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Why Iraq's disputed territories pose a challenge for international engagement

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Introduction

International efforts aimed at fostering long-term stability and economic recovery in Iraq have encountered significant challenges over recent decades. Despite attempts by donors and diplomatic partners to transition away from counterterrorism operations towards strategic partnerships,[1] such initiatives risk being undermined by the unresolved status of Iraq's 'disputed territories'. Against this backdrop, this policy brief explores how these status disputes in the country's contested borderlands impact international, state, multilateral (NATO, UN agencies) and other organisational efforts (e.g. oil companies, security consultants, non-governmental organisations) efforts to maintain stability.

More specifically, in drawing on research conducted for the Contested Borderland Elite Trajectories project,[2] the paper aims to move beyond conventional narratives of ethnic conflict and oil competition. Instead, the focus is on how frontier dynamics shape governance, resource management and property regimes. The evidence base consists of 41 semi-structured interviews conducted in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI),[3] undertaken with the aim of better understanding the territorialisation strategies adopted by Kurdish elites and local communities in the disputed territories.

These disputed territories, which are demographically diverse and cut across the governorates of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala and Salah al-Din, are located where the peripheries of the KRI and federal Iraq meet. Addressing the frontier dynamics at play within these territories is, ultimately, a prerequisite for achieving durable stability across the entirety of Iraq, the KRI included. With this in mind, it is useful here to lay out the characteristics of the disputed territories most relevant to the argument laid out in this paper:

- Ethnicity and sectarianism have long been instrumentalised in the pursuit of political, military and economic interests. This creates and sustains divisions between Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen.

- The reach of the official security apparatus of both

1 The UK, for instance, has sought to strengthen state capacity and encourage infrastructural development. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 'UK-Iraq development partnership summary', pub. Online 17 July 2023.

2 The Contested Borderland Elite Trajectories (CBET) project is funded by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development from the UK government.

3 Interviews conducted in December 2025 and January 2026. Potential interviewees were identified on the basis of their expertise and direct experience in relation to disputed territories. The exclusive focus on Kurdish perspectives allowed for an in-depth examination of the views of an historically disempowered ethnonational community that lays claim to territories over which they have never had exclusive sovereign authority (except briefly in some areas like Kirkuk in 2014–17, or where they currently share power with Arabs and Turkmen).

the federal and regional governments is often limited, leading to a proliferation of non-state armed groups and local militias. Many disputed territories served as battlegrounds in the fight against ISIS when the group was at its peak in 2014, with Sinjar the site of a genocide against the Yezidis.

- There is also a multitude of informal institutions, with many residents turning to tribal and militia groups for security and dispute resolution. By contrast, official security forces, which are often viewed by local people as belonging to a rival ethnic or sectarian group, tend to be mistrusted.

- Clientelism and patronage have a profound impact on the local economy and society. The most influential patrons are the federal government in Baghdad and its network built on financial, budget, licensing and administrative mechanisms; Kurdish ruling parties, specifically the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK); the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) leadership, specifically the Badr and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq and their local affiliates; the Shi'a clergy and its movements, specifically Al-Sistani and Al-Sadr; Sunni political blocs, most prominently those led by Al-Halbousi and Al-Kahnjar; Arab, Turkmen and Kurdish tribal leaders; and the neighbouring states such as Iran and Türkiye.

- Several of the disputed territories are rich in hydrocarbons, with Kirkuk containing some of the largest oil and gas fields in the country.[4] Given that oil accounts for 82–90 per cent of Iraq's total revenue, the division of revenues between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government in Baghdad arising from increased oil production in Kirkuk has proved to be a persistent source of tension.[5] Recent revenue-sharing agreements have, however, helped alleviate such frictions.[6]

The importance of Iraq's disputed territories

Beyond the matter of who controls the territory and its resources, the frontier between the KRG and the federal government of Iraq holds deep symbolic importance. From a Kurdish national identity point of view, the fact that Arabs in Baghdad exert control over the disputed territories is an ongoing historical injustice and violation of human rights. Conversely, the Iraqi federal government and non-Kurdish communities (such as Turkmen and Christians) view sovereign control over the area by Baghdad as vital for the unity of the state and the interests of diverse local populations.

As a result, elites in both the KRG and Baghdad have adopted uncompromising positions. There is also rivalry within the Kurdish elite, who compete with each other to showcase their nationalist credentials. Added to this, the territories' disputed status empowers militias and tribal leaders, while the abundance of oil and gas in Kirkuk especially has reshaped the local economy and enabled extensive patronage. These dynamics shore up the power of current elites and reduce the space for critical voices, especially from civil society.

From an international policy perspective, external political, military and economic engagement in Iraq's disputed territories risks empowering local actors with a vested interest in maintaining an insecure status quo. Given this, any high-level policy framework needs to take account of how informal and non-state dynamics in the Iraq/KRI borderlands influence state-level processes and governance. Economic deals aimed at developing infrastructure may in fact empower local militias and encourage patronage politics, further entrenching negative frontier dynamics and leading to instability and insecurity. It is therefore imperative that the international community find ways of promoting mechanisms capable of bringing together all key parties to resolve the status of the disputed territories.

4 US Energy Information Administration, 'Iraq', pub. online 14 July 2025 (last update); Draw Media, 'Iraq's revenue breakdown in January 2026', pub. online 29 April 2026.

5 Following the March 2026 resumption of crude exports from Kirkuk to Ceyhan in Türkiye via a pipeline managed by the Qatari North Oil Company, plans were announced to increase production from an initial 170,000 barrels per day to 250,000 barrels per day. Meanwhile, bp was awarded a contract, estimated to be worth US$25 billion in March 2025 to redevelop several giant oil fields in and around Kirkuk. Ahmed Rasheed, Yomna Ehab and Muayad Hameed, 'Iraq resumes Kirkuk crude exports via Ceyhan after Baghdad-KRG deal', Reuters, pub. online 18 March 2026; bp, 'bp and Iraq finalize contract for Kirkuk redevelopment', pub. online 26 March 2025.

6 Victoria Taylor and Yerevan Saeed, 'Is the Baghdad-Erbil oil deal a blueprint for settlement or a stopgap?', Atlantic Council, September 2025.

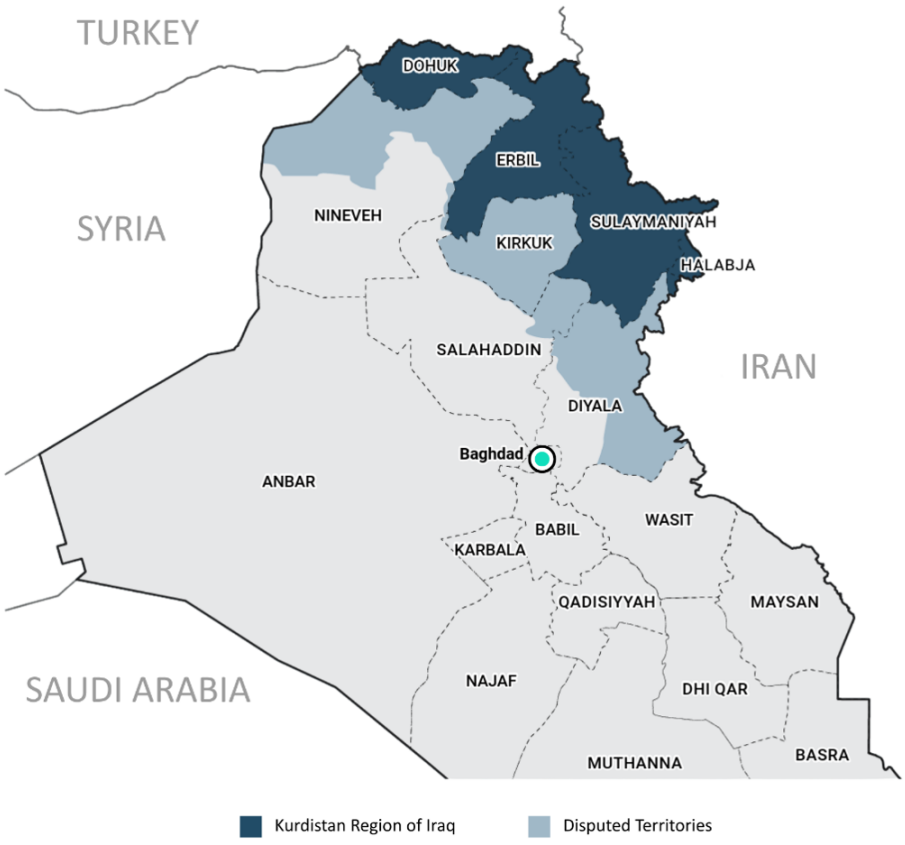

Figure 1. Map of the disputed territories in Iraq

Source: Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, Iraq's disputed internal boundaries after ISIS: heterogenous actors vying for influence (LSE Middle East Centre, February 2019).

Past and present of the disputed territories

The contested status of the disputed territories is the product of both British colonial processes and prolonged 'Arabisation' under Saddam Hussein.[7] The territories in question run along an approximately 1,000-kilometre line from Sinjar in northwest Iraq (where the border meets Syria) to Khanaqin and Mandali in southeast Iraq (where it borders Iran), with Kirkuk at its centre (see Figure 1).[8]

In total, the territories encompass about 37,000 square kilometres. While it is difficult to determine their exact population given the territories cut across multiple governorates, Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala and Salah al-Din governorates together host a population of approximately 10 million people (based on the 2024 census).[9]

Repeated efforts have been made to resolve the disputed status of the territories since 2003, all of which have failed. Article 58 of the 2004 Transitional Administrative Law (the provisional constitution put in place in the wake of power being transferred to Iraq from the coalition that overthrew Saddam) acknowledged the existence of disputed territories (including namechecking Kirkuk). The following year, Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution outlined a method for resolving disputed status. This involved: 1) a process of 'normalisation', including adjustment of the demographic balance to reflect the period prior to Saddam's regime, as well as restoration of property rights; 2) a national census; and 3) a

7 Kurds have claimed the disputed territories ever since they were denied statehood after the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. The depth of the contestation increased significantly, however, in the wake of oil being discovered in Kirkuk in the 1920s, escalating even further with the Kurdish insurgency against the Iraqi regime in the 1960s and the intensified Arabisation of the territories once Saddam Hussein officially came to power in 1979. For more on the Arabisation of disputed territories in general, and Kirkuk in particular, see Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: the ethnopolitics of conflict and compromise* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

8 Article 2 of the KRI's 2009 draft constitution also specifies the disputed territories. For more on which areas the KRG regard as disputed, see Mohammed Ihsan, *Report on the administrative changes in Kirkuk and the disputed regions* (Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Extra Regional Affairs, 2014).

9 According to the 2024 census, the total population of Iraq is 46.1 million. Approximately 5.5 million people are estimated to be Kurdish. Philip Loft, Kurdistan Region of Iraq: introductory Profile (House of Commons Library, 2025).

referendum in disputed areas on whether to make the relevant territories part of the Kurdistan Region.

Although the above process was to be completed by the end of 2007, the KRG maintains that Baghdad never fully implemented the normalisation phase, nor has there been any serious move towards a census or referendum. Various reasons have been offered for why the process stalled, including an unrealistic time-frame; an inexperienced and corrupt bureaucracy; an inability to address such complex issues as property disputes or the right of return for displaced people; lack of funding; and an absence of will among Arab politicians reluctant to accede to Kurdish ambitions regarding control over Kirkuk.[10]

In 2014, at the height of the war with ISIS, the KRG and its Peshmerga (military and security forces) seized control of the disputed territories. However, a KRG-instituted referendum on independence in 2017 that presented the disputed territories as part of a future Kurdistan prompted a fierce backlash from Baghdad and the international community, leading to the expulsion of the Kurdish Peshmerga from these areas. As a result, the Kurds now control approximately 40 per cent less territory than they did before the referendum.[11]

The disputed areas, including territories both outside of and under Kurdish control — most of which are multi-ethnic and include not only Kurdish but Arab, Turkmen, Assyrians, Yezidi, Shabak and Christian populations — contain some of the largest oil and gas fields in Iraq. The KRG itself does not refer to the territories as disputed. Rather, as one senior KRG civil servant asserted: 'We don't say disputed areas because political terminology comes into it. We say Kurdish areas outside the KRI borders or Kurdistani Areas Outside the Border Areas [...] Occupied is the term that we use'.[12]

The KRI's own division of territory into 'green' (largely controlled by the PUK) and 'yellow' (largely controlled by the KDP) zones further complicates matters. The two parties control different political and economic centres (the KDP in Erbil and Dohuk; the PUK in Sulaymaniyah), impacting who takes the lead when addressing issues within various parts of the disputed territories. For instance, Sinjar in the north (the site of the Yezidi genocide) is largely seen as within the KDP's ambit, whereas Kirkuk, along with its oil and gas fields, is largely seen as the PUK's preserve. Regional and international actors seeking to pursue their own interests also have a hand in influencing local dynamics. Of particular note in this regard are Iran's connection with the armed PMUs, Türkiye's support for Turkmen populations in Kirkuk, and bp's presence in Kirkuk.

Frontier dynamics and key actors

The disputed territories represent a 'frontier' for the Iraqi government and the KRG alike. In exploring the implications of this, the frontier should be seen as not merely a line on a map, but rather a physical space or zone subject to different political dynamics from the rest of the territory, often with no single authority in complete control.[13] In many cases, the state and its institutions are incapable of fully penetrating a frontier, and thus struggle to enforce laws, build infrastructure or even collect taxes.

Frontier dynamics actively dissolve existing social orders, property systems and political jurisdictions, creating a vacuum where instability paradoxically becomes the only stable feature. Typically, frontiers are spaces where different cultures and populations encounter each other. Such encounters can rapidly descend into conflict, particularly when the frontier in question — as is the case with the disputed territories — contains important economic resources.

Beyond issues of territory and material wealth, frontiers are also key sites for symbolic contests. This is reflected in the former Kurdish Minister for

10 These were recurrent themes across many of our interviews with multiple former and current senior PUK and KDP officials as well as civil servants working on the disputed territories, and various journalists and civil society leaders. They also reflect the accepted view in the policy and academic literature – see for instance International Crisis Group, Reviving UN mediation on Iraq's disputed internal boundaries (2018); Peter Bartu, 'Wrestling with the integrity of a nation: the disputed internal boundaries in Iraq', International Affairs 86: 6, 2010, pp. 1329–43; Anderson and Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk*.

11 Alia Chughtai, 'Territory lost by Kurds in Iraq', Al Jazeera, pub. online 1 Nov 2017.

12 December 2025, Erbil. In this context, 'Kurdistani' is an adjective used by Iraqi Kurdish political elites to describe areas they consider to be rightfully Kurdish while also acknowledging they are multi-ethnic and should be governed as such under KRI sovereignty.

13 Eric Lewis Beverley describes 'frontier zones' at the edges of empires as in-between or liminal spaces characterised by incomplete state control over that space, leading to particular economic, legal and political dynamics. E. L. Beverly, 'Frontier as resource: law, crime and sovereignty on the margins of empire', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55: 2, 2013, pp. 241–72. For more on how to understand frontiers and how they open space for contested territory, see Mattias Borg Rasmussen and Christian Lund, 'Reconfiguring frontier spaces: the territorialization of resource control', *World Development* 101, 2018, pp. 388–99.

Extra Regional Affairs' claim that, 'Kurdish history and honor ties are deeply rooted to these [disputed] lands'.[14] In order to justify their claims over frontier areas, Kurdish political leaders have frequently engaged in a 'symbolic' construction of the disputed territories as naturally and rightfully Kurdish. Such claims are usually rooted in some form of ethnohistorical analysis, with this 'natural' right painted as having been unnaturally stripped from the Kurds due to the selfish interests of rivals – whether this be the British during the colonial period; the Arabs throughout Iraq's modern history; or, in the current instance, Western powers, Türkiye and Iran engaging in predatory international politics.[15]

Various historical traumas are invoked as part of this narrative, including British colonialism, the Sykes–Picot Agreement, Saddam Hussein's Arabisation policies, the non-implementation of Article 140, and the failure of the US to adequately support the Kurds following their victory over ISIS. Kurdish identity is thereby framed in terms of sacrifice and suffering, with the longstanding efforts of Kurds to fend off 'predators' granting them a rightful claim to the land.[16] By contrast, Baghdad's claims to said land are dismissed as 'greedy', focused on oil rather than 'legitimate' ethnonational ties. As one former official stated, 'Kirkuk is for all people living there – Turkmen, Christians, Sunnis, Shias – but the identity of Kirkuk is Kurdish'.[17]

This context has fed into the frontier dynamics currently at play across Iraq's disputed territories, with the persistent instability characteristic of these areas allowing a diverse array of actors to come to prominence. It is to these dynamics and actors that the paper now turns.

Security, instability and resource capture

Since 2003, the disputed territories have experienced a chronic security vacuum, with formal state institutions consistently weaker than elsewhere in Iraq.[18] Such institutions are often outstripped by the informal practices of non-state actors, such as the security apparatus provided by local militias or the patronage offered by political parties. The disputed territories have also been marked by longstanding conflict and tensions, which fall along various military, economic, ethnic and sectarian lines. This state of affairs is reflected in the fact that de facto control has changed hands numerous times over the past 20 years, from initial Baghdad rule (2005–13) to the rise of ISIS (2013–14) to Kurdish control during the counter-offensive (2014–17) to the current return to Baghdad authority (2017–present).

Interviewees described local Yezidi people in Sinjar as relying on Yezidi militias for their security.[19] Moreover, Kurdish residents of Kirkuk were, until recently, still turning to Kurdish forces for their security and dispute resolution rather than using the local courts (conversely, when Kirkuk was under Kurdish control prior to 2017, it was Arab residents who refused to recognise the Kurdish-controlled legal apparatus).[20] Meanwhile, local militias of all backgrounds continue to extract money from international and local companies working in the oil industry, despite the companies already possessing licences issued by the government in Baghdad.[21] In short, complex and competitive power dynamics characterise relations between (among others) central state institutions, KRG institutions, political parties, militias and tribal leaders.

In many areas, including Kirkuk, armed groups such as the PMUs (referred to under the collective banner of Hashd al-Shaabi) often play a bigger role than official police or military forces. As a result, residents

14 Ihsan, *Report on the administrative changes*.

15 This perspective arose in numerous interviews, including those with former KRG and senior PUK and KDP officials (December 2025, Erbil; January 2026 Sulaymaniyah).

16 Ibid.

17 Interview with a former KRG senior official (December 2025, Erbil).

18 This is not to claim that state institutions are universally accepted elsewhere in Iraq, simply that there is a particular dynamic in the disputed territories that means state institutions are less likely to be seen as binding.

19 Interviews with Yezidi civil society organisation leader (December 2025, online), Yezidi political representative (January 2026, online) and human rights civil society leader (December 2025, Erbil).

20 Interviews with senior members of PUK party organisation (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah); former member of Kirkuk council (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

21 Interview with an oil company analyst (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

must navigate competing claims to authority on an everyday basis, with one interviewee noting: 'Especially after 2017 … certain armed groups that belong to Hashd got more power, more control. So state institutions are weaker in the disputed territories. The Ministry for Oil, ministries for internal affairs, market regulation, economic architecture, economic activities in energy services, security, etc. are weaker'.[22]

The militias operating in the disputed areas are affiliated with different ethnic or sectarian groups. Alongside the Kurdish Peshmerga and Asayish (domestic security forces) present in Kirkuk are both Kurdish and Turkmen Shi'a and Sunni, each with their own tribal and sectarian affiliations. Militias permeate civic life and are embedded in local politics, bureaucracy and business, often supported by Iran or Baghdad. As a presidential adviser observed: 'What brought these new people is the culture of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. They have their own security alongside the state security, their own department of customs, their own department of economics alongside the state's … If you need to do anything in the governorate you have to get permission both from the government authorities and al-Hashd al-Shaabi authorities'.[23]

Competition over a wide range of resources – whether oil, jobs, business deals, territory, security checkpoints, recruitment, construction permits, or land and property – variously generates, weakens or consolidates influential actors. As a result, political actors and militias looking to strengthen their local power base in Iraq's frontier spaces have increasingly come to view the capture of resources as their overriding goal. This in turn has prompted changes in governorate- and district-level governors, security control structures and resource distributions.

Attempts by local elites to co-opt or coerce communities often lead to contradictory dynamics: on the one hand, people come to resent their lack of influence on political and economic outcomes; on the other, they must continue to adhere to the prevailing socio-political regime in order to get things done, including following party-controlled processes. The procedure for getting approval to carry out a development or economic project can vary widely depending on the area involved, and may change over time. As such, residents must learn to navigate complex, fluid, often vague processes. In each case, the specific combination of overlapping structures – political parties, tribal affiliations, religious authorities and oil companies – can lead to different outcomes for different people.

Intra-Kurdish rivalry

Internal KRI politics have recently undergone a generational shift. Whereas previous leaders, most notably Masoud Barzani of the KDP and Jalal Talabani of the PUK, were revered as revolutionary figures fighting for Kurdish freedom, the current generation (their sons and their coterie) is perceived as venal by the interviewees. Interviewees spoke of a 'Gulf mentality' that places elite enrichment above ethnic solidarity.[24]

The result is a multi-level game in which elites pursue policies designed to advance their personal position within the KRI and Iraq. Nationalism is frequently weaponised: the KDP accuses the PUK of losing Kirkuk to Baghdad and aligning with Iranian Shi'as, while the PUK accuses the KDP of intentionally failing to resolve governance issues and using the disputed territories as a political 'stick' with which to beat it.[25] Meanwhile, both parties are wary of a new administrative Arabisation being pushed by Baghdad, which includes reassigning Kurdish administrative posts to other groups.

Despite this intra-Kurdish rivalry, the two main parties have managed to maintain a duopoly through wide-ranging patronage and clientelism. The KRG-controlled public sector and the Peshmerga serve as massive employment engines, imposing party loyalty on everyday people.[26] During the 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections, for example, Peshmerga units reportedly had to prove their loyalty by sending photographs of their marked ballot papers to commanding officers.[27] Social media sites and traditional media outlets (the latter are typically owned by political parties or militia groups) play

22 Ibid.

23 Interview with a former KRG presidential adviser (December 2025, Erbil).

24 Interview with a senior non-PUK Kurdish politician (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah); a senior academic and a PhD researcher (December 2025, Erbil).

25 Interviews with four senior members of the PUK party organisation (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

26 As of 2010, 60% of the KRG workforce were in government jobs, either real or sinecure positions, largely arranged through patronage. See David McDowall, A modern history of the Kurds, 4th edition (Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 616.

27 Interview with a former KRG presidential adviser (December 2025, Erbil).

a significant role in legitimising Kurdish groups,[28] showcasing military and governance achievements while highlighting injustices supposedly committed by rivals.

Patronage networks and bureaucratic capture

In the absence of strong state institutions, patronage is the primary engine of economic power. Oil and gas revenues grant individuals, parties, militias and other actors vast stores of wealth with which to shore up their influence. The bestowing of this wealth on the wider population has created an intricate web of relations in which every means of employment is tied to party elites. As one interviewee put it: 'even for example a low-level security guard job, the chances are very high that this security company is owned by one of the parties' elites or someone close to this. So they only give jobs to those who are supporters and they do not tolerate any dissent in their strongholds'.[29]

Since 2025, all oil deals must be conducted via the national State Organization for Marketing of Oil. Nevertheless, companies affiliated with the KDP and PUK and their respective supporters are often involved in ancillary oil sector activities, such as catering, transportation, security or gas distribution. This enables corruption and feeds into KDP–PUK rivalries, with both sides competing for control over resources.[30]

Local elites also engage in 'bureaucratic capture', refusing to grant licences to external companies unless their preferred clients are hired for certain services.[31] In addition, interviewees reported that, in the absence of a strong state security apparatus, militia groups will often prevent oil trucks traversing certain roads without paying a fee (usually to a company rather than directly to the militia).[32] One interviewee working as an oil company analyst observed: 'The militias get their way through threats and fear and they have their guys in the bureaucracy. If you don't pay them [...] they don't let your paperwork go to a certain minister. They stop you at a checkpoint [...] or they could accuse you of being a member of ISIS [...] If you are an investor, you cannot handle all this headache, so you just pay'.[33]

For 'ordinary' people, this system is inescapable: public sector employment, conducting business, accessing certain neighbourhoods and obtaining a land permit all typically require approval from both government authorities and militia leaders.[34] Corruption is rife and dissent marginalised using threats of exclusion from patronage networks.

The inherent uncertainty of the frontier means that for the most part people must simply accept this ongoing reproduction of power. A former KRG minister described the prevailing psychology among local power holders as: '[t]hey want to get an advantage on everything [now] because they don't know what will happen tomorrow. Get what we can because the game will be finished soon'.[35] This opportunistic survivalism has led to a remarkably constant period of instability over recent years. Such is the paradox of the frontier: despite individual arrangements continuing to be highly unstable, the system producing them remains highly durable. The limited time horizon that elites are working to militates against longer-term institution-building, with short-term extraction prioritised instead, thereby perpetuating the cycle.

28 For instance, a Yezidi civil society leader spoke of coming under pressure from ruling officials to publicly acknowledge the support received by the Yezidis. This was despite the fact that the Yezidis were in reality often disappointed by the Kurds and remain in a highly vulnerable position (December 2025, online).

29 Interview with an analyst and researcher (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

30 Yerevan Saeed, 'Corruption and partisan politics can bring down the KRG', Al Jazeera, pub. online 1 March 2020.

31 This is akin to what happens under the power-sharing system at the national level. See Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq (Chatham House, 2021).

32 Interviews with a human rights civil society organisation leader (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah); civil society organisation leader (December 2025, Erbil); a researcher based in Kirkuk (January 2026, online); a journalist (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

33 Interview with an analyst for an oil company (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah). This theme also arose in interviews with several civil society organisation leaders and in three interviews with journalists (December 2025, Erbil; January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

34 Interviews with civil society organisation leader (December 2025, Erbil); two journalists (January 2026 Sulaymaniyah). This is echoed in prior research on corruption and the main political parties in the KRG. See Farhad Mamshai, 'Party corruption in the Kurdistan region of Iraq: context and implications', *Digest of Middle East Studies* 31, 2022, pp. 25–32.

35 December 2025, Erbil.

Civil society organisations and squeezing the public space

Civil society organisations have a long and vibrant history in Iraq generally and the KRI especially.[36] In many cases, independent civil society organisations offer a platform for community-based activism in areas neglected by the duopoly of Kurdish parties or other vested interests. As such, they can become engines for agenda-setting, forcing elites to prioritise areas they would otherwise neglect. Yezidi civil society organisations in Sinjar – which include women's rights groups, trade unions, student groups, and human rights and anti-corruption organisations – are a case in point.

These independent civil society organisations play an important role in promoting the everyday security of people in the disputed territories, standing in the way of predation by both state and non-state groups.[37] Crucially, their in-depth knowledge of local political dynamics and geography allows them to represent the needs of local people in ways more top-down interventions cannot.

In recent years, however, anti-terrorist legislation has increasingly been used to curtail protest.[38] Moreover, other legislation supposedly intended to protect civil society has been deployed to contain organisations perceived as a threat.[39] Together, diminished international funding and tightened controls imposed by the Department of Non-governmental Organisations (operating under the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers) in the name of anti-genderism and anti-terrorism have contributed to a shrinking of the independent civil society sector.

Significantly, a new breed of 'party-created' civil society groups has emerged to fill the space this has opened up. Formed by ex-politicians, or alternatively individuals connected to prominent (formal or informal) political, religious and military actors, these organisations often have an insider track on international funding bids, further sidelining independent groups.[40] Despite purporting to be neutral, the party-created civil society organisations are embedded deep within the established patronage system.

Conclusion and policy implications

Iraq's disputed territories can be understood as a frontier characterised by incomplete state power and a security vacuum. Here, amid myriad overlapping and sometimes contradictory processes, various actors vie for pre-eminence. The result is a durable instability, driven by complex frontier dynamics that will take considerable time and effort to resolve. Problematically, the actors best placed to bring about change are also those who benefit most from the current state of affairs.

If progress is not made towards resolving the status of the disputed territories, international partners risk perpetuating the present instability. To give but one example, capacity building and infrastructure support in oil-rich Kirkuk may simply end up providing new resources for local actors' frontier projects. Also concerning is the filling of the space that emerged due to pressures on civil society by new party-created civil society organisations, some of which have sought international funding at the expense of their independent civil society counterparts. Another example of the negative impact of competitive frontier dynamics can be seen in the efforts made by the US, the UK and their partner states, as well as NATO, to provide technical assistance to joint security mechanisms to Baghdad and Erbil. Despite

36 Jamal Mohammed Ameen Hussein and M. D. Moniruzzaman, 'Civil society organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan: an analysis of challenges', *Asian Affairs* 55: 2, 2024, pp. 225–42.

37 Zeynep Kaya, Feminist peace and security in the Middle East and North Africa (Oxfam, 2020).

38 Interviews with a journalist (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah); two civil society leaders (December 2025, Erbil; January 2026, Sulaymaniyah). One of the civil society organisation leaders referred to the high-profile Bahdinan prisoners case, which saw four journalists and an activist convicted of spying following the 2020 anti-government protests and sentenced to six-year prison terms. Rebaz Majeed, 'In Iraqi Kurdistan, court convicts journalists of spying', VOA, pub. online 18 February 2021.

39 The leader of a human rights civil society organisation spoke of how the Law of Non-Governmental Organisation in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (Law 1 of 2011) refers to the importance of empowering civil society, including granting permission for demonstrations. The interviewee noted that, in reality, authorities require so much unrealistic information prior to granting permission (such as the names of every protestor) that large-scale spontaneous demonstrations are effectively impossible (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

40 Interview with a civil society leader (January 2026, Sulaymaniyah).

multiple initiatives aimed at cooperation between the two, efforts to date have borne little tangible fruit.[41]

With this challenging context in mind, we conclude by highlighting the following policy implications for international actors looking to navigate the obstacles thrown up by Iraq's disputed territories:

- *Navigating constitutional and legal uncertainty (Article 140):* Despite support from international practitioners for constitutional mechanisms such as Article 140, resolution efforts continue to be stymied by political inaction and entrenched elite interests. Thus, rather than rely exclusively on high-level political will, international practice and diplomacy (for instance, UN-monitored mediation) should establish structural incentives, such as joint development zones and encouraging the creation of independent civilian committees or oversight mechanisms that address mistrust; find ways of directly engaging local stakeholders; and establish clear, internationally monitored timelines.[42]

- *Conducting multilayered research and analysis:* In Iraq, as elsewhere, policy frameworks are often formulated without sufficient analysis of how micro-level frontier politics distort macro-level stabilisation programmes such as efforts at creating joint security mechanisms. Establishing collaborative working groups of local and international academics, analysts, and civil society organisations would offer a useful means of unpacking these fluid dynamics and assessing possible military and economic risks.

- *Ensuring risk mitigation:* Even if well intentioned, development and infrastructure projects in frontier zones such as Iraq's contested territories risk reinforcing patronage networks and practices. In resource-rich areas especially (e.g. Kirkuk), international engagement requires rigorous 'do no harm' assessments, with careful auditing conducted to ensure external investments do not inadvertently consolidate militia control, further entrench frontier dynamics, increase insecurity or feed popular disillusionment with politics.

- *Safeguarding independent civic space against co-optation:* The emergence of new party-created civil society groups is further entrenching the current duopoly of political parties. Working with such groups feeds into the disputed territories' frontier dynamics, exacerbating insecurity and instability. International actors should instead support independent civil society organisations capable of crossing sectarian divides, challenging the dominant political parties, and holding elite actors to account.

41 One of the KRG's purported objectives is to have a stable partnership with Baghdad, with partisan media often touting high levels of security cooperation, partly as a means of reassuring international investors. Contrary to this rosy portrayal, a recurring theme across all interviews was the deep mistrust between Erbil and Baghdad on matters of security in the disputed territories. Kurdistan Regional Government, 'A constructive and stable partnership with Baghdad'; Kurdistan24, 'Kurdistan region delegation heads to Baghdad for critical oil security talks', pub. online 25 May 2026.

42 International Crisis Group, *Reviving UN mediation*.

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