

An Analysis of Iraqi and External Threats to Civil Society Organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract: The study examines the Iraq and external threats that have posed several threats to civil society organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan since the formation of the first cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government. In this regard, although Iraq has many political, economic, and military problems, it is still not ready to resolve its problems with the Kurdistan Region, which poses a threat to civil society organizations. The two neighbouring countries of Iran and Turkey have become a threat to the development of social organisations in the Kurdistan Region due to their military, political, security, and socio-economic interference. The measures taken by international organisations to assist civil society organisations have also created major obstacles to the activities and work of civil society organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Keywords: Iraqi Kurdistan, Social Organizations, Challenges, Iraqi Government, Neighbouring Iraqi Kurdistan.

Introductions

Iraqi Kurdistan is geographically, historically, and politically connected to Iraq and has been governed by a federal system since 1991. The historical dimension of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916, and the geopolitical location of the Kurdistan Region between Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria's military, political, security, economic, and social interventions have created a great threat to the Kurdistan Regional Government. They have harmed the development of the Kurdistan Region and civil society because Iraq and neighbouring countries see the presence of a progressive government in the Kurdistan Region as a threat to security because of the presence of the Kurdish nation. Although the Iraqi government has several political, economic, and military problems and currently suffers from security instability, it was still not ready to resolve its problems with the Kurdistan Region until the 2005 Iraqi constitution. This has caused economic and financial problems for community organizations. On the other hand, the lack of international cooperation from European and American countries has become a major challenge for the work of social organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan. During the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan on September 25, 2017, opposition to the referendum brought together these countries to nullify the results. The Revolutionary Guards helped the Iraqi army and Hashd Al-Shaabi occupy Kirkuk and other separatist areas. Many people were displaced, and the activities of civil society organisations were prevented, so some were displaced to other areas or forced to comply with the Iraqi Civil Society Organisations Act. The Turkish government also provided logistical assistance to the Iraqi government despite economic sanctions imposed on Kurdistan by neighbouring countries. In this regard, neighbouring countries caused great damage to the economy of Iraqi Kurdistan, which, of course, included damage to civil society organizations. The Iraqi government and neighbouring countries also consider the development of the democratic, political, and socio-economic processes of the civil society movement in Iraqi Kurdistan a threat to their security. They believe that the strengthening of the Kurdistan Region means the strengthening of the Kurdish liberation movement in their countries, which is a threat to their security. In recent years, the aid of international organisations and financial assistance from European and American countries to civil society organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan has decreased, due to the spread of COVID-19 and the poor economic situation of charitable countries and international organizations. It has created huge financial challenges for CSOs.

The difference between this study and other studies is that this article highlights the external challenges facing community organizations. In general, these challenges are of several types: military interference, political, economic, social, and cultural. And none of the researchers pointed to the threats of the obstacles in Iraq and neighbouring countries or the lack of international assistance to the activities and development of CSOs in the Kurdistan Region. They mentioned the activities of the organisations, and focused on the internal challenges, which are largely different from the external challenges, in reality, we can say that the external challenge is the threat to the Kurdish community in general., For example, Nicholas (2017) refers to the referendum that presents a unique challenger for Iraq, Turkey, and Iran with enough urgency to overcome their conflicts in key arenas such as Syria and the fight against ISIS. He also argued that Iraqi-Kurdish independence is anathema to all three, but rifts between the three states are likely to resurface in the immediacy of Kurdish

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secession fads. Neither Turkey nor Iran has the incentive to give up their footholds in Iraq, and Baghdad will have to face that reality if it continues to welcome its intervention against an independent Kurdistan. Likewise, Turkey and Iran have incentives to work together, but they cannot ignore each other's core agendas. Nicholas (October 12th, 2017).

However, he didn't mention the impact of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq on the Kurdish community. Also, he didn't discuss the military interference of Turkey and Iran in the Kurdistan region, which led to the establishment of more obstacles for CSOs in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to Ozcelik (2021), following the US-led invasion in 2003, Turkey and Iran competed for influence in the independent IK. Iran strengthened connections with the PUK, while Turkey cultivated ties with the KDP. Recent operations in IK by militias supported by Iran have targeted the US and Turkish objectives. That means Ozcelik (2021), which indicates the influence of Turkey and Iran in IK. He also didn't mention the SCOs' reactions to Turkey and Iran's army attack on IK boundaries. Erdis (2006), discusses the objectives of civil society actors and the obstacles they face in their work, which affect them. They also refer to the development of CSOs and their cooperation with international organisations on the reconstruction of Kurdistan and Iraq in general. However, she didn't mention the neighbouring states' challenges and decreased assistance from international organisations and their impact on CSOs in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Medeni (2017) discusses the negative economic impact of the Ba'ath regime on Kurdish society in 1991 and points to the role of the United Nations in improving the economic situation and livelihoods of the people and the development of civil society organizations. However, he did not mention the threats to security and the economic and social obstacles of neighbouring countries (Iran and Turkey). These countries have always created great problems for the Kurdish people in general and civil society organisations and have hurt the political and social fields of the Kurdish people.

Furthermore, Heavy generally discussed the positive aspects of civil society organisations but did not mention the obstacles they face, including the obstacles of the Iraqi government and neighbouring countries and the decreased cooperation of international organisations that have had a very negative impact on the development of civil society organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan. Furthermore, Mark and Patel (2019), referred to the attitudes of Shiites and Sunnis towards each other in Iraq but did not mention the impact of the Shiite-Sunni conflict on Kurdish society or the obstacles it has created to the development of civil society organisations in Kurdistan.

This article examines these external challenges in detail, which have led to the creation of several risks and examines the external obstacles facing social organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan. How Iraq, neighbouring countries and international organisations affect the situation Due to military, political, and economic intervention, reducing river water is a threat to civil society organisations and has weakened the work and activities of civil society organizations. It points out that social. organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan can further develop socioeconomically and expand their activities by eliminating these threats to encourage the development of democracy.

This study uses a qualitative research approach primarily based on 7 interviews with various social organisations in selected targeted social communities in Iraqi Kurdistan cities. The interviews were conducted face-to-face as well as on the online Zoom platform using an unstructured, open-ended questionnaire. The study also used secondary data to back up the findings of the primary data about the problems that CSOs in Iraqi Kurdistan face on the inside.

Historical background

The Ba'ath regime seized power in 1963 and started ethnic cleansing and systematic genocide against the Kurds. At the same time, it banned all activities of civil society organizations. And in terms of security, Iraq has signed several agreements with Iran and Turkey to suppress the Kurdish revolution in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as the 1975 Algiers agreement and the 1984 Iraqi agreement with Turkey on border crossings. These agreements have allowed the two countries to carry out ground and air attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan in the name of expelling Kurdish opposition fighters, which have caused great damage to the Kurdish people. The Iraqi delegation, led by Saddam Hussein, deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council at that time, and the Iranian delegation, led by King Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, met at the opening of the OPEC summit in Algeria in March 1975, at the request of President Houari Boumediene. As a result of the meeting, an Algerian agreement was signed to resolve the border issue and water rights in Shat Al-Arab. According to the agreement, Iraq ceded part of the Shat Al-Arab to Iran in exchange for the Iranian King withdrawing Iranian support for the Kurdish revolution, which thereupon collapsed. Darius (2009). The Kurdish community has long been a political society, which reflects the plight of the Kurdish people in Iraq. From the formation of the new Iraqi state in the 1920s to the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government, since 1991, the Kurds in Iraq have been in every phase of the liberation struggle, both military and civilian. According to Karim (1998), CSOs and cultural institutions,

political movements, associations, student unions, and others were absent from the scene during the previous regime. During the monarchy period, the Saadabad Agreement was signed between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan, It was a non-aggression pact signed by Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan on July 8, 1937. to prevent the rights of the Kurdish nation.

Jon Gresham (2004) Following the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the introduction of the “No-Fly Zone” by the UN Security Council, Kurdistan was militarily protected from the genocidal Ba’athist regime, and the KRG began to emerge as an embryonic state. The Ba’ath regime removed all its administrations from the KRG in 1992, and the KRG hastily addressed this administrative predicament by creating conventional political and municipal institutions. When the US and its allies defeated the Iraqi army in the first Gulf War in 1991, the Kurds stood up again, prompting the Iraqi forces to intervene. Since then, Kurdistan has been in de facto existence, as an autonomous administrative unit, and Guenter (1993) referred to it as a “de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq”.

A de facto state is a country that acts like a state but doesn't have a name. It is not recognised by other countries or the UN, even though it has control over land, people, and government institutions. The Kurdistan Federal Region of Iraq is not recognised as an independent country by the UN. The formation of the KRG was an explicit repudiation of the national vision of Ba’athism and an embodiment of Kurdish nationalism in public life and society, which has implications for various political interests and CSOs.

Although Turkey and Iran helped tens of thousands of Kurdish families during the 1991 uprising and saved them from starvation and genocide by the Ba'ath regime, Also, Turkey and French governments proposed a no-fly zone for Iraqi Kurds under UN Resolution 688, on April 5, 1991, but after the formation of the first cabinet, Although the Kurdistan Region has become a good market for Turkish and Iranian companies, these two countries continue to interfere militarily, politically and security in Iraqi Kurdistan, which has caused instability in the Kurdistan Region and threatens civil society organizations. Civil society institutions were formed anew after the fall of the previous regime in 2003. Civil society institutions were re-established as a means of filling the political and social vacuum left behind. Some civil society institutions played a prominent role in guiding Iraqi Kurdistan society toward demanding various rights through demonstrations and protests at the start of its formation, and some of them continue to play a vital and influential role today. Many civil society institutions, such as political parties, have returned to Iraq's Kurdistan arena. The contribution of civil society to the democratic transformation and the state-building process in Iraqi Kurdistan is tentatively improving, despite incredible and extraordinary challenges. Iraq has several social ties such as faiths, sects, and ethnicities. This is true of tribal or clan affiliations, social classes, regional identities, or divisions to a specific religious figure, such as the Shi'ite Marja. Religious and tribal social structures are the foundations of very old civil organisations designed to ensure mutual support among members of specific groups. Finally, many other social connections are based on shared interests (professional, intellectual, and social) and bring people from different religious or ethnic backgrounds together, such as in clubs or associations. Yom (2005).

Analysis of the kind of threat to civil society in Iraqi Kurdistan

In Iraqi Kurdistan, there are three threats facing civil society organisations: the Iraqi government, neighbouring countries, and international organizations, which are analysed in the following headings.

1. The Iraqi government's threat

The Iraqi government threats include three types, faced by civil society organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan consisting of political, military, and economic-financial threats.

Political threats

During the republican period in 1958, until the 1991 uprising and the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government, different Iraqi governments continued to oppose the demands of the Kurdish nation. After that, Iraqi units continued to suppress the Kurdish revolution. If they have helped the Kurdish revolution at one stage, it has been tactical to achieve their goals, such as the assistance Iran gave to Iraqi Kurdish revolutionary parties against the Ba'ath regime in the 1970s and 1980s during the Iraq war. However, the Kurdish nation in Iraqi Kurdistan continued its political and military struggle to achieve its goals of democracy for Iraq and autonomy for Kurdistan. During this period, the Kurdish nation suffered genocide and terrorism, for example, in the process of Anfal and chemical attacks on Halabja by the Ba'ath regime, until the spring uprising of 1991 ended the Ba'ath regime in Iraqi Kurdistan. On April 5, 1991, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) established a no-fly zone to protect the Kurdish nation from the genocide of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq. After the fall of the Ba'ath regime, Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan actively participated in the reconstruction of the new Iraq under the supervision of the coalition forces that overthrew the Ba'ath regime in 2003. However, what was noticed was that the articles on Kurdish rights in the 2005 constitution were not implemented, but the

Iraqi government under Maliki tried to occupy the Kurdish areas in 2014 and cut the budget of the Kurdistan Region. The international community has continued to sacrifice the Kurdish national movement in the interests of the Iraqi state, even after the Peshmerga and KRG played the main ground role in destroying Daesh, in collaboration with international coalition forces.

The Iraqi government has been enabled to neglect the implementation of Article 140 of the Constitution; it did not form a Federal Council while simultaneously continuing to cut and withhold the budget of the KRG. This was because the President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani, decided to hold a referendum on September 25, 2017, with the participation of most of the people of the KRG, 93% of whom voted for independence. Many CSOs played a key role in encouraging people to participate, to the consternation of the Iraqi government and their international backers. Iran and Turkey were able to thwart the referendum and encourage Iraq to launch a ground offensive in the KRG (Shafaq News, 2021).

Although there was no real secession, the referendum sparked anger in Baghdad and condemnation from the world powers. In this regard, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq express their strongest protests against the independence of the Iraqi Kurds. Turkey's rivalry with Iran has eased in recent months and restricting the Kurdish independence movement could well unite the two nations. But to do so, they need to reconcile their competition for influence in both Iraq and Syria, as well as overcome Baghdad's fears of Iraqi sovereignty and internal Kurdish conflicts. (Norberg, October 12, 2017). The history of Iraq shows considerable periods of constraint on the development of a non-democratic form of government. Jon (2004).

Military Threats

There is open hostility between the KRG and the Iraqi government, which can escalate into violent conflict. Khalil Majid, (2021). Maliki attempted to attack Khanaqin town in 2006, and further escalations occurred in 2012 and 2013; in the latter instance, the Dijla forces attempted to overtake the areas under the control of the Peshmerga with readiness for a land battle involving tanks and artillery (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 2012). The Iraqi government continually feeds Kurdish grievances and antagonises the KRG, including not implementing Article 140 of the Constitution, opposing the KRG's oil contracts, seizing the Peshmerga budget, and not providing salaries for public sector workers.

As Hakeem says:

All this, in addition to terrorist threats and the strict rules of the security forces in the Kurdistan Region, adds to the stress on the general public. My intention in drawing such an image was to illustrate to the reader that, in such unsettled circumstances, it is rather difficult for civil society to emerge and flourish. Trying to survive and attempting to promote the region, as well as improving the economic situation, are the primary concerns of the public and the administration, rather than promoting tolerance, pluralism, human rights, and freedom. (Hakeem, 2017.p.50).

In direct cooperation with Iran, from October 16th, 2017, until today, the Iraqi Army was able to occupy most of the disputed areas around the city of Kirkuk. However, on October 20, 2017, the Iraqi army was defeated by the Peshmerga in the battle of Parde near Erbil and the battle of Sahila near Mosul, (Rudaw.net 2017). This brought the fighting to a halt, and the Iraqi army's invasion on October 16 displaced thousands of people to the cities of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. Since 2017, CSOs in the disputed areas have been banned, and a limited number of CSOs have been allowed to tentatively access and work in those areas with licences from the Iraqi government (i.e., they must give obeisance to the central government to be able to offer humanitarian assistance). The Kurdish people overwhelmingly voted for independence, prompting the federal government to retaliate with military operations, including the seizure of Kirkuk, a disputed area previously held by Kurdish forces. Following these actions, the KRG pledged to suspend the referendum results and engage in negotiation with the federal government, and President Barzani resigned in November 2017. USAID, (2017). The rupture between the KRG and the IG is rooted in the historical experiences of the Kurdish people, particularly decades of ethnic cleansing and suppression under the Ba'athist regime, as discussed previously.

Hakeem (2017), said that: "From 1991–2003, the Kurds feared the return of the Iraqi Army and the brutal Ba'athist regime." "Frontier areas and towns located between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Army were bombarded frequently." In recent years, Iranian-backed Shiite militias have added another element to the complex mix by launching attacks in the Kurdistan region. The militias are part of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), an umbrella organisation mainly of Iranian-backed armed groups that were created in 2014 to fight the Islamic State (ISIS). In February 2022, more than a dozen missiles targeted a US-led coalition base near Erbil International Airport, killing a contractor and injuring several American citizens. A lesser-known group called Saraya Awliya al-Dam (Guardians of the Blood) claimed responsibility for the attack. The group is

believed to be a front for more prominent Iranian proxies. The attacks in Erbil revealed the growing involvement of Shiite militias in IK, using Iranian-made missiles launched from Kurdish-held territory.

Ozcelik (2021). There is open hostility between the KRG and the IG, which can escalate into violent conflict. Following the Kurdish independence referendum on September 25, 2017, Kurdish NGOs in Kirkuk and other disputed territories were required to register with the Federal NGO Directorate or leave the territory, according to the US Agency for International Development. (USAID, 2018). As a result, many Kurdish NGOs fled Kirkuk and other disputed areas, either because they refused to register in Baghdad, or because the registration process was too onerous. CSOs were affected by the political tensions surrounding the referendum, which took place despite strong opposition from Iraqis and other people in the region.

Economic and financial threats

Nevertheless, as a result of a hefty embargo from the Iraqi government, alongside the UN embargo on Iraq in general, the KRG went through an unimaginable period of deprivation and poverty, particularly before 1996. The conditions of the KRG steadily improved after 2003, but the attempts to reintegrate Iraq as a unified state have inevitably ignited political and even violent conflicts between the KRG and the Iraqi government concerning various issues. The Arab Shia-dominated Iraqi government routinely abuses the state infrastructure of Iraq to collectively punish the Kurdish people, including cutting budget allocations or withholding payments for civil servants. PM Nouri al-Maliki 2014 cut the KRG's budget, and funding for most CSO projects was consequently suspended, which led to the dissolution of a large number of CSOs and the inactivity of several others. All of these regional players have sought to work with CSOs to advance their agendas and interests in Iraq and the KRG. With the cut in funding for CSOs engineered by the Iraqi state (i.e., Arab Sunnis and Iran), only those organisations affiliated with the major political parties have remained active. The Iraqi government does not want the Kurdistan Region to progress and is trying to create internal political and economic problems for the Kurdistan Region, such as failing to implement Article 140 of the constitution to resolve the conflict areas. They are using the Kurdistan Regional Government's budget as a weapon to weaken the Kurdistan Region. They are trying to destroy the stability of the Kurdistan Region through drone strikes and missile launches by the Iranian Hashdi Shaabi militia. (Shafaq News,2021). The Iraqi government is doing it because the advancement of civil society will be a factor in the strengthening of CSOs in Iraq, which the Iraqi government considers dangerous. After all, most Iraqi politicians, especially Shiites, call CSOs spies. But a disagreement over one word in the country's constitution caused a crisis. The constitution stipulates that, together with the federal government, the local Kurdish authority controls the energy production of "current fields."

The Kurdistan government argues that the word "current" means fields operational at the time of ratification in 2005. All fields discovered since then, Erbil argues, belong to Kurdistan alone. In February, the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq said that all energy fields in Iraqi Kurdistan were "current" fields, including those found after 2005, and ordered the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to surrender oil production, reserves, exports, and revenue. Later, the judiciary council in Kurdistan disagreed, saying that the federal court didn't have the right to decide how local laws should be interpreted.

Analysis of the external threats faced by CSOs

There is no doubt that civil society organisations are a living part of society and their development and progress depend on the development of democracy, freedom of expression, protection of human rights and the stable development of the political, security, economic and social situation. Any political, security, economic, and social threat that faces any society, nation, or political entity will undoubtedly face civil society organizations. In this regard, the Kurdish nation in Iraqi Kurdistan, after forming the first cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government, has faced many threats from neighbouring countries, especially Iran and Turkey, which include political, military, security, social, and cultural interference, as well as in terms of cooperation. Another threat is that international assistance has declined significantly, threatening the ability of civil society organizations to provide relief assistance to thousands of civilians in refugee camps displaced by the war against ISIS and terrorist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as thousands of Kurdish refugees from Iran and Turkey. These risks are discussed at length below.

The challenges of neighbouring countries include several threats that the Kurdish people and civil society organisations are facing, including the threats of the military, political, economic, media, and river water reduction.

Threats of military intervention

The biggest challenge for the KRG and CSOs is the military intervention threats from Turkey and Iran. In this regard, these two countries have repeatedly violated the sovereignty of the Kurdistan region in the name of fighting their rival Kurdish armed parties. In this regard, these two countries have established military bases in many parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. This has led to the evacuation of hundreds of villages in the border areas, and the displacement of their people to other parts of the Kurdistan Region. It has also prevented civil society organisations from operating in these areas. Historically, Iraq's Kurdish population resided in Mosul Vilayet's hilly region. Because of the topography and the Kurds' tribal bonds, it was a challenging area for the British to manage. The Ottoman authorities and the British had a lot of disagreements over how the borders should be drawn after the Great War.

The Turks believed that the Mosul Vilayet belonged to them in particular since the British had unjustly seized it following the Mudros Armistice, which put an end to the war's hostilities. The British were adamant about holding onto the Mosul Vilayet even after oil was discovered in northern Iraq. Additionally, the Kurds' acting as a buffer between the British and the Ottoman Empire was advantageous to the British. Regarding Daniel Sabr. (2017) that point, Turkey has several military bases in Baashiqra in Mosul province and Bamerni and Shiladze, in Duhok province. The Turkish government has repeatedly carried out air and ground attacks on IK on the pretext of the presence of PKK fighters. This has created an unstable security situation in the IK, as nearly 250 villages have been destroyed, and their people have been displaced, creating a bad situation for CSOs. On July 20, 2022, Turkey bombed the village of Parkhi, a tourist area in Zakho municipality, killing nine people and injuring 20 Turkish tourists from Baghdad and other central Iraqi cities. This had a strong impact on CSOs and the Iraqi and Kurdistan governments and led CSOs in most Iraqi cities to demonstrate against Turkey and lower the Turkish flag in Baghdad, Basra, and Najaf. Meanwhile, the Iraqi government called on the international community to hold a meeting to end Turkey's aggression and request an apology from Turkey (Rudaw, 2022). All those factors led to the establishment of challenges to the activities of CSOs in Iraqi Kurdistan. Due to the geographic location and history of thousands of years of coexistence of both Kurdish and Persian nations, these two nations have had a great influence on each other in terms of culture, languages, customs, and traditions. Relations between the KRG and Iran are in flux for political, geographical, historical, and religious reasons. Between 1980 and 1988, Iraq and Iran fought the longest conventional conflict of the twentieth century, and their rulers continued to espouse radically opposed visions for their countries. At that time, Iran supported Kurdish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan against the Ba'ath regime at that time. Also, it sheltered tens of thousands of Iraqi Kurds who were refugees in 1975 and 1988, from the Iraqi government and fled to Iran. But after the formation of the first cabinet of the KRG in 1992, Iran took a negative stance because it considered the KRG a threat to the security of its nation. After all, tens of thousands of opposition Kurds lived in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although they have suspended military activities, Iran continues to bombard the borders of the Kurdistan region and the headquarters of Iranian Kurdish parties and assassinate their members, which has always been a threat to the people of Iraqi Kurdistan. Since 2003, following the falloff of their opponents in Baghdad and with newfound autonomy and increasing security and stability, the Iraqi Kurds have gradually, but discernibly, strengthened relations with Iran. It's worth mentioning that Irani Kurdistan shares a 124-mile border with the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Nada and Crahan (2021). Iran armed Kurdish parties during the civil war to prevent agreements between them, which caused political turmoil, poor economic conditions, and disrupted social peace in Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, these factors have led Iran to have a negative role towards the Kurdish people and CSOs. After targeting Iraq's Sunnis during years of political and military conquest, Iran and its Iraqi militias have now set their sights on Iraqi Kurdistan, harassing its government, targeting its energy facilities, and working to break and subdue the autonomous region-all while the United States is looking the other way. Hussain Abdul-Hussain (2022). Iran, through Iraqi Shiite militias, has repeatedly carried out drone attacks on the Kurdistan Regional Government's capital and gas fields in the Garmian region of Kirkuk. Iran also launched 12 missiles against Erbil, the capital of the KRG, on March 13, 2022, under the excuse that there was an Israeli military facility nearby. The KRG and people protested when the missiles struck the home of the Kurdish businessman named Sheikh Baz, close to the US embassy. Koshsh Bestansoori (2022). Kurdish officials declared the rockets landed close to a recently constructed US embassy. No Americans were injured, according to US officials, and no US facilities were damaged. According to Kurdish authorities, no one was killed and only one civilian was injured. However, Iranian state media refers to the attack on the Israeli "strategic centre" in Erbil as carried out by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps in retaliation for the recent Israeli airstrikes that killed Iranian military personnel in Syria. Azad Lashkry (2022). In addition, Iran's military threat to civil society organizations in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is increasing in this regard challenged internally by a wave of anti-regime demonstrations, Iran is projecting the crisis and violence beyond its territory. On Wednesday, September 26, Iran launched a series of cross-border attacks in Iraqi Kurdistan against the offices and bases of Iranian Kurdish parties based in the neighbouring country. This operation was in retaliation for

their open support for the protest movement which arose after the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman of Kurdish origin who died on September 16 after being arrested by the Iranian "morality police." (Madjid Zerrouky, 2022).

These raids resulted in "13 dead – including a pregnant woman – and 58 wounded, mostly civilians, including children under 10," according to an announcement in the early evening by the anti-terrorist services of Iraqi Kurdistan, which mentioned "more than 70" bombardments, carried out by "ballistic missiles" and "armed drones."

"Iranian refugees, including women and children," were reportedly among the victims. Also, the Iraq branch of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a tweet, referring to a camp in Koi Sanjaq, east of Erbil. "The attack is alleged to have hit an elementary school where there were students." (Madjid Zerrouky, 2022). One journalist from the Iraqi Kurdish television station K24 was also injured.

On the external level, despite the protests from the United States and European countries, Several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and the Kingdom of Bahrain, protested Iran's treatment of Erbil. General Ahmed Aboul-Gheit of the Arab League also denounced the assault. Jess Diez (2022). At the time of the holding of the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan on September 25, 2017, opposition to the referendum brought these countries together to thwart the results of the referendum. The Revolutionary Guards helped the Iraqi army and Hashdi Shaabi to occupy Kirkuk and other separatist areas. The Turkish government also provided logistical assistance to the Iraqi government despite the economic sanctions imposed on Kurdistan by neighbouring countries. In this regard, the neighbouring countries caused great damage to the economy of Iraqi Kurdistan, which, of course, included damage to civil society organizations. The Iraqi government and neighbouring countries also consider any development of the democratic, political, and socio-economic processes of the civil society movement in Iraqi Kurdistan as a threat to their security. They believe that the strengthening of the Kurdistan Region means the strengthening of the Kurdish liberation movement in their countries, which is a threat to their security. Following the 2003 US-led invasion, Turkey and Iran competed for influence in the independent IK. Iran strengthened connections with the PUK while Turkey cultivated ties with the KDP. Recent operations in IK by militias supported by Iran have targeted the US and Turkish objectives. Concerning this point, Ankara thinks that Iran plans to lessen its diplomatic and economic clout in Turkey. Teheran sees the region as an extension of its tacit authority over the rest of Iraq as well as its natural sphere of influence.

Ozcelik (2021). The projection of Turkish and Iranian power onto the territory of Iraq is not something new. Turkey's military presence in IK is significant, and Tehran enjoys leverage thanks to its support for the powerful Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) faction fighting ISIS. Turkey insists on its right to intervene in Iraq on behalf of the Turkmen minority, while Iran's strategy against ISIS in Iraq relies on the units it supports in the PMF. Turkey was even accused of clearly violating Iraq's sovereignty in December 2015 when it sent troops to Bashiqa after which it insisted on contributing to the liberation of Mosul. In light of these realities and Baghdad's concern about Iraqi sovereignty, and while Turkey and Iran appear willing to subordinate their other interests in Iraq to the resolution of the Kurdish question, it is unlikely that they will cease to exercise extraordinary influence on Iraqi territory. Indeed, the response to the independence referendum gives both sides an opportunity to expand their influence in Iraq if they can manoeuvre around each other and the Iraqi government. Norberg (2017) As Watts (2013) pointed out, the KRG has faced threats from neighbouring countries (Iran, Turkey, and Syria) since its inception. Every so often, relations weaken between the Kurdistan Region and at least one or more of these countries, which have interfered in the internal affairs of the region. Turkey and Iran's military operations against Kurdish groups in the KRG over the last 20 years have been a constant warning to the region, and the IG's treatment of its Kurdish minority is no better.

Political intervention threats

Political tensions between the Iraqi government and the KFG, aggravated by the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, began to subside in 2018. The re-establishment of dialogue and subsequent agreements between the two governments alleviated the economic problems of the KRG, allowing more people to participate as volunteers in CSO-led initiatives, USAID (2018). On another level, regional states such as Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE wish to see Iraq remain weak for their purposes. They have sought to manipulate CSOs to further their agendas in this regard. Asaad, (2022). Both Turkey and Iran have become threats to the Kurdistan Region. The two countries have always helped the Iraqi government not to comply with the 2005 constitution, especially Article 140, which relates to the resolution of conflict areas because the implementation of this article will lead to economic development and a democratic process in the Kurdistan Region. Civil society One of the reasons for the holding on September 25, 2017, a referendum was the ignoring of Article 140 of the 2005 constitution of the Iraqi government. In this regard, Nada and Crahan (2021), indicate

that Iranian leaders roundly criticised the referendum and warned of further instability in the war-torn region. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, accused the United States and foreign powers of trying to “create a new Israel” to serve their interests. Also, President Hassan Rouhani called the plan to split Iraq into two “foreign sectarian plots.” Since that time, Iran’s political relations with the KRG became tainted in 2017, because of Iranian support for the Iraqi government during the KRG referendum on September 25, 2017. Ankara, Tehran, and Baghdad see the referendum as an immediate threat that goes beyond their multilateral military actions. In the days leading up to the vote, all three suspended flights to and from IK territory, with Turkey specifically threatening to cut economic ties with the KRG and close a pipeline that carries Kurdish oil to world ports to sell abroad. Joint military exercises by Turkey, Iran, and Iraq on the KRG border are unusual, and the deployment of Iraqi observers with neighbouring units allows Baghdad to counter its threats and monitor the activities of its former rivals. Norberg (2017). Furthermore, both Turkey and Iran are concerned that the referendum will reinforce Kurdish separatist movements in their countries. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and the Kurdistan Freedom Life Party (PJAK) are fighting for autonomous Kurdish states in Turkey and Iran, respectively. This conflict is happening at the borders, and both Turkey and Iran fear that the energy surrounding the referendum will spill over to their borders. Norberg (2017). What is noticeable is that Iraq and neighbouring countries do not want the Kurdistan Regional Government to develop and the democratic process and infrastructure building in the Kurdistan Region to be advanced. They want to create a gap between the Kurdish people, political parties and the government to tarnish the face of the government and politicians among civil society organizations, thus destroying trust between the people and the KRG. Because they see the strengthening of the Kurdistan Regional Government as a threat to the national security of their countries. CSOs often demonstrate against the interference of both the Turkish and Iranian governments. For example, in Sulaymaniyah, CSOs often protest against the bombing of Turkish drones and the assassination of Kurdish opposition in Sulaymaniyah and other parts of the Kurdistan Region, but to no avail. The Kurdish people have also demonstrated in Erbil and other parts of the Kurdistan Region against the missile and drone bombings of Iranian militias and the assassination of Iranian Kurdish opposition in Iraqi Kurdistan but to no avail. The two ruling parties, for their own interests, often cooperate with Iran and Turkey in security matters, but both the Iranian and Turkish governments never trust the Kurdistan Regional Government for fear of the international community and the major powers that will occupy the Kurdistan Region at any time.

The economic threats

Although Turkey and Iran make huge profits in Iraqi Kurdistan in the fields of economy and trade, and hundreds of Turkish and Iranian companies operate in the Kurdistan Region, these two countries often use this trade and economy as a threat to the Kurdish people. They capture civil society organizations. For example, Turkish and Iranian companies employ more Turkish and Iranian people, which has led to unemployment among young people in Iraqi Kurdistan, who are the dynamic of civil society organizations. Neighbouring countries are trying to starve the Kurdistan Regional Government and reduce it to a poor and subjugated Iraqi province, subordinate to the central government and dependent on the central government. This model fits their agenda and vision for the future of Kurdish minorities in their territories. It is worth mentioning that Iran and Turkey often send expired food to the Kurdistan Region, which in some cases has caused the spread of diseases among the people. Several kilogrammes of drugs smuggled from Iran to Kurdistan have been seized, causing great harm to young people and causing many social problems.

The following discusses the economic and trade threats

For Turkey

Turkish companies operating in Iraqi Kurdistan that bring Turkish workers with them have caused a lot of damage to the labour market and have caused people not to take advantage of their projects in terms of labour, which has increased the phenomenon of unemployment in Iraqi Kurdistan. And it has hurt the CSOs in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region also in terms of the economy, trade, and energy. Turkey has benefited from the Kurdistan Region. For example, the table below shows that Turkish companies have benefited from the Kurdistan Region in terms of infrastructure and building.

Table 1: Turkish companies operating in Iraq, including Iraqi Kurdistan

Year	KRG
2009	485 companies
2010	730 companies
2012	1,023 companies
2013	1,500 companies

Sources: Kemal Kirişçi, "Turkey's foreign policy in turbulent times," Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper. No. 92 (2006), p. 47; "Kuzey Irak'ta 730 Türk firması var" [730 Turkish firms in Northern Iraq], Sabah, 23 July 2010, http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2010/07/23/kuzey_irakta_730_turk_firmasi_var

During his visit to Turkey in April 2012, Sinan Chelebi, the KRG's Minister of Trade and Industry, noted that 25 new Turkish firms join the IK each month and they make up more than half of all foreign companies registered by the KRG. (Ecofinance, April 26, 2012). Roughly 1,500 Turkish businesses were operating in the IK in 2013, pre-crisis. It is now difficult to determine the precise number of Turkish businesses operating in the area because many have temporarily stopped operations, to start up again once the security situation and the economy have normalised. Kemal Kirişçi (2006).2010 An estimated 25,000 Turkish workers and 30,000 Turkish citizens worked in Iraqi Kurdistan (IK) in 2010 and 2012, respectively. Turkish businesses quickly increased their market share and provided around 80% of the consumer imports that Iraqi Kurds made textiles, food, and furniture. Iraqi exports to Turkey, including the KRG, were negligible without oil and gas, ranging from 87% million dollars to 153 million dollars between 2007 and 2014. Çağaptay, Fidan, and Saçıkara (2015). It soon becomes clear that the business ties between Ankara, Erbil, and Baghdad were more advantageous to Turkey's economic growth. Turkish businesses used the region's warehousing and transfer infrastructure to hold products before shipping them on to, Iran, Kuwait, and Syria. They also exported items to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Table 2: Turkish Exports to Iraq with Estimated Exports to Iraqi Kurdistan

Year	Exports to Iraq	KRI's Est. Share	Est. Exports to KRI
2007	\$2,844,767,091	50 %	\$1,422,383,546
2011	\$8,310,129,576	61 %	\$5,060,868,912
2013	\$11,948,905,271	67 %	\$8,029,664,342

Sources: Soner Çağaptay, Christina Bache Fidan, and Ege Cansu Saçıkara (2015) "Turkey and the KRG signs of booming economic ties," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Sources: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/infographics/TurkeyKRGSignsofBoomingEconomicTies2>

As regards Iran

In 2012, a delegation of over 100 Iranian companies participated in the Iranian-Kurdistan Region Economic Forum. Also, in July 2013, the Iranian first vice president welcomed the Iraqi Kurdistan minister of housing and development, amid announcements that a new bilateral trade agreement had been signed and that trade between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan were expected to surpass \$ 4 billion in 2013. In 2013, before the war, the officially reported volume of trade was only \$100 million. Richards (2013). As a result, the relationship between Iran and the KRG is more evenly balanced than might be expected and even more surprising. Trade is blossoming, and Iranian cultural influence in the area is centuries old. In 2014, because of the ISIS terrorist war, Iran developed positive relationships with the KDP and PUK, both of which are increasingly striving to hedge Iraqi Kurdistan's economic growth with inbound investment from a basket of neighbouring countries. This led to a positive economic situation in IK and impacted positively on CSOs. Richards (2013). On the contrary, Iran exports 64% of its gas to Iraq and 33% to Turkey. As cheaper and more reliable Kurdish gas came online, both Ankara and Baghdad started relying on Erbil for their gas needs, especially for electricity production. When Iran instructs its Iraqi militias to hit Kurdish energy fields, it is often for reasons of commercial competition rather than the enforcement of a rarely observed Iraqi constitution. Although IK has become a good market for selling Iranian goods, it is noticed that traders in this country often send expired food and goods to the markets of IK. At that point, dozens of tonnes of expired food and goods will be destroyed. Dozens of drugs are smuggled into IK from Iran every year due to a lack of border control, most of which are seized by the Kurdistan security forces. For example, Ali (2019), points out that on June 27, 2019, the Security Apparatus of the Kurdistan Region reported that they had detained 651 alleged drug users and traffickers in the first half of 2019. The directorate also disclosed that during the previous six months, they had seized 92 kg of different drugs. Regarding this point, the spread of these drugs has become a bad cause for Kurdish society.

Risk of water depletion

Turkey and Iran have built several dams on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, causing the water levels of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq to decrease. This has caused severe damage to the Iraqi environment, causing dryness in many parts of southern Iraq and water shortages in Iraqi Kurdistan. In this regard, the source

of the rivers coming from Iran is used as a weapon against Iraq and the KRG. For example, Iran blocked the water in the IK near the border with Iran, which caused a water shortage. Concerning that point, Kakalaw and Abdulla (2020) referred to the past three years, Iran has decreased the flow to Iraq, causing agricultural harm and water scarcity. Iraqi officials issued a warning that the flows into the Sirwan and Little Zab rivers from Northwest Iran have drastically decreased. Also, Khani, cited in Abdulla (2020), claimed that almost two million people are dependent on the rivers that flow through Halabja and Sulaymaniyah for cities, Garmiyan district, and Diyala province for agriculture, fishing projects, drinking water, tourism, and the production of power. Low-water levels were seen in Darbandikhan Dam in IK (MEE/Dler Abdulla, 2020). This will cause damage to Kurdish society in general and all CSOs.

International organisations

The Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) supervises the disbursal of donor funds to INGOs and local CSOs for humanitarian aid, which has decreased significantly according to the UN Office, from \$45.6 million in 2017 (including \$7 million directly to local groups) to \$24.2 million in 2018 (including only \$3.2 million for local groups). (Several organizations, such as Al-Mesalla, PAO, and PFO, charge membership dues, which may not contribute substantively to organisational revenue. The significant decrease in donor funds from INGOs to local CSOs (i.e., aid) has resulted in the majority of CSOs becoming inactive. Foreign donors are aware of the many challenges that face CSOs in transitioning contexts, including the issue of creating durable and sustainable organisations able to serve end-users. This impasse is fundamentally due to challenges in implementation, which deter foreign donors and INGOs (whom themselves must account for how they allocate funds). International donors and organisations have limited expectations of what CSOs can achieve in authoritarian states with high levels of corruption, aside from the inherent moral dilemmas that often arise in post-conflict and democratising societies. Universal expectations can be jarring for organisational life emerging in post-conflict settings. In these transitional settings, the view of international organisations and donors is that it is insufficient – if not actively malign – to simply prop up CSOs with foreign funding without tangible deliverables for suffering people and communities on the ground.

However, in authoritarian contexts, it can perhaps be considered a victory that independent CSOs merely exist, but donors have higher expectations in transitioning contexts like Iraq due to the manifest needs of local communities. Because political dynamics differ at the provincial level, international organisations require extra resources to navigate local politics. INGOs and agencies also find it difficult to find and vet new organizations, and they positively fear becoming associated or implicated in the political affiliations of CSOs, which may dovetail into armed factions in the context of Iraq. As explained previously, all CSOs in Kurdistan must de facto align with either the KDP or the PUK, which in turn are directly integrated into the Peshmerga. Furthermore, many CSOs in Iraq are associated with sectarian religious groups (although this is a less prominent issue within the KRG compared to other areas of Iraq), which in turn may be associated with Islamist politics, terrorism, or other political- and conflict-related issues antithetical to Western governments and international CSOs themselves. Secular and liberal organisations are thus better able to communicate with foreign organizations, although they are not necessarily the most germane groups to serve the humanitarian needs of communities on the ground. International organisations have often invested in providing grant-writing training for CSOs, but many are concerned that by doing so, they are disrupting important work done by these CSOs. Besides, grant sizes are not always catered to the size of organisations operating on the ground. KRG organisations tend to be very small and are not qualified for the large grants supplied by entities like USAID.

In the past, the PRTs were able to work locally and provide smaller grants that helped support smaller organizations, but few of them were capable of applying for the larger grants available from USAID. International organisations are hesitant to help smaller and local NGOs for a variety of reasons, including the difficulty of locating and screening them, the worry of diluting their objectives by giving grant-writing and other training, and the paucity of appropriately sized funds for them. Small local organisations must thus continue to rely on donations from their communities or members, which are severely limited, especially if they refuse to be co-opted by affiliates with the major political factions. In recent years, the assistance of international organisations and financial assistance from European and American countries to CSOs in Iraqi Kurdistan has decreased due to the spread of COVID-19 and the poor economic situation of donor countries and international organizations, which has decreased assistance to CSOs in Iraqi Kurdistan. It has created a huge financial challenge for civil society organisations. (USAID,2021). Previously, some CSOs in Iraqi Kurdistan were very active in their projects in collaboration with international organizations. For example, the PAO, which is a non-profit and active organisation established in 1992, in Iraqi Kurdistan, is registered under Law No. 1 of 2011. PAO has established 32 projects as of 2018, It has carried out several projects, for example: Firstly, the NPA-assisted Democracy Promotion Project was launched in June 2016 and in18, the second phase was launched in five provinces (Baghdad, Erbil, Nineveh, Di Qar, and Diwaniya). to increase citizen participation in public

decision-making, improve partners' understanding of joint work, and enhance the effectiveness and principle of citizenship and the importance of the role of civil society. Secondly, the project to increase access to child protection services for refugees with the assistance of UNICEF Since 2013, a reception centre for refugee children has been opened in Erbil province, Kurgosk camp, which has benefited 2,500 children. Thirdly, Business Innovation Program Project (BIP): The project is about how to set up your project for two years, which started in mid-2016 and continued until mid-2018 and benefited 1722 people in the Duhok refugee camp. It cost USD 2,746.953, with direct beneficiaries comprising 43,448 individuals, families, civil society institutions, networks and alliances, media organisations and media professionals and institutions, official and government departments, parliamentary committees, provincial councils, organs of the judiciary, and various private sector institutions. Direct beneficiaries of PAO include internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and returnees (55%); and social solidarity groups (45%) (People Agency Organization Report, 2018). The funding bodies for PAO projects include both international and local bodies, as well as individual donors, as shown in Table 1.

Table 3: The sources of funding bodies for PAO projects were as follows international, domestic and individual donors. 2018

The sources of funding	The number of projects that supported
UN Agencies	7
International NGOs (INGOs)	11
Universities	1
Individual donors	5
Local organizations/ NGOs	5
Private/ computer	3

Source: People Agency Organization Report (2018)

Conclusion

Civil society organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan face several threats posed by the challenges posed by the Iraqi government and neighbouring countries against the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. In this regard, the military, political, economic, commercial, and river water threats have hurt Kurdish society, which has led to a decrease in the activities of civil society organisations in this regard.

The Iraqi government routinely undermines the infrastructure of the Iraqi state to punish the Kurdish people collectively, including by cutting budget allocations or withholding money from civil servants. This has created obstacles to the activities of social organizations. Since the Kurdistan People's Referendum in 2017, Iraq, with Iranian support, has launched a series of offensives against the Kurdistan Region, occupying the conflict areas, banning the activities of civil society organisations and displacing large numbers of them to the Kurdistan Region. Budget cuts in the Kurdistan Region have hampered the activities of civil society organizations.

Despite the good relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government, Iran, and Turkey, which have great economic benefits for both neighbouring countries, these countries constantly cross the borders of the Kurdistan Region through ground attacks and drone bombings, killing large numbers of civilians and evacuating hundreds of villages. This has led to the banning of the activities of civil society organisations in these areas. On the other hand, these two countries constantly support the Iraqi government to prevent the development of democracy in the Kurdistan Region, thus harming civil society organisations because the development of civil society organisations depends on the development of democracy for civilians in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The growth and independence of CSOs are undermined by their weak financial position and the lack of a robust funding system for international organisations and donors. International organisations are reluctant to help small, local NGOs for a variety of reasons, including difficulty in finding and screening them, concerns about diluting their target by giving them grant-writing and other training, and a lack of adequately sized funding for them. These measures by international organisations have created an obstacle to the work of most social organisations in the KRG.

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