

Autonomy without Exit: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a Security Actor in the Middle Eastern Regional Order, 2005–2026

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الحكم الذاتي من دون انفصال: إقليم كردستان العراق بوصفه فاعلاً أمنياً في النظام الإقليمي للشرق الأوسط، ٢٠٢٦ ٢٠٠٥

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الملخص

شهد إقليم كردستان العراق تقلصاً في نطاق سيطرته الإقليمية عقب استفتاء الاستقلال عام ٢٠١٧، وتكيفاً قضائياً لاستقلالته المالية بين عامي ٢٠٢٢ و٢٠٢٤، وإغلاقاً لخط أنابيب صادراته استمر ثلاثين شهراً. ومع ذلك، لا تزال الدول المجاورة تستهدفه وتسعى إلى استمالاته وتتفاوض معه بوصفه فاعلاً أمنياً. وتعجز نظرية المركب الأمني الإقليمي عن استيعاب هذه الفاعلية؛ إذ يَبْقَى إطارها التشغيلي الدولة معياراً يُحدّد على أساسه موقع الوحدات ضمن مستويات التحليل، وهو ما يحصر إقليم كردستان العراق في المستوى الداخلي. استناداً إلى تسع مقابلات مع شخصيات من النخبة أُجريت بين آذار/مارس ٢٠٢٥ وآذار/مارس ٢٠٢٦، إلى جانب مصادر وثائقية، تصوّر هذه المقالة إقليم كردستان العراق بوصفه حالة من «البينية الهامشية» — أي الحكم الذاتي من دون انفصال. يمارس الإقليم الأمننة ونزع الأمننة أساساً من خلال الممارسة، وليس الخطاب؛ ويفصل بين أنماط الصداقة والعداوة من خلال سياسة هشة لفصل الملفات؛ كما يشكل مرتكزاً لمركب أمني كردي فرعي آخذ في التشكل. وفي الوقت نفسه، يحوّل الانقسام الداخلي فاعليته إلى مصدر بنيوي لعدم الاستقرار الإقليمي. وبناءً على ذلك، تستطيع وحدة دون مستوى الدولة أداء وظائف الأمننة التي تحصرها نظرية المركب الأمني الإقليمي بالدول، من دون أن تكتسب السيادة. ومن ثم، فإن ما يؤدي إلى إقصاء هذه الوحدات من النظرية هو إطارها التشغيلي رباعي المستويات، وليس افتراضاتها الأنطولوجية. ويغطي هذا التحليل التطورات حتى ٣٠ حزيران/يونيو ٢٠٢٦. الكلمات المفتاحية: إقليم كردستان العراق؛ نظرية المركب الأمني الإقليمي؛ دول الأمر الواقع؛ السيادة البينية؛ الأمننة؛ نزع الأمننة؛ فصل الملفات؛ علاقات أربيل-بغداد؛ المركب الأمني الكردي الفرعي.

Abstract

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has absorbed territorial contraction after its 2017 independence referendum, the judicial dismantling of its fiscal autonomy between 2022 and 2024, and a thirty-month closure of its export pipeline, yet neighbouring states still target, court, and negotiate with it as a security actor. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) cannot register that agency: its operational scheme retains the state as the measure by which units are located, confining the KRI to the domestic level. Drawing on nine elite interviews conducted between March 2025 and March 2026 alongside documentary sources, this article conceptualises the KRI as a case of marginal liminality — autonomy without exit. It securitizes and de-securitizes primarily through practice rather than discourse, holds amity and enmity apart through fragile compartmentalisation, and anchors an

emergent Kurdish Security Subcomplex, while internal fragmentation converts its agency into a structural source of regional instability. A sub-state unit can therefore perform the securitizing functions RSCT reserves for states without acquiring sovereignty: what excludes such units is the theory's four-level operational scheme, not its ontology. The analysis is current to 30 June 2026. **Keywords:** Kurdistan Region of Iraq; Regional Security Complex Theory; de facto states; liminal sovereignty; securitization; de-securitization; compartmentalisation; Erbil–Baghdad relations; Kurdish Security Subcomplex

1. Introduction

Between September 2017 and June 2026, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) experienced a sequence of shocks that, by the expectations of most theories of contested statehood, should have terminated its career as an autonomous security actor. The 2017 independence referendum provoked a coordinated military, economic, and diplomatic response from Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran that stripped the Region of roughly half the territory its forces had come to control since 2014.¹ Since 2022 the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court has been dismantling the legal framework of Kurdish oil autonomy and the payroll of public-sector employees in the Region has been put under federal control.² In March 2023, an international arbitration decision closed the pipeline that transported the Region's exports, eliminating its key revenue stream for thirty months, and costing over US\$30 billion.³ Yet by mid-2026 the KRI still maintained its own armed forces, hosted coalition troops and forty-four foreign diplomatic representations, and was negotiating export and salary arrangements with a new Iraqi government, while being struck, courted, and mediated with by every significant actor in its neighbourhood. It has neither been reabsorbed nor moved towards independence. It persists.

1.1 The Research Problem and Question

This persistence is an empirical puzzle for the dominant theory of Middle Eastern security regionalism. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) argues that security threats are more likely to spread across short distances and that states within a region form complexes, with securitization in each state so tightly intertwined that they cannot reasonably be analysed apart.⁴ The theory's definition of the complex is deliberately open—its members are 'units', not states⁵—but its operational scheme is not: the state is retained as the measure by which units are located.⁶ The KRI appears within it, if at all, as a domestic vulnerability of Iraq—a source of state weakness rather than an actor with securitizing agency, external alignments, and threat perceptions of its own. The empirical record examined in this article renders that classification untenable. An entity that frames existential threats to domestic and international audiences, elicits counter-securitization from three neighbouring states, sustains a direct security partnership with a great power, and mediates between other units of the regional system is performing functions the theory reserves for states. The article asks: through what processes of securitization and de-securitization, and through what patterns of amity and enmity, does the KRI shape its security relations with neighbouring states and external powers—and what does its trajectory imply for the operational state-centrism of RSCT? It answers by synthesising two bodies of scholarship that RSCT has largely ignored: the literature on de facto states⁷ and the concept of liminal sovereignty.⁸ The KRI, it argues, is a de facto state occupying a position of marginal liminality—an entity that mimics the practices of recognised statehood in pursuit of eventual membership of the international system, yet which, since 2017, has pursued autonomy without exit: the maximisation of self-rule within, rather than secession from, the Iraqi state.⁹

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The article makes four contributions. Conceptually, it specifies marginal liminality as a durable sovereignty configuration—autonomy without exit—rather than a stage en route to statehood or reintegration. Analytically, it shows that de-securitization by a de facto state proceeds through practice—constitutional embedding, economic entanglement, para-diplomacy—rather than through Copenhagen School speech acts, and identifies compartmentalisation as the mechanism holding amity and enmity apart within a single dyad, together with the conditions under which it fails. Empirically, it provides the first interview-based account of the KRI's security agency from the 2017 referendum through the 2022–2024 Federal Supreme Court rulings and the 2023–2025 pipeline closure to the formation of a new Iraqi government in May 2026. Theoretically, it grounds the claim that the KRI anchors an emergent Kurdish Security Subcomplex, showing that sub-state units can constitute subcomplex nodes—a possibility the theory's structural variables permit but its authors did not pursue.

1.3 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative single-case design combining thematic analysis of elite interview testimony with documentary triangulation. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2025 and March 2026 with serving and former KRG officials, presidency advisers, parliamentarians, and regional analysts in Erbil,

Sulaymaniyah, and Baghdad, and were coded against categories derived from the theoretical framework. Interview evidence is triangulated throughout against constitutional texts, judicial rulings, official statements, and institutional reporting, so that no analytical claim rests on testimony alone. Section 2 sets out the design, sampling, ethics, and analytical procedure in full.

1.4 Structure of the Article

Sections 2 and 3 set out the research design and the theoretical framework. Sections 4 to 8 develop the empirical analysis: de facto status, securitization and its reversal in 2017, juridical re-subordination, compartmentalised amity–enmity, and internal fragmentation. Section 9 concludes.

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Case Selection and Design

The article employs a single-case research design in which the KRI serves as a theory-extending case for RSCT. The case is selected on three grounds. First, it is the strongest available instance of the phenomenon the theory cannot accommodate: a constitutionally recognised, militarily capable, externally engaged sub-state entity operating within a regional complex for more than three decades. Second, the trajectory contains clearly bounded episodes — the 2017 referendum, the 2022–2024 rulings of the Federal Supreme Court, and the pipeline closure of 2023–2025 — allowing the processes of securitization, de-securitization and compartmentalization to be seen under stress rather than only in equilibrium. Third, the KRI empirically anchors the broader Kurdish arena: its institutional model, party networks, and territory affect the security of Kurdish actors in Turkey, Syria, and Iran well beyond the case itself. The temporal scope runs from the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which established constitutionally guaranteed federal autonomy alongside external protection and de facto self-rule,¹⁰ to 30 June 2026.

2.2 Data Sources and Sampling

The analysis triangulates three bodies of evidence: semi-structured elite interviews; documentary sources comprising constitutional texts, judicial decisions, and official statements; and reports by international organisations and established research institutes. The interview data were generated within a larger doctoral study of Kurdish de facto entities, under the access constraints characteristic of elite research in security-restricted settings.¹¹ The present article is based on the nine interviews related to the KRI and the broader Iraqi and regional context. Purposive sampling was undertaken to ensure participants had direct knowledge of, and involvement in, the security and politics of the Region, with snowball sampling used to take account of elite and hard-to-access participants, and to avoid network bias.¹² The cohort is positionally stratified, comprising two senior Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials;¹³ a KRI presidency official with a foreign-relations portfolio; a former senior parliamentarian and political adviser;¹⁴ a former KRG minister and regional analyst;¹⁵ a veteran regional security analyst with a parliamentary background in a neighbouring state;¹⁶ a KRG official with diplomatic experience in Washington;¹⁷ a veteran PUK political figure and former senior office-holder;¹⁸ and a former senior parliamentarian and regional analyst.¹⁹ Non-KRG perspectives enter through opposition-aligned and non-executive voices;²⁰ the positions of Iraqi, Turkish, and Iranian officials who were not interviewed are reconstructed from documentary sources and published statements.

2.3 Interview Procedure and Ethics

Interviews were conducted between March 2025 and March 2026, in person in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Baghdad, or by secure video-conferencing for participants outside Iraq or subject to security restrictions. They were conducted in Kurdish (Sorani), Arabic, or English according to participant preference; the author conducted the Kurdish- and English-language interviews directly and drew on professional translation for Arabic-language material. Duration ranged from approximately forty-five to ninety minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent, transcribed, and stored on encrypted devices.

Because participants in contested governance environments face professional and personal risk, an anonymisation protocol assigns each participant an alphanumeric code²¹ that preserves analytical traceability across citations while withholding names and precise affiliations; role descriptors are generalised.²² Interview quotations are reproduced verbatim, with minor clarifying adjustments indicated by square brackets. Where interview claims cannot be corroborated by documentary or secondary evidence, they are presented as testimonial claims rather than established facts.

2.4 Analysis, Positionality, and Reflexivity

Thematic analysis proceeded through iterative coding guided by the framework's four categories: securitization, de-securitization, amity–enmity, and interdependence, but also open to inductive themes.²³ Trustworthiness was

pursued through triangulation across data types, attention to divergence as well as convergence among sources, and the maintenance of a reflexive research journal. I write as a scholar of Kurdish background attached to universities of the Kurdistan Region. That proximity was a condition of access: several participants agreed to be interviewed only through established networks of professional trust, and my proficiency in Sorani permitted direct engagement with material that would otherwise have required translation. It also creates risks: over-identifying with Kurdish institutional narratives, under-weighting Baghdad's constitutional arguments, and reading KRG discourse as description rather than data. Four practices manage them. Interviewee claims are cross-checked against documentary evidence, and claims advanced from official positions are treated as positioned accounts. The analysis foregrounds the scholarship and testimony least flattering to KRG governance, including that by Kurdish authors. The framework addresses systemic dynamics, not the normative merits of any actor's claims. And the evaluative conclusions, especially that Kurdish fragmentation operates as a structural multiplier of regional instability, run counter to an advocacy reading of the case. Where the analysis addresses situations still unfolding at its cut-off of 30 June 2026—the export arrangement, the salary dispute, the Turkey–PKK process—its claims are characterisations of the record to that date, not predictions.

3. Theoretical Framework: Bringing Liminal Actors into the Regional Security Complex

3.1 RSCT and the Problem of the Non-Sovereign Unit

RSCT defines a regional security complex as a set of units whose major processes of securitization and de-securitization are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another.²⁴ Its analytical apparatus rests on four structural variables—boundary, anarchic structure, polarity, and social construction—and on the securitization framework, in which an actor's speech act constitutes an issue as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures.²⁵ The theory's authors deliberately loosened its vocabulary from 'states' to 'units'—a reformulation undertaken, in their words, 'to shed the state-centric and military-political focus'²⁶—and characterised the result as 'not dogmatically state-centric in its premises' though often state-centric in its findings.²⁷ The qualification is exact. Having opened the ontology, they retained the state as 'the defining unit for locating things in this scheme'—the 'measure'²⁸—and conceded the cost themselves: an open ontology that nonetheless tells 'largely state-centric stories'.²⁹ In application, accordingly, the units of Regions and Powers remain sovereign states; sub-state formations enter the analysis at the domestic level, as sources of a state's own vulnerability rather than as actors in their own right. Two objections to admitting sub-state entities as units deserve to be met directly. The first holds that the shift to 'units' was cosmetic, and that the theory was never intended to admit de facto entities as constituent members of a complex. The primary text will not bear this reading. The reformulation was adopted expressly to shed the state-centric focus³⁰; Buzan and Wæver themselves observe that in the Middle East a number of sub-state entities—Kurdish organisations among the most notable—have acted as securitizing actors at the regional and global levels³¹; and the membership criterion the theory actually deploys is functional, not juridical: a 'normal' member of the system is one possessing autonomy to make its own policy and the capability to engage the other units.³² As the following sections show, the KRI passes that test: it has armed forces, engages in para-diplomacy, securitizes threats to its autonomy, and receives cross-border responses from three neighbouring states. What was never revised is the scheme by which units are located; it is there, not in the definition, that accommodation is required. The second objection is that the cases are already covered at the domestic level. At the domestic level, however, sub-state conditions register only as inputs to a state's own security; that level cannot represent a sub-state actor forming external alliances, attracting great-power protection, and shaping the threat perceptions of neighbouring states. Accommodating the KRI therefore requires admitting it as a unit, not extending the domestic level. A growing scholarship has pressed the same charge, finding RSCT's state-centrism its major weakness in arenas where non-state actors define security outcomes;³³ the argument above locates that weakness precisely—in the operational scheme, not in premises the theory's authors expressly opened.

3.2 De Facto Statehood and Marginal Liminality

Which non-state formations qualify? The threshold is provided by the de facto state literature. Based on the conceptual framework of de facto state proposed by Florea,³⁴ a de facto state is a state that is not a colony of another state, has a sense of separation and has shown some aspirations for independence (through a referendum, for example), exercises military control over a territory with a permanent population, is not condoned by the state that has juridical sovereignty, performs at least basic governance functions, has existed for at least two years, and lacks international legal sovereignty. The operationalisation of Florea is preferable to the declaration-based definition because it captures entities, such as the KRI, which manifested their independence through a

referendum, but did not claim independence unilaterally, and because the concept of statehood is not binary but rather a continuum.³⁵ The continuum needs to be further specified, as Loh and Heiskanen³⁶ do. The sovereignty, they say, is not a dividing wall between inside and outside but a zone 'betwixt and between' the two, inhabited by polities that carry out sovereign functions without full recognition. Within this zone they distinguish, inter alia, marginal liminality—polities that 'mimic existing sovereignty practices in an effort to eventually join the system as full members'³⁷—from hybrid liminality, exhibited by polities that contest the internal/external boundary itself and refuse incorporation on either side.³⁸ The distinction matters because the two positions generate different securitization profiles, different amity–enmity patterns, and different vulnerabilities. The KRI is a paradigmatic case of the marginal position. Its institutions—presidency, parliament, army, flag, anthem, international airports, passport stamps—deliberately replicate the grammar of the sovereign nation-state,³⁹ and its political trajectory, culminating in the 2017 referendum, aimed at membership of, not transcendence of, the international system of states. S. L. Potiker's⁴⁰ comparative-historical analysis captures the configuration precisely: the KRI represents autonomy-without-exit—the expansion of self-rule within the inter-state system and a better position inside it—as against the exit-with-autonomy pursued by the Syrian Kurdish administration. This article treats autonomy-without-exit not as a way-station towards either statehood or reintegration but as a durable configuration in its own right, whose stability, mechanisms, and costs the empirical sections examine.

3.3 De-Securitization as Practice; Amity–Enmity as Compartmentalisation

Two further conceptual instruments complete the framework. First, whereas the Copenhagen School's foundational account treats the speech act as the vehicle of securitization and de-securitization,⁴¹ a sociological turn associated with Balzacq⁴² and, in the de-securitization literature, with Åtland's⁴³ study of the Arctic, locates both processes equally in routinised practice: the gradual normalisation of engagement that renders extraordinary measures unnecessary. For an actor that lacks the discursive standing of a sovereign state, this practice-based register is not a supplement but the primary channel, a claim Section 5 substantiates. Second, RSCT's social-construction variable arrays relations along a spectrum from amity to enmity, implicitly assuming that a dyad occupies one position at a time. Hamilton and Mikulska demonstrate, through the Russian–Turkish relationship⁴⁴, that actors can 'compartmentalize zones of difference and emphasize zones of cooperation', allowing economic relations to operate as a shock absorber insulated from conflict elsewhere. Applied to a de facto state, compartmentalisation explains how the same dyad can exhibit deep economic amity and active military enmity simultaneously—and, as Section 7 shows, where the insulation breaks down. Finally, the framework generates a structural claim. Buzan and Wæver⁴⁵ allow subcomplexes as a 'half-level' within the regional one, identified through the same four structural variables. Applying those variables to the transnational Kurdish arena—boundary ambiguity across four states, an anarchic structure of autonomous Kurdish units, multipolarity among the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Syrian-Kurdish and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) formations, and a social construction combining intra-ethnic solidarity with intra-ethnic rivalry and shared securitization by host states—supports conceptualising a Kurdish Security Subcomplex nested within the Middle Eastern complex. A single-case study cannot demonstrate the subcomplex in full; what it can do, and what Section 9 argues it does, is establish the KRI as the subcomplex's institutional anchor and demonstrate that a sub-state unit can constitute such a node.

4. A De Facto State in Marginal Liminality

The KRI fulfils all of the elements of Florea's operationalisation and the way it does so determines its liminal position. It lies within the internationally recognised borders of Iraq, a founding member of the United Nations, so that its security agency is exercised inside the parent state rather than outside it.⁴⁶ The autonomy has been uninterrupted since the 1991 uprising and the imposition of a no-fly zone, and is now constitutionally guaranteed: Article 117 of the 2005 Constitution officially declares the Kurdistan Region as a federal region, Article 121 vests the Region with legislative, executive, and judicial authority and with responsibility for its own internal security forces, and Article 115 gives the region residual competence over matters that are not reserved for the federal government.⁴⁷ The Peshmerga are its armed forces, alongside parallel intelligence services, an internal-security apparatus, and a full administrative structure of ministries, courts, schools, and airports.⁴⁸ The referendum of 25 September 2017 satisfies Florea's separatist-aspiration criterion. Non-recognition holds throughout: no state supported implementation, and the international response reaffirmed Iraq's territorial integrity. Duration exceeds the two-year threshold many times over, though, as the post-referendum contraction shows, satisfying the criteria is a continuous achievement rather than a settled condition.⁴⁹ What the criteria establish, the concept of marginal liminality interprets. The Region's practices of sovereignty clearly gesture toward the horizon of recognized

statehood: its institutions mimic the state form, and its para-diplomacy is oriented towards joining the states system rather than against it. The 2017 episode then fixed the ceiling of that configuration. After the referendum's reversal no major KRI actor has sought a juridical exit; the Region's maximal project is the defence and extension of autonomy within the federal order of Iraq – autonomy without exit.⁵⁰ One senior diplomatic adviser described the resulting condition: 'Western support is needed, but it is not *carte blanche*. Each time we get military aid, we know this is by Baghdad's consent. Each time we embark on independent diplomacy we are instructed to contact the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The advantages are very real, as are the restrictions. The world in which we live is a liminal one of autonomy and dependency and we must traverse it over and over again'.⁵¹ Liminality is here an operating condition rather than a metaphor: it is the space in which the practices examined below are conducted. Such partial statehood is not exceptional, since the Weberian/Westphalian state 'hardly exists in reality beyond the OECD world'; the KRI is best read as a position on a continuum of statehood.⁵²

5. Securitization and De-Securitization from a Liminal Position

5.1 Securitizing without Sovereignty

The KRI's record as a securitizing actor shows that the capacity to securitize does not require recognition. Three moves stand out. First, the securitization of ISIS. The 2014 assault put the Region in both the role of victim and defender, with a senior KRG diplomat describing the war as 'a test of Kurdish survival' and a senior presidential adviser as a fight 'to protect humanity, to protect all those who believed in peace and freedom, to protect the minorities'.⁵³ The framing succeeded with its target audiences: the international coalition responded with training, air support, and direct armament, thereby accepting that the threat warranted extraordinary measures, including Peshmerga operations beyond the Region's administrative boundaries.⁵⁴ Independent scholarship corroborates that the threat operated at the level of communal survival, with the referent object reaching beyond the regional government to the identity community and the individuals and minorities under its protection.⁵⁵ The securitization was thus layered rather than monolithic, and it enabled the Region to bypass the structural constraints of non-sovereignty by working directly with external powers as a *de facto* security ally. Second, the securitization of Baghdad's centralisation. Since 2005, disputes over fiscal transfers, hydrocarbon control, and the disputed territories have been framed by Kurdish leaderships as threats to the autonomy settlement itself.⁵⁶ After 2017 this framing sharpened: Baghdad's punitive measures were characterised as collective punishment, and, as one senior official put it, 'Baghdad's reaction confirmed our fears that our autonomy is perpetually at risk'.⁵⁷ The move consolidated internal cohesion around a narrative of victimisation while soliciting external solidarity—but it also deepened the Region's entanglement in zero-sum security interdependence with the federal centre. Third, the KRI is simultaneously the object of securitization from without. Host states construct Kurdish self-rule anywhere as a demonstration threat to their own territorial integrity.⁵⁸ Turkish policy treats the Kurdish arenas of Iraq and Syria as 'different theatres of the same struggle',⁵⁹ and Iranian analysis frames the Region's independence, rather than its autonomy *per se*, as the securitized object.⁶⁰ One participant traced this pattern back to the post-imperial creation of what he called quasi nation-states—that is, states with *de jure* sovereignty but lacking national identities—and in which the very legitimacy of the state is a challenge to Kurdish belonging.⁶¹ The interpretation matters theoretically: securitization of the Kurds is not event-driven but embedded in the architecture of the regional order, a historically constituted pattern of enmity of precisely the kind RSCT's social-construction variable is designed to capture.

5.2 De-Securitization as Practice

Against this structural hostility, the KRI's de-securitization strategies between 2003 and 2016 are best read as a repertoire of practices in Balzacq's⁶² sociological register, with discourse in a supporting role. Four mechanisms operated in concert; the *de facto* state literature aptly terms the resulting posture 'constrained engagement without recognition', durable because survival requires it, unstable because it can be revoked when existential stakes resurface.⁶³ The first and most consequential mechanism was institutional embedding. Kurdish decision-makers secured the Region's constitutional recognition in 2005 and thereafter re-founded engagement with Baghdad on constitutional entitlement rather than hostile confrontation: a former senior Iraqi official confirmed that constitutional engagement served as the Region's principal de-securitization mechanism, with Kurdish elites defending the settlement against amendment initiatives that could diminish guaranteed rights,⁶⁴ while a senior KRG figure described Kurdish participation in federal office-holding as a deliberate normalisation of Kurdish governance within, rather than against, the Iraqi state.⁶⁵ Budget allocation, wage negotiation, and export contracting were repeatedly referred to ministries, joint committees, and legal counsel—technical channels rather than political mobilisation—such that, in one specialist's formulation, 'the threat [has] not gone, rather it is mainly

contained as both of the sides now expect bargaining, not breakdown'.⁶⁶ This is Åtland's⁶⁷ de-securitization through administrative routine, performed by an actor the Copenhagen School did not anticipate. Its limits are equally instructive: because the 2005 settlement left energy control, revenue sharing, and the disputed territories constitutionally ambiguous, embedding moved conflict into normal politics without resolving it—and left it open to re-securitization through judicial reinterpretation, as Section 6 shows. The second mechanism was economic interdependence, pursued as security management rather than as development strategy. Senior officials rejected the language of dependence altogether, describing an integrated economy in which Ankara relies on the Kurdish market and the Region on Turkish goods, producing a 'material entanglement' that makes escalation more costly,⁶⁸ and another explicitly framed energy deals and cross-border infrastructure as tools 'to reframe its existence from a security threat to an economic partner'.⁶⁹ The insulation survived several crises: 'security issues remain politically motivated, but trade and oil exports continue, as both sides require it to continue'.⁷⁰ The third mechanism was para-diplomacy, defined in this context as the traditionally understood external activity of subnational governments⁷¹ and for a de facto state in a securitized region as a purposive tool for de-securitization. The party-based representation abroad became routinised diplomacy,⁷² as 44 states maintained offices in the Region by 2026 and the KRG had offices in 14 countries. The normalising effect is subtle but cumulative: the regularity of these channels establishes the Region as a legitimate interlocutor, whose concerns must be addressed through diplomacy and not coercion; contact is no longer a one-off event to resolve a crisis, but an institutionalised partnership on routine and sensitive files.⁷³ Even Turkey's accredited consulate in Erbil formalises an engagement previously conducted through crisis diplomacy and military-security channels.⁷⁴ Yet the same participants identified the mechanism's ceiling: 'channels of diplomacy do not eradicate threat perceptions, rather they manage them',⁷⁵ and the entire para-diplomatic edifice rests on Western, especially American, backing whose withdrawal would degrade external actors' willingness to engage.⁷⁶ The fourth mechanism was discursive: the reframing of Kurdish aspiration from independence to constitutional federalism, of conflict narratives into partnership narratives, and of the Region into 'a factor of stability' whose stability matters to Ankara, Tehran, and Damascus as much as to Erbil.⁷⁷ Masoud Barzani's post-referendum formulation is representative: 'What is important to us is that any Iraqi has full faith in federalism based on the constitution, believes in implementing the constitution, passing laws related to its articles, and enforcing those laws that have been enacted but not yet implemented... Any party that commits to implementing the constitution will be our closest ally'.⁷⁸ Nechirvan Barzani's insistence that 'federalism is not a threat to Iraq—it is the only way to keep Iraq united'⁷⁹ inverts the threat narrative: centralisation, not federalism, endangers Iraqi unity.

5.3 The 2017 Referendum: Overreach and Reversal

The independence referendum of 25 September 2017 illustrates both the reality of de facto securitizing agency and its structural limits. The referendum, held not just in the Region's recognised borders, but also in the disputed areas of Kirkuk,⁸⁰ was a securitizing move: it cast Kurdish statehood as an existential question lying outside ordinary Iraqi federal politics.⁸¹ One seasoned analyst read it in exactly these terms at the time: 'This referendum is not just about independence but also about redefining Kurdistan's place in the regional order... Whether Barzani's intentions were sincere or not, this is an act of security'.⁸²

The decision provoked co-ordinated counter-securitization by Iraq, Turkey, and Iran: counter-offensives that within weeks recaptured much of the disputed territory, together with flight bans and border closures. The cumulative effect was to reduce the Region's autonomy below its post-2003 level and to reverse the territorial gains made since 2014.⁸³ The Region's register shifted quickly: within months the KRG undertook to 'discuss with the Iraqi government within the bounds of the Iraqi constitution'.⁸⁴

Three analytical conclusions follow. First, de facto states can securitize, but they do so under constraints sovereign securitizers do not face: the same move that would have consolidated a state's position undid a decade of the Region's de-securitization gains. Second, de-securitization by a de facto state is reversible in principle: it is not an accomplishment but a process requiring continuous maintenance, and it fails when the liminal actor makes moves that reactivate existential concern among sovereign neighbours. Third, the episode fixed autonomy-without-exit as the Region's operating condition after 2017.

6. Juridical Re-Subordination and the Fiscal Weapon, 2022–2026

If 2017 defined the ceiling of the Region's autonomy, the period from 2022 defined the contest over its floor—conducted not by armies but by courts and finance ministries. The juridical track opened immediately after the referendum: on 6 November 2017 the Federal Supreme Court held that no Iraqi governorate had a constitutional right to secede. From 2022 the Court built systematically on that foundation, first ruling the KRG's 2007 Oil and

Gas Law unconstitutional on 15 February 2022,⁸⁵ then declaring the mechanism of monthly federal transfers to the Region unlawful on 25 January 2023, and, on 2 February 2024, requiring the federal government to assume direct control of the Region's finances, including salary payments to the public sector.⁸⁶ In a separate February 2024 ruling initiated by a PUK complaint, the minority-quota seats of the Kurdistan parliament were abolished, bringing the number of seats to 100 instead of 111.⁸⁷

Participants framed the campaign in explicitly securitizing terms. 'The verdicts of the Federal Supreme Court are not merely legal verdicts but also tools for recentralization of power', in the account of one participant with close knowledge of the Erbil–Baghdad negotiations, who characterised Baghdad as using the judiciary to re-subordinate the Region to the federal centre — restrained, on his reading, only by the Region's residual military capacity — and traced the political rationale for the campaign to the referendum.⁸⁸ A more critical respondent agreed that the decisions 'exert a coercive effect from the inside and the outside on the Region';⁸⁹ and added that the Kurdish reaction itself 'has lost its cohesion and turned into a variety of party positions'.⁹⁰ The scholarly assessment converges: the Court's rulings have served as 'tactics or tools in the ongoing power struggles' between Iraq's post-2003 elites rather than as consensus-based conflict resolution.⁹¹

The fiscal dimension proved the sharpest instrument. The March 2023 ruling of the International Chamber of Commerce's arbitration tribunal, which found Turkey liable to Iraq for approximately US\$1.5 billion over unauthorised Kurdish exports through the Iraq–Turkey Pipeline, prompted Ankara to close the line, halting some 430,000 barrels per day of exports and severing the fiscal base of Kurdish de facto statehood for thirty months.⁹² A senior presidential advisor drew the political consequence: oil independence 'was a way of exerting political [leverage]; without it, our negotiating position is not from strength, but weakness'.⁹³ Salary domiciliation compounded the exposure. Between 2023 and 2025 the federal government transferred only 41 per cent of the Region's legally approved entitlements,⁹⁴ and in 2025 funded only ten of twelve monthly salary cycles, having suspended transfers altogether in May of that year.⁹⁵ Participants read the salary file as sovereignty by other means: 'When the Iraqi government holds direct control over the KRI public employees' salaries, it also controls loyalty. This is not just an economic matter; it is an issue of legitimacy';⁹⁶ 'salary payments are the most visible duties of government; when [the] Iraqi government directly provides, the public increasingly perceive [the] Iraqi government rather than [the] KRG as their government'.⁹⁷ External analysis converges on the characterisation of budget transfers as weaponised.⁹⁸ The export resumption of 27 September 2025 must be read against this background, because its terms consolidated rather than reversed re-centralisation. According to the tripartite interim deal between the federal government, the KRG and eight international oil companies, the crude is sold exclusively through Ceyhan, with producers paying a fixed price per barrel based on an escrow system, with initial shipments of 180,000–190,000 bpd reaching an average of approximately 218,000 bpd by the end of 2025, amounting to more than US\$1.2 billion.⁹⁹ The arrangement exemplifies the practice-based de-securitization outlined in Section 5, and it remained fragile. It was time-bound, running three months to the end of December 2025 and renewed thereafter on a rolling basis rather than placed on a durable footing; it remained hostage to the unresolved constitutional question; and in March 2026 a further variable emerged when Ankara gave notice of termination of the 1973 pipeline treaty with effect from 27 July 2026, since when a new bilateral energy framework has been under negotiation.¹⁰⁰ The regional environment sharpened in 2026 when Gulf export routes were severed during the war between Iran on one side and Israel and the United States on the other, and the northern pipeline consequently assumed greater strategic importance for Baghdad than at any point in a decade.¹⁰¹ This analysis concludes with the formation of Iraq's new government. On 14 May 2026, six months after the November 2025 elections, parliament approved Ali al-Zaidi as prime minister at the head of a government that was yet to be fully completed.¹⁰² The new premier instructed that salaries be paid to the Region's employees without 'administrative or political obstacles' and on a par with other provinces,¹⁰³ while the KRG's prime minister pushed for the salary list to be removed from the overall political conflict — a 'compartmentalisation' of the federal dyad itself. In the following weeks, however, senior members of the federal parliament called for a ban on transfers, and transfers continued only sporadically. The Region's fiscal lifelines thus remained tied to federal institutions as they had been since 2022, each interim arrangement restating the underlying constitutional question rather than resolving it.¹⁰⁴

7. Compartmentalised Amity–Enmity: The Turkey and Iran Dyads

7.1 The Paradox and Its Mechanism

No relationship sits less easily on RSCT's amity–enmity spectrum than Erbil–Ankara: Turkey is at once the Region's principal economic partner and its principal military adversary. The combination has led analysts to

speak of the 'golden handcuffs' in which Turkey holds the Region. Turkish firms dominate its construction and consumer markets, and from 2014 until the closure of 2023 Ankara carried Kurdish crude to world markets.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, Turkey has prosecuted the successive Claw operations since 2019 in Duhok governorate, and maintains a permanent network of bases and forward posts amounting to a de facto security zone on Iraqi soil, estimated at roughly one hundred positions extending some sixty kilometres deep by 2022.¹⁰⁶ One senior official summed up the contradiction: 'Ankara is our main trading partner and our main security risk at the same time. Turkish products saturate our markets, and Turkish firms construct our infrastructure, but Turkish drones and artillery also strike our rural communities... We live with this contradiction every day'.¹⁰⁷ Read through a state-centric amity-enmity lens, the dyad is incoherent. Read as compartmentalisation, it becomes intelligible: amity and enmity are held separate, are sectorally bounded, and do not cross-contaminate.¹⁰⁸ Energy flowed and trade continued through the political rupture, and diplomatic engagement proceeded alongside cross-border strikes. The KRI case has two features that extend the concept. First, the insulation is partisan as well as sectoral: Ankara does not see the Region as a single security unit, but co-operates closely with the KDP while increasingly securitizing the PUK for its tolerance of PKK activity around Sulaymaniyah. This bifurcation has an economic foundation in the KDP's dependence on Turkey.¹⁰⁹ Second, the insulation is weak, and its mode of failure is clear: the March 2023 episode showed that a judicial shock can breach the wall between the economic and security compartments at a stroke, converting an arbitration decision into a fiscal and therefore political crisis. Compartmentalisation is therefore an achieved condition of the dyad rather than a structural property of it: it is actively managed, and it can collapse.

7.2 The PKK Variable, 2025–2026

The Turkey-PKK peace process that unfolded across the analysis period tests the dyad's future architecture. Following Abdullah Öcalan's February 2025 call, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire on 1 March 2025, formally dissolved at its congress on 12 May 2025, staged a symbolic weapons-burning near Sulaymaniyah on 11 July 2025, and announced on 26 October 2025 the withdrawal of all its forces from Turkish territory into northern Iraq, with the progressive vacating of bases in the Zap and adjacent areas thereafter.¹¹⁰ Turkey's parliamentary commission adopted its framework report in February 2026, but by mid-2026 the process had stalled over sequencing—Ankara demanding complete demilitarisation before legal reform, the Kurdish side demanding legal guarantees as a condition of completing it.¹¹¹ For the Region, the process is double-edged in ways that confirm the analysis above. The removal of the PKK's armed presence would dissolve the declared rationale for Turkey's basing network, potentially de-securitizing the dyad's military compartment; yet the withdrawal has, in the interim, concentrated PKK cadres inside KRI territory, and Ankara's deepening bilateral track with Baghdad—the Development Road project, joint counter-terrorism mechanisms, and Iraq's March 2024 proscription of the PKK—increasingly routes Turkey's regional engagement above and around Erbil rather than through it.¹¹² Whether Turkey reciprocates the PKK's withdrawal with a drawdown of its own remains, at the time of writing, an open question on which the compartmentalised structure of the dyad will turn.

7.3 Iran: Containment through Institutions and Proxies

The Iranian dyad exhibits the inverse configuration: a thin economic compartment subordinated to a strategy of containment. Tehran's leverage operates through aligned armed formations entrenched in the disputed territories since October 2017, through institutional influence over the federal judicial and budgetary organs whose rulings have constrained the Region since 2022, through direct strikes—including the missile and drone waves of September–November 2022 against Iranian-Kurdish opposition positions in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah—and through its long-standing relationship with the PUK.¹¹³ A veteran PUK figure described the architecture from within: 'The approach of Tehran toward Erbil is indirect but wide-ranging. Iran does not need to challenge the KRI through military means—it acts via channels such as the federal court, through its proxies, the budget process, and through its aligned political actors in Baghdad. Each decision that subtracts power from [the] KRI and adds it to Baghdad strengthens Iran's strategic position in Iraq'.¹¹⁴ The Region's selective economic engagement with Iran is therefore not a partnership but a component of that containment architecture, whose securitized object is the possibility of independence rather than autonomy as such.¹¹⁵ In both dyads, the contested zones cluster the system's vulnerabilities: 'it's the most volatile node in the entire sub-complex... all the vulnerabilities of Kurdistan converge: Baghdad's aspirations, Iran's influence, the PKK issue of the Turks, our own divisions...'.¹¹⁶

8. Internal Fragmentation as a Structural Multiplier

The final pathway through which the KRI shapes regional security runs through its own divisions. The KDP-PUK duopoly institutionalised by the 1998 Washington Agreement left the Region effectively divided into two

one-party statelets with separate Peshmerga units, intelligence agencies, revenue sources, and foreign backers.¹¹⁷ The Peshmerga's legal status — 'in yet another grey area, between federal and regional security structures'¹¹⁸ — is compounded by the force's partisan division, with successive reform programmes foundering on that division and most units remaining loyal to a party rather than to the KRG.¹¹⁹ One participant framed unification as a constitutional obligation, describing the Peshmerga as 'part of the defence system of the Iraqis' who accordingly 'should be paid, equipped, trained and armed' because 'they are a constitutional force'.¹²⁰ That is an aspiration; its non-realisation is the analytical datum.

Fragmentation feeds regional instability through a self-reinforcing external circuit. Turkey and Iran both cultivate these cleavages—Turkey through the KDP, Iran through the PUK—using intra-Kurdish division as an instrument of containment.¹²¹ The cost of the mechanism was clearest in October 2017, when an Iranian-brokered withdrawal by a PUK faction delivered Kirkuk without a battle: 'Kirkuk was not lost on the battlefield — it was lost at the negotiating table between Kurdish parties and Iran'; the withdrawal was, on this participant's account, 'an indicator to all regional actors that the KRI is not a [unified] security actor'.¹²² It resurfaced in a federal legal register in 2022–2024, when multiple judicial interventions by the Federal Supreme Court, the most impactful of which was the quota-seats decision, were rooted in legal disputes among Kurds, transforming federal institutions into an arena for Kurdish infighting.¹²³ And it reappeared at the close of the analysis period in a novel register: in April 2026 the PUK secured the Iraqi presidency for its candidate through non-Kurdish parliamentary support, in a vote the KDP boycotted—the first occasion since 2005 on which the presidency was filled without a prior intra-Kurdish settlement, and a departure that contemporaneous analysis read as evidence of the two parties' willingness to trade collective Kurdish leverage for partisan position.¹²⁴ The pattern generalises the argument of Section 4: the marginal-liminal configuration is sustained not only by external structure but by internal polarity. As one participant put it, the governing class has made the Region 'the primary agent of its own vulnerabilities rather than merely a target of external interferences'¹²⁵—a testimonial judgement that the documentary record of 2017, 2022–2024, and 2026 substantially corroborates. Threat perception towards Baghdad is itself factionally produced rather than a stable property of 'the KRI';¹²⁶ the unit that RSCT would have to admit is internally differentiated, and its internal differentiation is constitutive of, not incidental to, the subcomplex's dynamics.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined how a constitutionally embedded, unrecognised, internally divided polity has acted as a security agent within the Middle Eastern regional order across two decades of shocks. Four findings answer the research question. First, the KRI performs securitization and elicits counter-securitization in patterns indistinguishable in kind—though not in capacity—from those of sovereign units; its 2017 referendum demonstrated both the reality of that agency and the asymmetric limits within which it operates. Second, its de-securitization has proceeded through practice—constitutional embedding, economic entanglement, para-diplomacy—rather than through speech acts, and it is conditional and reversible: an accomplishment requiring maintenance, revocable by the actor's own overreach or by juridical reinterpretation from above, as the 2022–2026 re-subordination demonstrated. Third, its principal external relationships are compartmentalised, holding amity and enmity apart within single dyads through sectoral and partisan insulation whose fragility the 2023 pipeline closure exposed. Fourth, its internal fragmentation operates as a structural multiplier that converts Kurdish agency into regional instability and invites the external penetration it fears—most recently in the April 2026 presidency vote. The contributions specified in the introduction can now be restated with their warrant. Conceptually, autonomy-without-exit has been shown to function as a durable configuration: nine years after the referendum, the Region neither exits nor dissolves, and the configuration's stability is produced by the very mechanisms—embedding, entanglement, compartmentalisation—this article has traced. Analytically, the practice-based account of de-securitization and the extension of compartmentalisation to sovereign—de facto dyads give RSCT instruments it currently lacks for cases where amity and enmity coexist. Empirically, the interview evidence establishes how the Region's own decision-makers and their federal and regional interlocutors understand these mechanisms from within, across an evidentiary window—March 2025 to March 2026—that no existing study covers. Theoretically, the case grounds the Kurdish Security Subcomplex claim at its anchor node: the KRI exhibits boundary ambiguity across the disputed territories, participates in an anarchic configuration of autonomous Kurdish units, occupies one pole of a multipolar intra-Kurdish distribution of power with divergent external alignments, and is bound to Kurdish actors elsewhere by a social construction that combines solidarity, rivalry, and shared securitization by host states—the four variables by which Buzan and Wæver¹²⁷ identify a security formation. What a single case cannot do is demonstrate the subcomplex's second node; the claim

advanced here is therefore deliberately bounded: the KRI is a sub-state unit functioning as a subcomplex anchor, and RSCT requires revision to see it. Three implications follow for the field. For RSCT, the case shows that admitting de facto states is not an additive exercise: securitization operates differently under liminal sovereignty, amity–enmity is not binary for such units, and internal differentiation must be treated as a unit-level variable rather than noise. For the study of de facto states, the KRI demonstrates that non-recognition is compatible with dense, formalised security interdependence—including a direct great-power partnership—and that the fiscal, not the military, instrument has become the parent state’s weapon of choice. For policy, the Region’s dual character counsels engagement that supports its stabilising functions—counter-terrorism, humanitarian absorption, mediation—while anticipating that any move read as exit-seeking will regenerate coordinated counter-securitization. Three limitations qualify the findings. The cohort, though positionally stratified, is weighted towards Kurdish and KRG-adjacent perspectives, with Iraqi, Turkish, and Iranian official positions reconstructed from documents rather than testimony. Nine interviews support analytical depth within the case, not generalisation beyond it. And several processes analysed—the export arrangement, the salary file, the Turkey–PKK endgame, the incomplete Iraqi cabinet—remained open at 30 June 2026. Three extensions follow: a paired analysis of the hybrid-liminal Syrian Kurdish case, to test whether the mechanisms identified here vary systematically with liminal position; the application of the revised framework to de facto entities in other complexes, notably the post-Soviet space; and, as the Turkey–PKK process matures, a study of what de-securitization of the subcomplex’s most militarised dyad does to the compartmentalised architecture described above. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq will not soon resolve its liminality. That is precisely why the theory of regional security must learn to see it: not as an anomaly awaiting statehood or reintegration, but as what it has been for three decades—a unit of the region’s security order, autonomous without exit.

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هوامش البحث

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