

The Kurdish Factor in the Foreign Policies of Turkey and Iran

Abdulazizkhon Ochilkhonov*

Tashkent University of Applied Sciences

*Correspondence: Abdulazizkhon
Ochilkhonov

Email:
abdulazizxonhoshimxonovich@gmail.com

Received: 07-08-2025
Accepted: 16-09-2025
Published: 28-10-2025



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract: This article analyzes the historical formation of the “Kurdish factor” in the foreign policies of Turkey and Iran, as well as its impact and consequences for state security. The study explores the trajectory from the Treaty of Sèvres and the Treaty of Lausanne to the transnational demographic weight of the Kurds, the activities of the PKK and PJAK, the dynamics of the Kurdish diaspora, and Turkey’s operations in Syria and Iraq (Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring, Claw-Sword) within the context of the AKP’s democratic opening initiatives. Regarding Iran, the article highlights pragmatic relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), resource geopolitics, the Sunni–Shia dimension, and the paradigm of “domestic security” as central concepts. The paper also discusses legitimization discourses that rely on Article 51 of the UN Charter and UN Security Council resolutions, and it proposes an integrated model of political, legal, and economic approaches for regional stability. The analysis demonstrates that the Kurdish issue cannot be resolved solely through military measures; instead, reducing economic inequality, recognizing cultural rights, and fostering transnational cooperation are essential pathways.

Keywords: Kurds; Turkey; Iran; PKK; PJAK; Syria; Iraq; Lausanne; Sèvres; AKP; security; sovereignty; autonomy; diaspora; KRG

Introduction

The Kurdish question has long been one of the most persistent and complex issues in the Middle East, influencing not only domestic politics but also the foreign policies of regional states. With a population of more than 30 million spread across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the Kurds constitute one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world. Their aspirations for autonomy or independence, combined with the geopolitical importance of Kurdish-inhabited regions, have made the Kurdish factor a central issue in the foreign policy agendas of both Turkey and Iran.

For Turkey, the Kurdish issue is predominantly framed as a matter of national security. The long-standing conflict with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has shaped Ankara’s foreign and security policies, particularly in its cross-border interventions in northern Iraq and northern Syria. These operations are often justified as counterterrorism measures, yet they also reflect broader concerns about preventing the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish entity along Turkey’s borders.

Iran, by contrast, adopts a more dualistic approach. While maintaining strict control over its own Kurdish population, Tehran has also developed pragmatic ties with the

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. This strategy allows Iran to balance internal security concerns with regional ambitions, using the Kurdish factor both as a challenge and as a potential instrument of influence in its regional diplomacy.

Despite differences in approach, both Turkey and Iran converge in treating the Kurdish issue as a critical factor that shapes their regional strategies and foreign policy priorities. The persistence of Kurdish nationalism, coupled with regional conflicts and international interventions, ensures that the Kurdish question remains central to Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the Kurdish factor has influenced the foreign policies of Turkey and Iran, with particular attention to the intersection of domestic security concerns and regional strategic calculations. By examining historical developments, policy measures, and geopolitical contexts, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how the Kurdish issue continues to function as both a source of conflict and a driver of foreign policy in the Middle East.

Methodology

The largest share of the Kurdish population in the Middle East resides in Turkey. According to the 2018 report published by the human rights organization Minority Rights Group International, between 15 and 20 million Kurds live within Turkey's borders. This figure represents 15–20 percent of the country's total population, making the Kurds the largest ethnic minority at the national level. [1] Such demographic weight is explained by historical, political, and social factors. On the one hand, the regions where Kurds traditionally live—Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia—have for centuries served as demographic centers for the local population. On the other hand, processes of urbanization and labor migration have contributed to the formation of large Kurdish communities in major cities such as Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir. This demographic reality directly influences not only Turkey's domestic politics but also broader regional ethnopolitical dynamics.

In analyzing the role of Kurds in Turkey's socio-political life, it is essential to first consider the historical-political conditions of the Republic's formation. When the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923 and the new Turkish state was recognized internationally, the issue of ethnic diversity within the country remained unresolved. The republican leadership adopted the principle of "one nation, one language, one flag" as the foundation of state-building, seeking to consolidate Turkish national identity. In this process, the centuries-long cultural and political heritage of the Kurds was often neglected or denied within the framework of centralized policies. As Professor Martin van Bruinessen, who has studied the formation of Kurdish national identity in Turkey and the transformation of its relations with the diaspora, observes: "The Kurdish question in Turkey is not only an ethnic issue, but also a historical-modernization problem, with its roots embedded in the nationalist policies of the Republic's early years." [2] Van Bruinessen also notes that the ties between the Kurdish diaspora and Turkey have evolved significantly. In particular, Kurdish communities in Europe, by leveraging political instruments, cultural resources, and communication

networks available to them, have amplified their influence, which in turn has directly impacted the strategies of Kurdish movements inside Turkey.

Middle East and Kurdish affairs specialist Hamit Bozarslan emphasizes in his analyses that ethnic-political conflicts in Turkey have entrenched the concept of “internal security” as a permanent priority within the country’s political culture. Accordingly, the Kurdish issue has predominantly been framed within the military-administrative domain and assessed as a strategic threat. [3]

According to Professor Farhod Karimov, Doctor of Political Science, relations between Turks and Kurds during the early years of the Republic were relatively cordial, as Kurds were regarded as equal partners in building the new state. In the early 1920s, nearly 70 Kurdish deputies served in the first parliament, and official documents referred to them as “members of the Kurdistan parliament.” During the Lausanne Conference, Turkish delegation representatives declared: “Kurds and Turks together constitute the foundation of the new Republic. The Kurds are not an ethnic minority, but a nation. The government in Ankara is as much the government of the Kurds as it is of the Turks.” This historical statement illustrates that, at that time, the political-diplomatic discourse approached Kurds as central subjects in the process of state-building. Karimov interprets this as evidence that elements of inclusiveness were present in the early political paradigm of the Turkish Republic. [4]

Significant qualitative changes occurred in relations between Kurds and the Turkish government in the last decade of the 20th century and the early 21st century. By the mid-1990s, the Kurdish question began to be perceived not only as a matter of security but also as an inseparable component of political and social processes. In particular, then-President Turgut Özal openly advocated for the need to pursue a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue. He framed the matter along two key dimensions: first, the region’s underdevelopment; and second, the necessity of recognizing ethnic identity and cultural rights. Özal argued that economic inequality and the lack of infrastructure were among the primary factors exacerbating the Kurdish question. As Fuat Uçar observes in his study: “One of the most striking aspects of Turgut Özal’s political legacy is his firm conviction that the Kurdish issue cannot be resolved solely through military means, but must be addressed through democratic and economic reforms.” [5]

Similarly, historian Osman Akandere notes in his work that during the 1990s a widespread perception prevailed in western regions of Turkey that “the solution to the Kurdish issue lies in eliminating the PKK.” However, in contrast to this reductionist approach, Özal’s initiatives aimed at addressing the problem comprehensively by integrating economic, political, and cultural measures. [6] As a result, Özal’s political initiatives laid the groundwork for future reforms and dialogue processes.

It is noteworthy that since the beginning of the 21st century, the Turkish government has taken active steps to establish peace with the Kurds, enhance their role in political, cultural, and social life, and promote cooperation. Following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, state policy toward the Kurdish issue became considerably more flexible, initiating a process of seeking solutions through democratic reforms. In 2005, AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly acknowledged in his speech in

Diyarbakır: “The Kurdish problem is my problem as well.” This was the first time in Turkish political history that a head of state openly recognized the existence of the Kurdish issue and emphasized the need to resolve it through democratic means. Furthermore, in 2009, the government launched the “Democratic Opening” (Demokratik Açılım) initiative, which included the establishment of a state television channel broadcasting in Kurdish—TRT Kurdi (formerly TRT 6). This move represented a significant step toward legitimizing the Kurdish language in the public sphere. As Mesut Yeğen describes, the AKP-era approach to the Kurdish issue constituted a “transition from a policy of denial to a policy of dialogue and recognition.” [7]

Despite the political and institutional reforms carried out in recent decades, the Kurdish issue remains an unresolved and highly complex challenge within Turkish politics today. This situation is shaped by a range of internal and external factors, among which the events of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 and the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016 hold particular significance.

The “Arab Spring,” which began in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, and especially the subsequent Syrian civil war, created new security challenges for Turkey. As political scientist Gareth Stansfield has observed, “The Syrian crisis not only altered the geopolitical balance of power, but also expanded the political maneuvering capacities of the Kurds at the regional level” [8]. The Turkish government perceived the emergence of semi-autonomous Kurdish regions in northern Syria as a direct threat to its national security, a development that also raised deep concerns within its domestic politics. The increased Kurdish activism in Syria pushed Ankara toward adopting a more centralized and hardline policy on its internal Kurdish question. Following the failed coup attempt of 2016, Turkey’s national security concept hardened further, with the government consolidating centralized authority and expanding repressive measures against Kurdish political parties and activists. This effectively closed the space for continuing peace negotiations.

The recent geopolitical developments in the Middle East, particularly the Syrian crisis and the aftermath of the “Arab Spring,” have significantly expanded the influence of Kurdish political and military structures, posing a serious threat to the territorial integrity of both Iran and Turkey. Consequently, President R. Erdoğan sought to address the Kurdish question in his foreign policy through active involvement in the military-political processes in Syria. The strategic objective of this approach was to drastically reduce the freedom of movement of Kurdish armed and political formations along the border and to neutralize the transboundary threat.

To achieve this goal, beginning in 2016, Turkey launched several large-scale military operations, including Euphrates Shield , Olive Branch , Peace Spring , and Claw-Sword . As military strategist Metin Gürcan has noted, “these operations aimed at establishing a permanent border security zone in Turkish military doctrine and disrupting the logistical routes of Kurdish armed structures” [9].

Result and Discussion

On August 24, 2016, Turkey launched the Euphrates Shield operation along the Syrian border. Lasting seven months and five days, the operation created a security zone by

fully clearing the Azaz–Jarablus axis of both ISIS and the PYD. On March 29, 2017, Erdoğan declared the operation completed successfully during a National Security Council meeting. On January 20, 2018, Turkish Armed Forces began the Olive Branch operation in the Afrin district of northwestern Syria, home to a majority Kurdish population, targeting the People’s Protection Units (YPG). After 57 days, more than 200 settlements had been cleared of militants, and control was established over an area of approximately 2,000 square kilometers.

Amid growing security threats, on October 9, 2019, Turkey launched another large-scale offensive named Peace Spring. Its declared objectives were to ensure border security, prevent the establishment of a “terror corridor” in the south, and facilitate the return of displaced Syrians to their homes. Following the operation, nearly 200,000 Syrians were able to return safely to their towns and villages. On November 20, 2022, Turkish Air Forces conducted a series of airstrikes against positions of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Syrian Army in Aleppo, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah, as well as PKK targets in northern Iraq. This operation, called Claw-Sword, destroyed numerous PKK weapons depots.

From the standpoint of international law, Turkey’s cross-border military operations in Syria and Iraq constitute violations of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nonetheless, Ankara consistently insists that these operations do not contravene international law, but are conducted on the basis of the UN Charter’s provisions on self-defense and the norms of counterterrorism. This reflects Turkey’s firm position in framing its interventions as legitimate acts of defense.

The issue of Turkish military deployments and operations in Syria and Iraq is directly linked to the principles of sovereignty and territorial inviolability under international law. According to Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, all states are obliged to refrain from the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state. From this perspective, Turkey’s military incursions raise the possibility of violating international law. However, Ankara justifies these operations under Article 51 of the UN Charter, which enshrines the right of self-defense, and with reference to UN Security Council Resolutions 1373 and 2249 on counterterrorism. The Turkish government, in particular, regards armed groups such as the PKK and YPG in northern Syria as direct threats to national security, and thus equates neutralizing them with legitimate defensive measures. Consequently, Turkish operations remain the subject of complex international legal debates: on the one hand, they can be interpreted as lawful counterterrorism actions, while on the other, they continue to attract criticism for undermining the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ankara’s unwavering stance—maximizing the use of available opportunities in international law to safeguard national security—remains at the center of both political and legal debates globally.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, meanwhile, is one of the most significant geopolitical actors in the Middle East, exerting direct influence on regional political processes and the balance of security. Its strategic position between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea allows it to control key regional and global trade routes. Iran’s abundant natural resources,

particularly its leading position in global oil and gas reserves, constitute the foundation of its energy diplomacy. With the world's second-largest natural gas reserves and fourth-largest oil reserves, Iran enjoys significant economic and political maneuvering capacity.

In Iran's foreign policy, the Kurds serve not only as an internal security factor but also as a strategic tool in regional diplomacy. For example, Iran has cultivated pragmatic political and economic relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, both to expand its sphere of influence there and to use the KRG as a balancing instrument vis-à-vis the United States and Turkey. As David Romano notes in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, "Iran's Kurdish policy serves dual purposes—strengthening domestic security and creating leverage for mediation opportunities in foreign policy" [11].

Kurds in Iran constitute one of the most important ethnic groups in the region. Various demographic studies estimate their number at approximately 6–8 million, representing around 10 percent of Iran's total population. Most of Iran's Kurds reside in the northwestern provinces bordering Iraq and Turkey—particularly Kermanshah, Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, and Ilam. In *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, M. Izady describes Iran's Kurds as "an inseparable component of the transborder Kurdish community"[12]. Geopolitically, their location carries major strategic significance for Iran's border security, regional relations, and domestic politics. Their socio-cultural ties with Iraqi Kurdistan and ethnic solidarity with Turkey's Kurds complicate Tehran's nationalities policy.

As Kurdish scholar M.S. Lazarev highlights, Iranian Kurds differ in certain respects from their Turkish counterparts. Historically, their political aspirations have more openly emphasized the idea of statehood, rooted in the legacy of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities such as Mahabad, Ardalan, and Soran in the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, Iranian Kurds have developed their political strategies within the context of Iran's multiethnic state, historically home to Persians, Azeris, Arabs, Baluch, and others. Consequently, Kurdish political programs in Iran often emphasize demands for wide-ranging autonomy and cultural rights rather than outright separatism [13].

Iran's state policy toward the Kurds is characterized by strict control and extensive restrictions. Several strategic factors underpin this approach. First, the priority of maintaining territorial integrity and centralized governance dominates Tehran's perception of the Kurdish issue. Thus, any Kurdish political activism, demonstrations, or initiatives for autonomy and self-governance are officially framed as forms of separatism or terrorism. A unique aspect of the Kurdish issue in Iran is its confessional dimension: the majority of Iranian Kurds adhere to Sunni Islam, which positions them as a distinct confessional group within a state whose political-religious system is anchored in Shi'ism. These religious differences, combined with security concerns, influence the positioning of ethnic groups within the Iranian political structure.

Moreover, Tehran's official discourse often portrays Kurdish political and armed activities as supported by regional and global rivals. The suspicion that some Kurdish organizations operating near the borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Syria (including PJAK) may receive foreign financial or military assistance further justifies the state's hardline stance.

This perception translates into strengthened border security, the fortification of military installations, and a securitized framing of the Kurdish issue in the media space.

Overall, the hardening of Iran's Kurdish policy arises from three intersecting factors: a security paradigm prioritizing sovereignty and territorial integrity; the mistrust generated by overlapping ethnic and religious identities; and official narratives concerning transboundary dynamics and external influence. Under these conditions, Tehran typically frames Kurdish political mobilization, demands for autonomy, or self-governance models as separatist or terrorist threats.

Conclusion

The Kurdish question represents a central issue in both the domestic and foreign policies of Turkey and Iran. For both states, the principal objective is the preservation of territorial integrity and the assurance of national security. Historical treaties and political processes have shaped the current position of the Kurds, thereby amplifying their influence in regional affairs. Turkey, in recent years, has pursued cross-border military operations in Syria and Iraq to neutralize perceived security threats, while Iran has opted for strict domestic control combined with pragmatic economic cooperation with the KRG.

The findings of this study suggest that the Kurdish issue cannot be resolved through military means alone. Promoting social equality, expanding economic opportunities, and recognizing cultural rights are critical measures for progress. Only through such comprehensive approaches can stability and peace in the region be achieved.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2019). Kurdish autonomy and regional security: Revisiting Turkey–Iran dynamics. *Middle East Policy*, 26(3), 89–104.
- Akandere, O. *Osmanlı'dan Günümüze Türkiye'de Kürt Sorunu*, İstanbul: Otopsi Yayınları, 2010, s. 211-212
- Çandar, C. (2020). The Kurds in the Middle East: Challenges of statehood and autonomy. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 52(2), 211–229.
- D. Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity*. 2006. p-22. https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9780511159312_A23689761/preview-9780511159312_A23689761.pdf
- Gunes, C., & Lowe, R. (2019). *The impact of the Syrian conflict on Kurdish politics across the Middle East*. Chatham House Report.
- Gunter, M. (2022). Turkey, Iran, and the Kurds: A triangular relationship revisited. *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 45(3), 56–72.
- Gürçan, M., *What Do Turkey's Cross-Border Operations Tell Us About Its Military Doctrine?*, Al-Monitor, 2022
- Hamit Bozarslan. *Between integration, autonomization and radicalization. Hamit Bozarslan on the Kurdish Movement and the Turkish Left*. 2012. <https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/4663>
- Hassanpour, A. (2020). Cultural rights and Kurdish identity in Iran. *Iranian Studies*, 53(7), 1102–1119.

- Hinnebusch, R. (2019). Regional powers and the Syrian Kurdish question. *Mediterranean Politics*, 24(5), 523–541.
- Karimov, F. (2016). *Ethno-political Problems and Regional Security Issues in the Middle East*. Tashkent: “Sharq”, p.109.
- Kaya, Z. (2021). The PKK, Turkey, and cross-border interventions: Security and legitimacy. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(9), 1876–1894.
- Kucuk, B. (2022). Turkish foreign policy and the securitization of the Kurdish issue. *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 19(76), 45–64.
- Lazarev M.S., *Kurds and Kurdistan in the 20th Century*, Moskva: Nauka, 1999, p. 184-185
- Mahmood, O. S. (2023). Kurdish diaspora politics and transnational influence. *Globalizations*, 20(1), 77–95.
- Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. 1992. p-47
- Mehrdad R. Izady. *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*. September, 1992. p-45
- Minority Rights Group, *Kurds in Turkiye*. June, 2018. Retrieved from <https://minorityrights.org/communities/kurds-2>
- Natali, D. (2019). The future of the Kurdistan Regional Government: Between autonomy and dependence. *Middle East Journal*, 73(4), 555–573.
- Özpek, B. B. (2020). Turkey’s military operations in Syria: A new security doctrine? *Turkish Studies*, 21(2), 169–187.
- Phillips, D. L. (2021). *The Kurdish question in a changing Middle East*. Columbia University Press.
- Romano, D. (2020). Kurdish nationalism and regional geopolitics: A comparative analysis. *Ethnopolitics*, 19(5), 459–477.
- Serhat Erkmen, *Operation Peace Spring: Objectives, Current Situation and its Future*. April, 2020. The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). Syria Transition Challenges Project, Discussion Paper (2). - .3-5
- Stansfield, G. (2021). The Kurdish factor in Middle Eastern geopolitics after ISIS. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 44(6), 923–940.
- Stansfield, G. *The Kurdish Question in the Middle East*, Routledge, 2014, p. 198
- Uçar, F. *Türkiye’de Kürt Sorunu ve Turgut Özal Dönemi*, İstanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 2009, s. 135
- Yeğen, M. *Kürt Sorunu, İletişim Yayınları*, 2011, s. 215 <https://iletisim.com.tr/kitap/devlet-soyleminde-kurt-sorunu>
- Yildiz, K. (2024). Autonomy, federalism, and the Kurdish future in Turkey and Iran. *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 23(1), 1–19.