

The Role of the Kurds of Iraq in the Third Gulf War and Internal Changes 2003-2005

Haji Mustafa Sheeko, Prof. Dr. Mohammed D Kareem
^{1,2} University of Al-Hamdaniya



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this research is to address the political, military and intelligence role of Kurdish forces on U.S.-led strategy to dismantle the Iraqi regime in 2003 and follow what results came out for the place occupied by Kurds and Kurdistan Region until 2005. **Method:** The research examines the role of Peshmerga from logics, intelligence-gathering, and military operations towards Kirkuk and Mosul to the postwar institutional transition from a wartime cooperation in alliance among Kurdish political actors to a long-term partnership built around these actors within the Governing Council and its constitutional process. **Results:** It argues that U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in the war should not be seen as a stopgap battlefield arrangement which had warmer relations between Washington and Ankara merely reintroduced but rather as the product of an ongoing political-security process that has made Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly following Washington's difficulties with Turkey, one of three vital geographic-political-military bases constituting the Northern front. The conclusion is that, by participating in the 2003 war, Kurds secured a place at the post Saddam table which in forming regional institutions and Kurdish co-ordination enabled them to obtain constitutional recognition of federalism (and of Kurdistan Region) in 2005. **Novelty:** The research examines the role of Peshmerga from logics, intelligence-gathering, and military operations towards Kirkuk and Mosul to the postwar institutional transition from a wartime cooperation in alliance among Kurdish political actors to a long-term partnership built around these actors within the Governing Council and its constitutional process.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2003 marked a pivotal point in modern Iraqi history and in the trajectory of American-Kurdish relations. After more than a decade since the establishment of a Kurdish region that practically came out from under Baghdad's direct control, the relationship between Washington and the Kurdish forces shifted from political and humanitarian protection to a level of political, security, and military cooperation directly linked to the plan to overthrow the Iraqi regime. This shift became more apparent after the events of September 11, 2001, when the U.S. administration began searching for local forces it could rely on to implement its new strategy toward Iraq.[1]

The research problem lies in determining the nature of the role played by the Kurds in the American strategy in 2003: Was it merely a supportive military role, or did it constitute a significant political and intelligence element in the success of the Northern Front and in the post-regime arrangements. It also examines the extent to which this role reflected on the political and constitutional gains that the Kurds achieved until 2005.

The research assumes that the importance of the Kurds to Washington did not stem solely from the military strength of the Peshmerga, but from the combination of four elements: the existence of a geographical area outside Baghdad's control, political and

administrative institutions established since 1992, field experience of the Kurdish forces, and a political willingness to cooperate with the United States in exchange for guaranties related to federalism and regional protection. The value of these elements has doubled after the Turkish parliament's refusal to allow the use of Turkish territory in the manner anticipated by the American plan. [2]

The research relies on the analytical historical method and focuses temporally on the period 2002-2005, with 2003 as the center of analysis, and refers to previous developments as far as they explain the formation of the alliance. The extracted material has been reconstructed to make it an independent research with a question, analysis, and results, while preserving the references and footnotes on which the original thesis is based, and without adding narratives unsupported by its content.

Chapter One: The Position of the Kurds in American Planning for the War on Iraq

First: From Political Contacts to American Guaranties:

It was clear in 2002 that American communications with Kurdish leaders were changing. Discussions soon began to specifically focus on the intelligence and military capacity of Kurdish forces as well as using these forces for the regime change project after political contacts or meetings aimed at opposition unity. The letter states it relates to secret meetings with U.S. officials in Germany and Washington, the most significant of which was held on April 15, 2002 among representatives for the National Security Council, the Departments of State and Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency [3].

The message states that the two Kurdish leaderships received guaranties at that stage regarding Washington's seriousness in overthrowing the regime, preventing external interventions in Kurdistan, supporting the establishment of a federal democratic Iraqi system, and relying on the Kurdish opposition and Peshmerga forces within the country. This point is particularly significant because it reveals that subsequent military cooperation was initially linked to a political vision for Iraq's future, rather than merely the need for a local force on the battlefield [4].

Secondly: The London Conference and the Establishment of the Political Position of the Kurds:

The London Conference of the Iraqi opposition in 2002 represented a political station complementing military preparations. The Kurdish forces participated alongside the other opposition parties, emphasizing the unity of Iraq while demanding a federal democratic system that guaranties Kurdish rights. The presence of American and British representatives at the conference also added weight to it and more clearly linked the opposition's arrangements to the post-Saddam project [5].

Thus, the Kurds entered the war not only as an armed local force but as part of the opposition leadership being prepared to participate in the new system. And this overlap between the political and military roles is one of the keys to understanding the influence exerted by Kurdish leadership in the post-April 9, 2003 phase.

Third: The impact of the Turkish stance on raising the strategic value of Kurdistan:

The American war plan anticipated opening a wide northern front through Turkey. However, the failure of this option increased the importance of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Peshmerga forces. The message indicates that the refusal of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey to provide the required support to the coalition has made the Kurds more important in American operational calculations, and the region has become a passageway and base for receiving special and airborne forces and supporting operations in northern Iraq [6].

From a political standpoint, the American-Turkish tension contributed to granting Kurdish leaderships greater leeway. This was evident in Washington's refusal of a Turkish request to send troops to Kurdistan without Kurdish approval, and then in the incident of the detention of Turkish special forces in Sulaymaniyah in July 2003. These developments reflected a shift in the balance of relations between Washington and Ankara on one hand, and Washington and the Kurdish forces on the other [7].

Section Two: The Military and Intelligence Role of the Kurds in the Overthrow of the Regime in 2003

First: The operations room and cooperation before the outbreak of the war:

In the context, the American forces and the Peshmerga forces had previously established during the pre-war period (the Joint Operations Room) and started with cooperation on security files before launching a great operation against Baghdad according to what is stated in this message. Foremost among such files was clashing with the Ansar al-Islam group in border areas with Iran. The latter operations offered a preliminary opportunity to assess coordination between Kurdish elements and U.S. forces in an active field operation [8].

It also references the training of Peshmerga contingents to cooperate with American forces, as well as special U.S. operations in Kurdistan before the war for intelligence, reconnaissance and "targeting" Iraqi force positions. Then, the role of Kurds did cease with March 20, 2003 and it is not reactions whether war has burst [9].

Secondly: Logistical and intelligence support:

The role of the Kurdish forces was more logistical in organizing sites, bases and airports that can be used by American forces on the northern front. American forces also relied upon localized geographical expertise as well as Kurdish networks for tracking Iraqi army movements. The message explained that the Kurdish intelligence channels have been attempting to communicate with a number of officers and commanders in both the First Corp stationed in Kirkuk as well as Fifth Corp in Mosul [10].

This one is important, because in the north operations did not depend on American air superiority. Washington wanted something that could move on the ground and locate places and routes, as well as provide intelligence about the status of Iraqi units. Local knowledge (that was to become a military and intelligence resource for the plan that the Americans had) all started with this local knowledge being supplied by the Peshmerga.

Third: The Peshmerga and the Northern Front:

After the war began, more than a thousand American soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived at Harir Airport in the Kurdistan Region, and operations on the northern front took on a more organized form. The Peshmerga forces advanced with the support of American troops toward Kirkuk and Nineveh, taking advantage of the retreat of Iraqi forces under the impact of airstrikes and the operational superiority of the coalition [11].

The message confirms that the Peshmerga's participation included multiple battles and operations, and that the Kurdish forces moved in some areas faster and further than the American leadership desired, especially in regions that previously experienced Arabization and displacement policies. This reveals that the two allies met in the goal of overthrowing the regime, but their motives were not entirely aligned; Washington viewed the operation within the goal of regime change, while Kurdish leaders also linked the war to the recovery of areas and rights they considered to have been taken from them in previous decades [12].

Fourth: The limits of the Kurdish role in overthrowing the regime:

The Kurdish role should not be exaggerated to the point of considering it the sole decisive factor in the fall of the Iraqi regime; the American military, aerial, and technological superiority was the primary factor in the outcome of the war. However, this does not diminish the importance of the Peshmerga on the northern front. It provided the American forces with an organized local partner, helped compensate for some of the limitations imposed by the absence of the Turkish path, and played a role in securing vast areas, gathering intelligence, and conducting field operations.

In this sense, the Kurdish role was complementary and amplifying to the American capacity in the north, not a substitute for it. And this formulation is more accurate than describing the Kurds as having single-handedly overthrown the regime or downplaying their contribution to a mere secondary role [13].

Chapter Three: From Military Alliance to Political Partnership After April 9, 2003

First: The fall of the regime and the change in the nature of the relationship:

The fall of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, led to the transition of the American-Kurdish relationship to a new phase. After the priority during the war was military, the main issue became the position of the Kurds in the state institutions being formed. The message indicates that the relations have taken on a more formal and clear character, and that Kurdistan has gained an important position in the long-term American agenda in Iraq [14].

Secondly: The Governing Council and Kurdish Representation:

When the Governing Council was formed in July 2003 with twenty-five members, the Kurds received five seats, in addition to their participation in the council's rotating presidency. This represented a practical acknowledgment of the Kurdish forces as a key partner in the transitional process, although Kurdish leaders believe that the extent of

their representation does not always reflect the level they expected in light of their previous cooperation with the United States [15].

Through the Governing Council, Kurdish leaders sought to protect the institutions that had emerged in the region since 1992, prevent a return to the previous model of a centralized state, and introduce the principle of federalism into the legal framework of the new Iraq. Thus, the military gains achieved during the war began to transform into a negotiating power within political institutions.

Third: Federalism and the Competition over Kirkuk:

The question over federalism thus became the single most important test of relations between Kurdish forces on the one hand and all other Iraqi parties and the American coalition authority on the other. It indicates that some parties have tended towards a geographical federation, yet Kurdish leaders insisted on a formula guaranteeing the specificity of Iraq's Kurdistan region and its national and political rights. Kirkuk and the disputed areas were also among those paved with landside of sensitive issues amid multiple the Turkish objections and Iraqi concerns [16].

Secondly: The Governing Council and Kurdish Representation:

The Kurds held five seats on the twenty-five member Governing Council formed in July 2003, including a role in the council's rotating presidency. This was a tangible recognition of the Kurdish forces as an important partner in the transitional process, but Kurdish leaders have argued that their representation does not always mirror what they hoped for given the level of support received from the U.S [15].

Through the Governing Council, Kurdish leaders sought to protect the institutions that had emerged in the region since 1992, prevent a return to the previous model of a centralized state, and introduce the principle of federalism into the legal framework of the new Iraq. Thus, the military gains achieved during the war began to transform into a negotiating power within political institutions.

Third: Federalism and the Competition over Kirkuk:

The issue of federalism has emerged as the most important test of the relationship between Kurdish forces and the other Iraqi parties and the coalition authority. The message notes that some parties preferred a geographical federation, while Kurdish leaders insisted on a formula that guarantees the region's specificity and its national and political rights. Kirkuk and the disputed areas have also become some of the most sensitive issues, amid various Turkish objections and Iraqi concerns [17].

In the 2005 Constitution, the recognition of the Kurdistan Region as a federal region with acknowledgment of its existing authorities was included, as well as the constitution addressing the powers of the regions, internal security forces, resource issues, and disputed areas. For the Kurdish forces, this represented a transition from a political situation that arose de facto after 1991 to a constitutionally recognized status within the Iraqi state [18].

Secondly: Sovereign positions and power-sharing:

The returns of the post-war phase did not stop at the recognition of the region, where Kurds got advanced positions in the institutions of Iraqi state including (presidency and Ministry of Foreign Affairs etc.) Their participation is therefore a sign of the transition from a regional opposition to being a concrete decision-making partner at federal level [19].

But they are not necessarily solely due to U.S. assistance. First, the unification of the Kurdish ranks, second the consolidation of organized administrative and party institutions in that they've had twenty years of governance since 1992 as well as significant military capability from not only direct US military aid but also their ability to use it responsibly translated into hard bargaining power at the negotiation table (as they have consistently negotiated with neighboring countries based on military leverage from their Peshmerga forces).

Third: Unification of Kurdish institutions and regional stability:

Your coverage underlines 2005 as a critical year for institutional development in the region, including the revival of Kurdistan National Assembly activity in Erbil, the election of Masoud Barzani as President of the Kurdistan Region, and progress towards unifying administratively the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah administrations under Kurdistan Region of Iraq Government. This came together with a degree of relative stability and growth compared to huge portions of Iraq that have been affected by chronic protection disturbance [20].

Fourth: The nature of the alliance and its limits until 2005:

If we take a closer look at the 2003-05 period, it is evident that the American-Kurdish partnership was not recognized as a full-blown meeting of interests. US repeatedly asserted its commitment to a unified Iraq, denying any assertions that could lead to the region achieving independence and Kurdish forces pushed further and wider for autonomy/ federalism formalization/ discourse as well as rights in constitution. Kirkuk, the engagement with Turkey and divisions of powers and wealth remained flashpoints.

But the key element setting this apart from earlier stages of its cycle was that Kurds moved into these negotiations as a respected political and military partner, not merely as a local group in search of safeguard. 2003 is the most important reflection of their strategy shift [21].

The study reveals that the role of the Kurds within the framework of the American strategy to bring about regime change in Iraq in 2003 had political, military and intelligence aspects which intertwined. It was the Kurdish forces that following a year of communication, political guarantees and having an autonomous area outside Baghdad's control, administration, local institutions as well as a well trained army made them America's biggest partner on the northern front of this war.

The Peshmerga added local knowledge, intelligence and manpower to concerned locations, participating in operations towards Kirkuk and Mosul, while Washington further gained from this cooperation in ways of alleviating some of the limitations put

into place by Brussels over Ankara. After the regime fell, this partnership became political leverage that manifested itself in the Governing Council, in discussions on federalism and then creating the issue of Kurdistan Region's status within the 2005 Iraqi Constitution.

Accordingly, the link between Kurdish participation in the war and post-war gains is not simply deterministic; rather it combines with the experience of self-governance since 1992 together with pre-existing Kurdish institutions, as well as an emerging reconciliation between parties and a unified stance on broad themes. However, the alliance with the United States ensured an international, military and political environment in which those dynamics could translate into real constitutional and institutional change.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: Kurds played more than a military role in the 2003 war; they were major players politically, contributing to opposition and intelligence most notably through logistics and field operations. The failure of American reliance on Turkey increased the operational importance of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Peshmerga forces on the northern front. The Peshmerga contributed to facilitating the American movement in northern Iraq, but they were not the only or decisive factor in the fall of the regime; the American military superiority remained the central factor. The relationship transformed after April 9, 2003, from a temporary military alliance into a political partnership negotiated within Iraq's transitional institutions. The Governing Council represented the first institutional framework through which the Kurds directly participated in the reconstruction of the new Iraqi state. **Implication:** Political guaranties related to federalism and regional protection were an important factor in encouraging Kurdish leadership to expand their cooperation with Washington. The establishment of federalism and the constitutional recognition of the Kurdistan Region in 2005 were the most significant long-term political outcomes of the phase that began with the military alliance in 2003. **Limitation:** However, the American factor alone cannot explain the Kurdish gains the regionwide institutions set up since 1992, united Kurdish position and experience with self-rule all led to these domestic factors being needed in order to leverage external support. **Future Research:** American factor can not solely explain the Kurdish gains; internal factors such as strong regional institutions developed since 1992, a unified Kurdish Strategy and experience in autonomous administration allows Kurdistan to develop its own external support.

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Haji Mustafa Sheeko,
University of Al-Hamdaniya
Email: hajirekani68@gmail.com

Prof. Dr. Mohammed D Kareem
University of Al-Hamdaniya
Email: dr.mdk@uohamdaniya.edu.iq
