political space, but it has often produced severe strategic costs once that patron withdraws. The resemblance, then, comes not from an abundance of options, but from the pressure of an external order that neither side controls. Both are deeply embedded in the region's conflict structure, yet neither can unilaterally determine its outcomes.

## **Same Structure, Heavier Costs**

Despite structural similarities, the political and existential costs borne by the Kurds are overwhelmingly higher compared to Gulf states. The decisive factor driving this asymmetry stems from the presence or absence of a sovereign state entity.

Gulf states possess robust institutional safeguards capable of offsetting external shocks. Multilayered mechanisms such as border control authority, official diplomatic channels, independent military power, legal sovereignty, financial autonomy, and international recognition function organically. Even in times of crisis, they command the capacity to utilize institutionalized diplomatic language, maintain their status as official negotiating parties, and control uncertainty.

In contrast, the Kurds are subjected to much more direct and lethal impacts from the same external factors. Should external patrons alter their strategies, withdraw support, or strike major deals between regional hegemony, the fallout immediately undermines Kurdish autonomous space, survival rights, and internal political cohesion. Fragmented territorial geography acts as a constraint on building a consistent collective response, and the absence of a sovereign state signifies a lack of institutional buffers to mitigate external shocks.

The nature of strategic assets also differs sharply. Gulf states possess assets that are difficult to replace, including energy, finance, logistics hubs, and investment capacity. The Kurds, by contrast, occupy a geopolitical chokepoint without enjoying the protection usually associated with strategic value. Their position is often treated less as an asset to be secured than as a buffer zone to be used. They are necessary, but seldom fully protected; relevant, but easily expendable. That position imposes a permanent risk premium on Kurdish politics.

These costs are not confined to mere physical or military risks. Structural distrust of external patrons, the instability of long term strategic planning, the fragmentation of internal priorities, the political memory of repeated betrayals and disappointments, and the fragility of fragmented negotiating channels cumulatively function as a constant that threatens Kurdish political survival.

## **Why the Kurds Must Account for the Ethical Limits of Their Partners**

The geopolitical vulnerability of the Kurds cannot be explained by power asymmetry alone. In practice, Kurdish political strategy also requires a judgment about how far outside actors are willing to go, how much responsibility they are willing to bear, and where they are likely to stop.

Gulf states operate within the framework of mutual recognition among sovereign states, even when they depend heavily on external security guarantees. The Kurds occupy a far less stable position. They can be classified, depending on circumstance, as non-state actors, separatist forces, or regional partners. Those shifting categories weaken the density and durability of their relationships with stronger powers. Kurdish strategic value may be acknowledged while a relationship lasts, yet that value can be rapidly downgraded once a higher-level bargain is struck elsewhere.

For that reason, Kurdish survival requires more than judging who may provide support. It also requires judging when support may be withdrawn, what costs a partner is actually prepared to bear, and where the ethical boundaries of that relationship are likely to

lie. This is not an abstract moral concern. It is part of the practical calculation of survival. Intentions and capabilities matter, but they are not enough. The durability of commitments, the depth of responsibility, and the ethical limits of the relationship all matter as well.

This helps explain why memories of patronage and betrayal remain so deeply embedded in Kurdish political life. In many cases, the way support ends leaves a deeper mark than the support itself. Those accumulated experiences continue to shape Kurdish strategic judgment and political positioning.

## **Fragmented Political Landscapes and the Strategic Space of the Kurds**

The strategy of the contemporary Kurds does not move along a single trajectory, as it is based on the unique political dynamics inherent to each region. Iraqi Kurds function as quasi-state actors managing budgets, oil resources, and territorial sovereignty. Syrian Kurds are tasked with complex negotiations between maintaining their autonomous space and the process of national restructuring. Turkish Kurds are placed in a different context involving electoral politics, cultural rights, and long-term national conflict. Iranian Kurds are situated under a far more direct and harsh pressure system characterized by state repression, exile politics, and the militarization of border zones.

As the realistic conditions of each region vary, the establishment of a unified pan-Kurdish strategy faces fundamental constraints. Despite sharing a common ethnic foundation, the survival conditions and priorities of each region diverge sharply. These differences are not merely the result of temporary tactical decisions, but are products of political experiences accumulated over long periods within different state orders.

Nevertheless, the necessity for a common frame that permeates the Kurdish community remains valid. The nature of the integration required at present is closer to a practical dimension of securing shared historical memories, rights, visibility, and bargaining power rather than the idealistic project of a pan-Kurdish state. If issues in each region are reduced entirely to separate matters, neighboring countries and external powers can manage them much more easily in a segmented manner. Conversely, if even a loose common frame is maintained, the Kurdish issue can be prevented from being reduced merely to local grievances or internal security matters.

The form of integration now relevant to the Kurds is less about military unification than about preserving and strengthening a shared political frame. It may lack dramatic

visibility, but it is far more realistic, and therefore better suited to long-term endurance.

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