Siddhanta's International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts & Humanities
Vol. 4, No. 2, November-December 2026

A Comparative Analytical Review of How Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria Suppress Kurdish Independence

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Abstract

Background: *Between twenty-five and thirty-five million Kurds live divided among four states, none of which has ever accepted Kurdish statehood. Although the literature on each national case is substantial, comparative work that explains why four very different regimes have converged on the same outcome remains thin.*

Objective: *To analyse how Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria have suppressed, contained or redirected Kurdish aspirations for independence, to compare the instruments they use, and to assess how far the observed convergence is deliberate cooperation rather than parallel self-interest.*

Methods: *A scoping-style narrative review guided by the reporting principles of PRISMA-ScR, drawing on monographs, peer-reviewed articles, judicial decisions, United Nations material and human-rights monitoring data up to September 2026. Evidence was charted against a four-channel analytical model (coercive, legal-institutional, discursive-cultural and transnational-digital) and compared through a structured, focused comparison of the four states.*

Results: *Suppression has never been a single act. Each state has combined organised violence, legal engineering, cultural assimilation and diplomatic coordination, but in different proportions. Turkey relied most on legal-institutional and military instruments, Iraq on demographic engineering and later fiscal control, Iran on securitised judicial punishment, and Syria on statelessness and exclusion. Since 2024 the pattern has shifted from open denial towards negotiated containment, visible in the Turkey–PKK process and the 2026 integration agreement between Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces. Independence nonetheless remains the one demand that no state has conceded.*

Conclusions: *Kurdish independence is contained less by overwhelming force than by an adaptive system in which repression, co-optation and external veto reinforce one another. Five testable propositions are advanced for future research.*

Keywords: *Kurds; self-determination; secessionism; state repression; Turkey; Iraq; Iran; Syria; comparative politics; scoping review*

1. Introduction

The Kurds occupy an unusual position in the modern international system. Numbering somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five million people, they are routinely described as the largest nation without a state of its own [1,2]. Their historic homeland, a mountainous arc

running from south-eastern Anatolia through northern Iraq and north-western Iran into north-eastern Syria, was divided among successor states after the First World War. The provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres that foresaw Kurdish autonomy were displaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, which did not mention the Kurds at all [1,3]. Ever since, the question has not been whether Kurdish political aspirations exist, but how four neighbouring governments with very different ideologies have managed to keep them below the threshold of statehood.

That question is analytically demanding for three reasons. First, "Kurdistan" is itself a contested geographical and political concept, used differently by nationalists, by scholars and by the states that rule over the territory [4,5]. Second, Kurdish society is internally divided by dialect, religion, tribal structure, party loyalty and cross-border rivalry, so that suppression has often worked in tandem with Kurdish disunity rather than against a single unified movement [6,7]. Third, the four states are not allies by temperament. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria have at different moments fought one another, hosted each other's Kurdish insurgents and competed for influence over Kurdish parties. That they nevertheless share a consistent veto over Kurdish independence demands explanation.

Theoretical work on nationalism supplies the background. If nations are imagined communities sustained by print, schooling and shared symbols [8], and if modern industrial states need culturally homogeneous populations to function [9], then a minority that refuses assimilation threatens the legitimating story of the state itself. Large-N studies add that ethnic rebellion is most likely where groups are excluded from power or have recently lost autonomy [10,11]. Other research cautions that insurgency is better predicted by weak state capacity and favourable terrain than by grievance alone [12]. The Kurdish case sits at the intersection of these arguments: it combines exclusion, mountainous terrain, trans-border kin networks and a historical memory of promised, then withdrawn, autonomy.

The existing literature on the Kurds is rich but fragmented. There are excellent single-country studies of Turkey [13], Iraq [14], Iran [15] and Syria [16], and important comparative syntheses of Kurdish nationalism as a social movement [3,7]. Yet few works treat state suppression itself as the unit of analysis across all four countries, and fewer still integrate the digital and transnational instruments that have grown in importance in recent years [17,18]. Moreover, events since 2024 have altered the empirical landscape in ways that earlier syntheses could not anticipate. These include the Turkey–PKK disarmament process, the collapse of the Assad government and the 2026 settlement between Damascus and Kurdish-led forces.

This paper therefore asks four questions. (RQ1) Which instruments have the four states used to prevent Kurdish independence, and how have these changed over time? (RQ2) How do the states differ in the mix and intensity of those instruments? (RQ3) To what extent is the convergence on a common outcome the product of coordination, as opposed to independent but similar interests? (RQ4) What does the evidence from 2024–2026 indicate about the durability of the existing containment system?

The paper makes three contributions. It offers a structured evidence map of the relevant literature, summarised in Table 1. It proposes a four-channel model of containment that can be applied to other secessionist contexts. And it offers five analytical propositions that are explicitly framed so that other researchers can test, refine or refute them. The remainder of the paper sets out the methods (Section 2), the conceptual framework (Section 3), the review of related research (Section 4), the four country analyses (Sections 5 to 8), the comparative

synthesis (Section 9), a discussion of competing perspectives (Section 10), the implications and propositions (Section 11), limitations (Section 12) and conclusions (Section 13).

2. Methods

2.1 Review design and reporting standard

The study is a scoping-style narrative review with a comparative case design. Scoping reviews are suited to broad, heterogeneous and conceptually unsettled literatures, where the aim is to map the evidence rather than to pool effect sizes [19,20]. The reporting follows the principles of the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews, namely an explicit question, stated eligibility criteria, a described search and charting process, and a transparent synthesis [19,21]. Methodological guidance on applying PRISMA-ScR to humanities and social-science questions was also consulted [22,23].

A caveat is necessary and is stated plainly. The sources used here are mainly books, court judgments, institutional reports and monitoring data, rather than records retrieved from a single bibliographic database. For that reason the paper does not reproduce a numerical PRISMA flow diagram. Inventing screening counts that were not generated by a logged database query would undermine the transparency that the standard is meant to protect. The review instead documents its criteria and charting procedure in prose and in Table 1, and it should be read as PRISMA-ScR-informed rather than as a fully registered systematic review.

2.2 Eligibility criteria

Sources were eligible if they met three conditions. They addressed state policy towards Kurds, Kurdish political movements or Kurdish territory in Turkey, Iraq, Iran or Syria. They were published as scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed articles, judicial decisions, United Nations or intergovernmental documents, or reports by recognised human-rights organisations. And they provided empirical evidence, legal analysis or theoretical argument bearing on suppression, containment or accommodation of Kurdish self-determination claims. Studies of Kurdish culture, folklore or diaspora politics were excluded unless they bore directly on state policy. Journalistic reports were used only for events from 2024 to 2026 that had not yet entered the scholarly record, and each such item was treated as provisional evidence. Material from the researcher-supplied reference collection was included where it offered a defensible conceptual or methodological link to the topic. These links were digital surveillance, the sociology of law, national identity politics, language and culture, displacement and trauma, and review methodology [17,24,25].

2.3 Charting and synthesis

For each included source the following were charted: country, period, design, principal findings and relevance to the four-channel model described in Section 3. Evidence was then compared using the method of structured, focused comparison, in which identical questions are posed to each case so that similarities and differences can be traced systematically [26,27]. Because the number of cases is small (four) and the cases are interdependent, the comparison is used for theory development and proposition building rather than for statistical inference. Where sources disagreed, for example on casualty estimates, the range is reported with attribution rather than collapsed into a single figure.

2.4 Quality appraisal and source triangulation

Scoping reviews do not usually score the quality of individual sources, but a pragmatic hierarchy was applied. Judicial findings and United Nations investigations were treated as the strongest evidence of specific acts. Peer-reviewed scholarship and university-press monographs were used for interpretation and context. Advocacy and monitoring organisations, including Kurdish human-rights groups, were treated as essential but potentially partial sources. Their statistics were presented as documented minimum figures wherever the organisations themselves described them in that way.

2.5 Ethical considerations and originality

The study uses only published or publicly released material and involved no human participants. It nevertheless follows established guidance on the ethical conduct of social-science research, including accurate attribution, avoidance of inflammatory language and respect for victims [28]. All text was composed originally for this paper. Quotations were avoided in favour of paraphrase with citation, consistent with accepted practice for preventing plagiarism in scholarly writing [29–31]. Authors who require a formal similarity score should still run the final manuscript through their institution's detection software, because no drafting process can substitute for that check.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Defining suppression of independence

In this paper, "suppression of Kurdish independence" refers to the set of state practices that prevent, deter or neutralise the creation of an independent Kurdish political entity. It covers both repressing movements that demand independence and restructuring Kurdish politics so that the demand loses organisational capacity or legitimacy. This is broader than violent repression alone. The literature on state repression distinguishes between overt coercion and "diffuse control", in which law, administration, surveillance and social pressure shape behaviour without constant recourse to force [32,33]. It is also broader than assimilation: policy towards minorities can range from accommodation to exclusion, with assimilation lying in between and with the choice shaped by state elites' perceptions of security threats [34].

3.2 Theoretical anchors

Four bodies of theory guide the analysis. The first is internal colonialism, which argues that peripheral ethnic regions may be incorporated into a state in a structurally subordinate position, with cultural distinctiveness reinforcing economic and political inequality [35]. The second is the "high modernist" state-building thesis. It holds that modern states render populations legible and uniform through standardised language, settlement patterns and administrative categories, and that groups that resist legibility become targets of coercive simplification [36]. Together with the war-making account of state formation, in which coercion and territorial control are central to how states consolidate [37], this helps explain why Kurdish-majority mountain districts were treated by early republican elites as zones to be pacified and reorganised.

The third anchor is the typology of ethnic conflict regulation. McGarry and O'Leary distinguish eliminative methods, such as genocide, forced population transfer and partition, from methods of managing differences, such as control, arbitration, federalisation and power-sharing [38]. Lustick's contrast between consociation and control is especially useful: a dominant group can deliberately maintain "control" over a subordinate segment through institutional devices that limit its organisational capacity [39]. Although all four states have at times used eliminative methods against Kurds, the contemporary mix is dominated by control and, increasingly, by selective accommodation.

The fourth anchor is the legal tension between self-determination and territorial integrity. International law recognises the right of peoples to self-determination, but state practice has overwhelmingly confined its external dimension to decolonisation, with remedial secession remaining contested at best [40,41]. Empirical research on state birth suggests that new states emerge mainly where powerful external actors permit or sponsor them [42,43]. This matters because the Kurdish case lacks the external sponsorship that has typically enabled successful secession.

3.3 A four-channel model of containment

Building on the foregoing, the paper proposes a heuristic model in which containment operates through four interacting channels.

Channel A: Coercive. Armed force, mass detention, executions, forced displacement, destruction of settlements and the use of proxy militias. Extreme versions meet the definition of crimes under international law, including the crime of genocide as defined in the 1948 Convention [44,45].

Channel B: Legal-institutional. Constitutional definitions of the nation, bans on parties and organisations, electoral thresholds, citizenship regimes, emergency law, anti-terror legislation and judicial doctrine. The sociology of law highlights how legal systems function as instruments of social control, not merely as neutral rule-sets [24]. Debates on judicial philosophy show how constitutional interpretation can entrench or relax such control [46].

Channel C: Discursive-cultural. Language policy, education, historiography, naming and symbolism. Language is a core mechanism here. Policies that restrict a minority's language in schooling and public life have been analysed as a form of cultural erosion [47], and sociological work on language and culture stresses their role in transmitting identity across generations [48,49]. Political mythmaking about the "authentic" national past can legitimise exclusion [25].

Channel D: Transnational-digital. Inter-state security cooperation, cross-border military operations, pressure on third countries and diplomatic veto over recognition, together with digital surveillance, connectivity restrictions and information control. The literature on techno-authoritarianism and cyber-diplomacy shows how states increasingly extend sovereignty claims into digital space [17,18]. Because these two works are conceptual rather than Kurdish-specific, they are used here as frameworks and not as direct evidence of particular acts.

3.4 Decolonial and critical reflexivity

A final conceptual point concerns positionality. Much of what is known about the Kurds has been written through state archives, security reports or the categories of the dominant nation. Decolonial approaches to sociology argue for centring the epistemologies of subordinated communities and for questioning inherited analytical categories [50]. Accordingly, the paper treats "separatism", "terrorism" and "national unity" as claims made by actors rather than as neutral descriptions. It also recognises that Kurdish parties themselves use contested labels and that some have committed serious abuses.

4. Review of Related Research: Results, Outputs and Perspectives

4.1 Evidence map

The evidence was organised into six clusters: (i) origins and theories of Kurdish nationalism; (ii) comparative and quantitative studies of ethnic rebellion; (iii) country-specific analyses of state policy; (iv) legal and human-rights investigations; (v) language and cultural policy; and (vi) recent developments and monitoring data. Table 1 summarises the principal studies that anchor the argument, with their design, main results and relevance to this paper.

Table 1. Charted evidence from key related research

Ref.	Design and context	Principal results or outputs	Relevance to this paper
[1]	Narrative political history, Ottoman collapse to the early 2000s	Kurdish nationalism develops under successive partitions and repeated state-led suppression of revolts; policies diverge by state but converge in refusing independence	Historical baseline for all four cases
[3]	Comparative historical analysis of Iraq, Turkey and Iran	Kurdish identity is shaped less by primordial ties than by state policy and international structures that alternately politicise and constrain it	Supports the argument that state design drives Kurdish mobilisation
[7]	Social-movement analysis centred on Turkey	Political opportunities, mobilising structures and framing processes jointly explain the rise of the Kurdish movement	Explains why repression can both deter and generate mobilisation
[10]	Quantitative global dataset of ethnic groups and civil conflict	Rebellion is more likely among groups excluded from power and those that have recently lost autonomy	Places Kurdish exclusion in a global pattern
[12]	Cross-national analysis of civil-war onset	Insurgency is better predicted by weak state capacity and favourable terrain than by ethnic diversity or grievance	A counterpoint to purely grievance-based accounts
[51]	Mixed-method study of the conflict in Turkey	Documents far-reaching social and political consequences of prolonged conflict, including displacement and altered political attitudes	Evidence on the long-term costs of Turkey's approach

[52]	Micro-level analysis of individual participation in the PKK rebellion	Shows how ordinary people come to bear extreme risk within specific local and repressive contexts	Links state coercion to recruitment dynamics
[53]	Documentary investigation using captured Iraqi state records and testimony	Concludes that the Anfal campaign was a systematic, centrally planned operation; estimates deaths at between 50,000 and 100,000	Core evidence on Channel A in Iraq
[54]	Field and documentary report on Syria	Documents the 1962 census and denationalisation, Arabisation policies and cultural restrictions	Core evidence on Channel B in Syria
[55]	Historical-linguistic analysis, 1918 to 1985	Language is central to both Kurdish nationalism and the repressive policies of the four states	Core evidence on Channel C
[56]	Policy analysis of Turkish language regulation	Traces a shift from outright prohibition to limited, conditional tolerance while structural restrictions persist	Shows adaptation rather than abandonment of control
[57]	United Nations monitoring report on south-east Turkey, 2015 to 2016	Documents large-scale destruction, killings and displacement during curfews, and calls for accountability	Primary evidence on recent coercion in Turkey
[58]	Grand Chamber judgment	Finds that the prolonged detention of the former co-leader of the pro-Kurdish party violated multiple Convention rights and pursued the ulterior purpose of stifling pluralism	Judicial confirmation of legal-institutional misuse
[59]	United Nations fact-finding mission on Iran	Finds serious violations during the 2022 protest wave, which began with the death in custody of a young Kurdish woman	Evidence on Iran's securitised response

4.2 Synthesis of results across clusters

Origins and theories. The historiography consistently shows that Kurdish nationalism is modern and relational, produced by contact with centralising states rather than by an unbroken ancient project [1,60]. This matters for the present analysis because it implies that state policy is not a response to a pre-formed nationalism but one of its constitutive causes [3]. Ethnosymbolist work adds that shared myths, memories and symbols give ethnic communities durable cultural cores, which helps to explain why assimilation campaigns have repeatedly failed to dissolve Kurdish identity [61]. Studies of Kurdish politics in the 1990s further showed how regional shocks, such as the Gulf War and the Iraqi safe haven, transmitted nationalist momentum across borders [62,63].

Comparative and quantitative work. Large-N research indicates that exclusion from state power predicts rebellion [10], and classic work on ethnic conflict stresses that fear of

domination and competition over group status drive escalation [64]. Fearon and Laitin's contrasting finding, that opportunity structures matter more than grievance, is less a refutation than a complement. Kurdish insurgencies have flourished in mountainous border zones with sanctuary across frontiers [12,63]. Work on the geography of ethnic violence further suggests that territory perceived as indivisible, such as oil-rich Kirkuk, makes compromise especially difficult [65].

Country-specific analyses. For Turkey, the central debate is whether state policy has been defined by denial and assimilation [13,66], by security-driven counter-insurgency [51,67], or by the interaction of both with changing party politics [68,69]. For Iraq, scholars emphasise the ratchet effect of repeated state violence and international protection. It transformed Iraqi Kurdistan into a quasi-state while keeping it dependent on external patrons and on Baghdad's finances [14,70,71]. For Iran, the literature stresses the Persian-centred nation-building of the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic's securitisation of ethnic dissent [15,72,73]. For Syria, the key contributions document statelessness, Arabisation and the unexpected emergence of an autonomous administration after 2011 [16,74,75].

Legal and human-rights outputs. Judicial and quasi-judicial findings show that legal instruments can be turned into tools of political containment. The documentary findings on the Anfal campaign and the European Court's finding of ulterior purpose in the prosecution of a pro-Kurdish leader are examples [53,58]. The United Nations has likewise documented the scale of destruction in Turkey's south-east and the heavy toll of Iran's protest crackdowns [57,59].

Recent developments. Monitoring organisations now provide timely quantitative data on the Kurdish dimension of repression in Iran [76,77]. News reporting and analyses chart the peace process in Turkey and the integration negotiations in Syria [78–80]. These sources are valuable but provisional, and Section 12 returns to their limits.

4.3 Competing perspectives in the literature

Four interpretive positions can be distinguished.

- *The state-security perspective* treats Kurdish militancy as a threat to territorial integrity and sees measures against it as legitimate counter-terrorism. This view underpins official discourse in all four capitals and is reflected in the designation of the PKK as a terrorist organisation by several governments [67,81].
- *The nationalist-grievance perspective*, prevalent among Kurdish political movements, frames the divided homeland as a colonised nation subject to assimilation, dispossession and mass violence [82,83].
- *The structural-comparative perspective* sees Kurdish outcomes as the product of state-formation dynamics, geopolitical constraints and opportunity structures common to many minority movements [10,11,37].
- *The critical-decolonial perspective* questions both state and nationalist narratives, emphasising the epistemic power embedded in official categories and advocating the recovery of subaltern voices [50,66].

The present paper draws mainly on the third and fourth perspectives while giving serious weight to the first and second, because each captures part of the empirical reality.

4.4 Research gaps identified

The review reveals four gaps. There are few studies that compare the four states using a common analytical grid. Digital and cyber dimensions of Kurdish containment are under-researched relative to their growing importance. The psychosocial consequences of prolonged conflict and displacement among Kurdish populations are seldom integrated with political analysis, even though comparative research on refugees and displaced persons elsewhere shows high burdens of trauma-related mental illness [84]. And the interactions between internal Kurdish fragmentation and external containment are often treated as separate topics rather than as mutually reinforcing. The sections that follow address the first, second and fourth gaps directly and point towards the third in the recommendations.

4.5 Appraisal of the evidence base

The strength of evidence varies across clusters. Judicial and United Nations findings are the most reliable for specific episodes, but they cover only a fraction of the period and the territory studied [57,58]. Scholarly monographs supply interpretation and context. Yet several foundational works pre-date the collapse of the Turkish peace process in 2015 and the changes of 2024 to 2026, so their conclusions must be updated with care [1,3,14]. Cross-national quantitative studies are methodologically powerful but treat Kurds as one case among hundreds and cannot capture the cross-border, multi-state character of Kurdish politics [10,12]. Monitoring organisations offer timely data but are inevitably selective and may be affected by access constraints and by their own mandates [76]. Because no single source type is sufficient, the paper triangulates across them and signals wherever a claim rests on one category only.

5. Turkey: Legal Engineering, Assimilation and Counter-Insurgency

5.1 Foundations of denial (1920s to 1980)

Turkey houses the largest Kurdish population and has the longest record of formal legal denial. The republican settlement at Lausanne limited recognised minority status to non-Muslims, leaving Kurds without a legal identity as a people [1,3]. In the 1920s the state abolished Kurdish-language education and publishing. Following the Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925 it enacted exceptional legislation and set up special tribunals that gave the executive broad powers in the east [1,6]. The language of official nationalism recast Kurds as "mountain Turks", a formula that transformed political difference into a question of cultural backwardness to be corrected [13,66].

The decisive episodes of this period were territorial and demographic. The suppression of the Dersim region in 1937 and 1938 involved large-scale killing and deportation. Its scale and character remain contested, with estimates ranging from thousands to tens of thousands of dead and some scholars arguing that it fits a genocide framework [85]. The Settlement Law of 1934 formalised the aim of dispersing Kurdish communities and reshaping population distribution so as to speed assimilation [86,87]. These measures illustrate Channels A, B and C operating together at the founding of the republic.

5.2 The 1980 coup, language bans and the rise of the PKK

The military regime of 1980 to 1983 intensified cultural restriction. A 1983 law prohibited the use of languages other than Turkish as mother tongues, effectively criminalising Kurdish in public life, and it was repealed only in 1991 [13,56]. Mass detention and abuse in military prisons, especially in Diyarbakır, are widely credited with radicalising a generation of Kurdish activists [67,81]. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), founded in 1978 as a Marxist-Leninist organisation that originally sought an independent state, launched its armed campaign in 1984 [67,81].

The ensuing conflict became one of the most destructive in the region. Reporting commonly attributes more than 40,000 deaths to it [78]. A state of emergency in the south-east, local militias known as village guards and military operations against rural settlements led to the evacuation of thousands of villages and hamlets in the 1990s. The result was mass internal displacement and a long and still incomplete return process [86,88]. Researchers note that violence by the state and by the PKK interacted: repression generated recruits, and attacks on civilians and security forces justified further securitisation [51,52].

5.3 Party bans, thresholds and the criminalisation of representation

A distinctive feature of Turkey's approach is the repeated closure of legal pro-Kurdish parties through the Constitutional Court. The People's Labour Party (HEP) was banned in 1993, its successor DEP in 1994, HADEP in 2003 and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009, each time after allegations of organic links to the PKK, and several elected deputies were imprisoned [68,69]. Each successive party reorganised under a new name, and Kurdish representation survived at the municipal level, but the pattern created a permanent legal risk for Kurdish politics. A national electoral threshold of 10 per cent, among the highest in the world, remained in force until 2022. It forced Kurdish candidates to run as independents or to build broad alliances [13,68].

The sociology of law helps interpret this record. Legal instruments in this case did not simply apply neutral norms; they marked Kurdish political demands as inherently threatening and shifted the burden to Kurdish actors to prove loyalty [24]. Debates on constitutional interpretation stress that judicial deference to national-security reasoning can transform courts into guarantors of the dominant understanding of the nation [46]. The European Court of Human Rights has, in turn, repeatedly acted as a counterweight. The most prominent example is the 2020 Grand Chamber judgment on the detention of former HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş, which found that his prolonged pre-trial detention pursued the ulterior purpose of stifling pluralism and limiting political debate [58].

5.4 Reform, rupture and the securitised turn

The early 2000s offered a different trajectory. Candidacy for European Union membership led to the relaxation of some language restrictions, including limited Kurdish-language broadcasting and private language courses. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) later opened a "democratic initiative" and a negotiated "resolution process" with the PKK between 2013 and 2015 [13,56,89]. Observers noted, however, that reforms were partial and conditional, leaving the constitutional definition of citizenship, the thresholds and the anti-terror framework largely intact [56,89].

The process collapsed in mid-2015. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) had won 80 parliamentary seats and denied the governing party a majority in the June election, and violence linked to the Syrian war followed [89,90]. Urban fighting and prolonged curfews followed in several south-eastern towns. A United Nations report estimated that between 355,000 and 500,000 people were displaced and that approximately 2,000 people were killed in the period from July 2015 to December 2016, and it documented extensive destruction of housing [57]. In November 2016, HDP co-leaders and other deputies were arrested. Many elected Kurdish mayors were later replaced by government-appointed trustees, a practice that scholars interpret as the dismantling of local Kurdish self-government [58,67].

Turkey's coercive reach also extended outside its borders. Military operations against Kurdish-led forces in northern Syria from 2016 onward, and repeated incursions into northern Iraq, aimed to prevent the consolidation of any Kurdish-governed entity along the frontier [90,91]. The logic is clear: Ankara has treated Kurdish autonomy in Syria as a strategic threat comparable to the PKK itself, and so has made the prevention of a Kurdish corridor a foreign-policy priority [75,91].

5.5 The 2024 to 2026 peace process

Since late 2024 the dynamics have changed. In October 2024 the leader of Turkey's nationalist MHP, a long-standing opponent of concessions, floated the idea that the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan might address parliament if he renounced violence. In 2025 the PKK announced that it would dissolve itself and disarm [78,92]. Fighters held a symbolic weapons-burning ceremony in northern Iraq in July 2025, a parliamentary commission was formed to propose legal steps, and in October 2025 the group announced the withdrawal of its forces from Turkish territory to Iraq [78,79]. In February 2026 a parliamentary commission backed a report intended to facilitate disarmament and reintegration [93].

Two features of this process matter for the analysis. First, the Turkish state has framed it as "terror-free Turkey", not as recognition of Kurdish national rights. The demand for independence, which the PKK itself abandoned in favour of democratic autonomy, is therefore not being negotiated [67,79]. Second, the PKK has conditioned further steps on ending Öcalan's isolation and on legal and constitutional changes enabling reintegration, which have not yet been delivered [79]. The process is therefore best interpreted as a shift from Channel A to Channel B and C instruments, an evolution in the mode of containment rather than its abandonment.

5.6 Assessment

Turkey's record illustrates both the capacity and the limits of containment. Decades of military pressure, party closures and cultural restriction did not eliminate Kurdish political organisation; instead they altered its form and aims. The PKK moved from a project of independence towards a platform of democratic autonomy, and legal Kurdish parties repeatedly reconstituted themselves after bans [67,68,81]. The experience is consistent with the view that coercion shapes the content of demands more reliably than it removes the underlying identity, a pattern that the quantitative literature on exclusion and rebellion also anticipates [10,51]. At the same time, the capacity of the Turkish state to absorb negotiated settlements without conceding national recognition indicates that institutional control remains robust [79,89].

6. Iraq: Demographic Engineering, Genocidal Violence and Fiscal-Constitutional Control

6.1 From promised autonomy to Ba'athist centralisation

Iraq presents the most paradoxical case. It is both the state that committed the most extreme violence against Kurds and the one in which Kurds have achieved the most institutionalised autonomy. After the incorporation of the former Mosul province into the British-mandated state, Kurdish leaders pressed for recognition but were repeatedly disappointed. A series of rebellions led by tribal and religious figures were suppressed with the aid of air power [1,71]. Following the 1958 revolution, the provisional constitution recognised Arabs and Kurds as partners, yet the promise was not honoured, and a war led by Mustafa Barzani lasted from 1961 to 1970 [1,94]. The March 1970 autonomy agreement and the 1974 Autonomy Law offered a nominal framework. The central government retained control over security, oil and the definition of the autonomous area, and the arrangement collapsed in renewed fighting that ended with the 1975 Algiers Accord between Iraq and Iran [82,94].

6.2 Arabisation, deportation and Anfal

After 1975 the Ba'athist regime used demographic engineering to alter the ethnic composition of strategic districts, especially Kirkuk, Khanaqin and Sinjar. Policies included the relocation of Arab settlers, forced displacement of Kurdish and other non-Arab communities, boundary changes to administrative units, and the manipulation of census categories that required residents to register as Arab [95,96]. In the early 1980s the state deported tens of thousands of Faili (Shi'a) Kurds and detained and disappeared thousands of Barzani men, measures that foreshadowed later campaigns [1,53].

The culmination was the Anfal campaign of 1988, a series of military operations that combined mass arrests, summary executions, chemical attacks and the destruction of villages. Human Rights Watch, relying on captured Iraqi documents and survivor testimony, concluded that the campaign was systematic and centrally planned. It estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 people were killed, while Kurdish sources have advanced considerably higher figures [53]. The chemical attack on Halabja in March 1988 killed thousands of civilians in a single day and has since become a central symbol in Kurdish collective memory [83,97]. Comparative scholarship has linked Anfal to the earlier suppression of Dersim in Turkey as examples of mass violence against Kurds in pursuit of state consolidation, while noting important differences in scale, method and intent [85]. In terms of the four-channel model, Iraq under Saddam Hussein shows Channel A in its most extreme form. It was supported by Channel B through citizenship manipulation and by Channel C through the erasure of Kurdish toponyms and identity from the registers of contested areas.

6.3 From safe haven to quasi-state

The 1991 uprising and the creation of an internationally protected zone transformed the situation. A Kurdish regional administration emerged, with its own parliament, armed forces and civil service. It also experienced a destructive internal conflict between the two dominant parties, the KDP and PUK, in the mid-1990s [70,71]. Scholars have described the resulting entity as a "quasi-state" whose autonomy rested on outside protection, oil-for-food revenues and, later, American support, which made it formidably capable in some domains and

structurally dependent in others [70,98]. After 2003, Kurdish leaders traded support for the new Iraqi order for constitutional entrenchment of a federal region. The 2005 constitution recognised the Kurdistan Region and mandated a process to resolve the status of disputed territories such as Kirkuk [96,99]. That process was not completed within its constitutional deadline, and Kirkuk's status remained unresolved [65,96].

6.4 Fiscal and judicial containment

After 2005, Baghdad's instruments shifted away from overt violence towards fiscal and legal levers. The central dispute concerns the control of oil exports and revenue and the Region's share of the federal budget. Independent oil exports from the Region led to confrontation. In 2023 an international arbitration ruling in favour of Baghdad against Turkey halted Kurdish exports through the Iraq–Türkiye pipeline, which had been the Region's main outlet [100]. A federal court ruling in 2024 required salaries of public employees in the Region to be paid through federal banks. In practice Baghdad has insisted on verifying detailed payroll lists, so a ruling that strengthens employees' legal entitlement also gives the centre an administrative lever [100]. Under current budget law, the Region is entitled to 12.67 per cent of national spending in return for meeting oil and revenue obligations. A persistent dispute over whether it has done so has left civil-service salaries hostage to negotiation for months at a time [101]. The Kurdistan Regional Government has claimed that the suspension of exports cost the Iraqi economy more than 25 billion US dollars, a figure that reflects its own estimate and should be treated accordingly [102].

The scale of the dependence is visible in the figures. In May 2026 the Region's finance ministry reported that Baghdad had transferred about 674.6 million US dollars of the 735.4 million needed for monthly salaries and pensions [103]. Reliance on federal transfers for a large public workforce illustrates how financial dependence can become a structural form of containment [70,103]. Whether this should be characterised as deliberate suppression or as the consequence of a contested federal bargain is itself disputed, and Section 10 returns to this question.

6.5 The 2017 referendum as a natural experiment

The clearest test of Iraq's willingness to accept Kurdish independence occurred on 25 September 2017, when the Kurdistan Region and several disputed areas held a non-binding referendum. According to the official results, 92.73 per cent of those voting favoured independence, on a turnout of about 72 per cent among 4.58 million registered voters [104]. The reaction was swift and coordinated. Baghdad rejected the vote and imposed restrictions on international flights to the Region's airports. Iraqi forces and allied militias advanced into Kirkuk and other disputed areas on 16 October [105]. On 20 November the Federal Supreme Court declared the referendum unconstitutional and ordered its results and effects annulled [106]. Neighbouring states, including Turkey and Iran, also exerted economic and diplomatic pressure, and major powers did not support the initiative [104,107].

Analytically the episode is revealing, for three reasons. First, the strongest democratic expression of Kurdish preference for independence was met by an immediate restoration of state control through legal, military and economic channels. Second, the reaction demonstrated the transnational veto: governments that are otherwise rivals cooperated in isolating Erbil. Third, it showed how the Region's internal divisions, which scholars had long identified as a vulnerability [70,98], limit its capacity to withstand pressure. To the author's knowledge, no

major Iraqi Kurdish party has revived a unilateral independence bid since 2017. Erbil's public position is now framed as a demand to be treated as a full federal region under the constitution [102].

7. Iran: Securitised Justice, Persianisation and Cross-Border Pressure

7.1 State-building and the Mahabad Republic

Iran's Kurdish regions were incorporated into a state whose Pahlavi-era nation-building promoted Persian language and culture as the core of national identity. Reza Shah's centralisation campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s disarmed tribes, forced settlement on pastoral communities and restricted the public use of minority languages [15,108]. Soviet and Allied occupation weakened the central government during the Second World War, and Kurdish nationalists proclaimed the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946. It collapsed within a year after Soviet withdrawal, and its president, Qazi Muhammad, was executed in 1947, an event that remains a founding memory of Iranian Kurdish nationalism [1,109].

7.2 The Islamic Republic: from jihad to judicial control

The 1979 revolution initially raised Kurdish hopes for autonomy, but they were quickly extinguished. Kurdish parties, above all the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Komala, boycotted or contested the new constitutional order. In 1979 the new leadership declared a holy war against Kurdish insurgents and sent the army and Revolutionary Guards to retake Kurdish cities [72,73]. The constitution of 1979 designates Persian as the official language. It permits regional languages in the press and in the teaching of their literature, but not as languages of instruction, which in practice limits Kurdish to a subordinate cultural role [15,72].

The regime's pursuit of Kurdish opposition leaders extended beyond Iran's borders. The KDPI leader Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou was assassinated in Vienna in 1989, and his successor Sadegh Sharafkandi was killed in Berlin in 1992, episodes that have been widely attributed to Iranian state agents [1,73]. Over subsequent decades Kurdish provinces were heavily militarised. Human-rights organisations documented executions after unfair trials, arbitrary detention and discrimination in employment, education and cultural expression [110]. The legal vocabulary of Iran's security courts, in which charges such as "enmity against God" or "corruption on earth" are applied to political activity, turned Channel B into an instrument of Channel A. The sociology of law offers a helpful lens for understanding how criminal law becomes a tool of political control [24,110].

7.3 Contemporary data on repression of Kurds

Current monitoring data allow a degree of quantification, although the sources deserve caution. The Norway-based Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, which focuses on Kurdish regions, reported that at least 46 Kurdish prisoners were executed across Iran in the first half of 2026. That accounted for about 12 per cent of all executions recorded in the country in that period [76]. For August 2026 it recorded the executions of at least 13 Kurdish prisoners, which was 14.5 per cent of the 89 executions recorded nationwide that month. It also recorded the arrest of 75 Kurdish individuals, which was 64 per cent of all arrests it recorded for the month [77]. The same organisation estimated that at least 10,000 Kurds were arrested during the first

half of 2026, and it verified the identities of 290 Kurds killed during the January 2026 protests [76].

Two analytical cautions apply. First, Kurds are generally estimated to constitute roughly a tenth of Iran's population [15,72]. A share of 12 to 15 per cent of executions therefore suggests moderate over-representation. The 64 per cent share of recorded arrests in a single month is much more striking but may be affected by the organisation's monitoring focus. Second, Hengaw describes its figures as verified minimums, and variation between monitoring groups is attributed partly to secret executions and non-disclosure to families [76,77]. The data are therefore best read as strong indicators of disproportionate targeting rather than as precise estimates.

Border policing is another dimension. Hengaw reported that at least seven Kurdish kolbars, the cross-border porters who carry goods on foot because of a scarcity of legal employment, were killed or injured along the borders of Kurdistan in August 2026. It also reported that civilians continue to be injured by landmines from the Iran–Iraq war and from newer mines laid by security forces [77]. This combination of economic marginalisation and lethal border control illustrates how coercion is embedded in everyday economic life.

7.4 Woman, Life, Freedom and securitisation of dissent

The 2022 protest wave began after the death in custody of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a young Kurdish woman arrested by the morality police. Its central slogan, derived from Kurdish political usage, spread across Iranian society, and the state's response included lethal force, mass arrests and sweeping internet restrictions [59]. A United Nations fact-finding mission concluded that the authorities were responsible for serious human-rights violations in connection with the protests, including violence resulting in the death of Amini [59]. The episode demonstrates a recurring state strategy: to frame mass social protest in Kurdish areas as separatism or foreign-sponsored subversion. That framing justifies exceptional measures that would be harder to defend in non-Kurdish provinces [15,59].

The pattern recurred during the nationwide protests of January 2026, which began over economic conditions and were followed by mass arrests. Hengaw's later verification work placed Kurds among the dead and the detained in large numbers [76]. Connectivity restrictions during protest periods illustrate how digital control tools complement physical repression. This dynamic is analysed conceptually in the literature on digital sovereignty, although those works do not document the Iranian case specifically [17,18].

7.5 External dimension

Iran's containment of Kurdish independence is also territorial and regional. Over several decades Iranian forces have struck the bases of Iranian Kurdish opposition parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Tehran has pressed Baghdad and Erbil to restrict their activities [72,73]. During the 2017 referendum crisis, neighbouring states including Iran joined Baghdad in applying pressure on the Kurdistan Region. This suggests that Tehran treats Kurdish statehood anywhere in the region as a strategic threat to its own integrity [104,107].

8. Syria: Statelessness, Arabisation and Contested Integration

8.1 Exclusion under the Ba'ath state

Syria's Kurds were, for most of the twentieth century, the least visible of the four communities in international debate, yet they experienced some of the most distinctive legal exclusion. Under French mandate rule the Kurdish-populated districts of Jazira, Kobani and Afrin were incorporated into Syria, and after independence Arab nationalism became the dominant state ideology [16,74]. In 1962 an exceptional census in Hasakah province stripped an estimated 120,000 Kurds of their citizenship, classifying them as "foreigners" or as unregistered persons. The status was inherited by their descendants, creating a stateless population that grew to several hundred thousand by 2011 [16,54]. Statelessness had practical effects: those affected could not hold public employment, own property legally, travel freely or access many state services [54,74].

The state complemented legal exclusion with spatial and cultural policy. The "Arab Belt" plan of the 1970s sought to settle Arab families along the northern border and to separate Kurds in Syria from those in Turkey. Regulations also restricted the use of Kurdish language in public, banned Kurdish publishing and limited the registration of Kurdish names [16,54]. The Newroz festival was frequently restricted, and Kurdish political parties were illegal and fragmented [16,74]. Political tension surfaced in March 2004, when disturbances in Qamishli following a football match turned into wider unrest and were met with lethal force, a turning point that signalled the depth of Kurdish alienation [16,74]. In 2011, at the outset of the uprising against the Assad government, Damascus offered naturalisation to some of the stateless Kurds. It was an attempt to defuse Kurdish participation in protests, and it left many unregistered persons uncovered [74].

The long denial of citizenship also had a political function that is easy to overlook. By separating a large share of Kurds in the north-east from the legal community of the state, the regime reduced their claims on public goods and made their loyalty contingent on administrative favour, a classic technique of control rather than of mass violence [54,74]. It is notable that the 2011 naturalisation decree, which came when the regime needed to prevent Kurdish defection, shows how citizenship was used as a bargaining instrument as much as a right [16,74].

8.2 Autonomy by default, 2012 to 2024

The Syrian war created a space that no Kurdish party had been able to open by force. In 2012 government forces withdrew from most Kurdish-majority areas, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wings assumed control. They built a system of local councils described by its supporters as democratic autonomy and by critics as dominated by a single party [90,111]. The defence of Kobani against the Islamic State in 2014 and 2015 made the Kurdish-led forces an indispensable partner of the international coalition. These forces were organised as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with an Arab-majority component in the east [75,90]. The area under their control expanded to include large Arab-populated districts, which complicated claims of ethnic self-rule [75].

Turkey regarded this development as an existential security threat because of the PYD's relationship with the PKK. It conducted military operations in 2016, 2018 and 2019 that

captured territory along the border and displaced Kurdish populations, particularly from Afrin [90,91]. The Kurdish administration therefore faced simultaneous pressure from Ankara, from the Syrian government and from the ambiguity of its American patron. Notably, the leadership generally avoided demanding independence and called instead for a decentralised Syria. This pragmatic stance illustrates how external veto shapes the content of Kurdish demands [75,91].

8.3 After Assad: integration under pressure

The fall of the Assad government at the end of 2024 reopened the question of Syria's future. A March 2025 agreement between the interim president and the SDF commander envisaged the integration of the SDF and of northeastern civil and military institutions into the Syrian state. Little progress was made before the year-end deadline, which paved the way for the government offensive [80]. In January 2026 government forces captured wide areas of northern and eastern Syria from the SDF. An agreement on 29 and 30 January set out a ceasefire and phased integration, with security forces of the interior ministry entering the cities of Hasakah and Qamishli [80,112]. A decree was also issued granting citizenship to stateless Kurds, ending a status that had lasted for more than six decades [112]. By April 2026, the interim president and the SDF chief were meeting to discuss completion of the integration process [113].

The agreement is analytically ambiguous. For the government, it advances the aim of a unitary state under a single flag and a single army, an analysis offered in commentary on the settlement. For the Kurdish side it preserves a measure of local specificity and security presence [80,114]. A source in the interim government, quoted in reporting, said that the deal reflected the necessities of the moment rather than a definitive settlement. The same source noted that some had dreamed of independence while others had hoped to deny Kurds any specificity at all [115]. Turkey said it was scrutinising the agreement [80]. In terms of the four-channel model, the shift from the dominance of Channel A in January 2026 towards Channel B, in the form of citizenship and institutional integration, shows the same adaptive logic observed in Turkey. Coercion establishes the bargaining ceiling, and law then absorbs the residual demands.

9. Comparative Analysis

9.1 Structured comparison

Table 2 presents the four cases against a common set of questions. The figures are drawn from the sources cited in Sections 5 to 8, are approximate where indicated, and reflect disagreements among sources where these exist.

Table 2. Comparative matrix of containment practices towards Kurdish independence claims

Dimension	Turkey	Iraq	Iran	Syria
Approximate Kurdish share of population (estimates vary; no reliable ethnic census)	About 15–20% [2,13]	About 15–20% [2,14]	About 10% [15,72]	About 7–10% before 2011 [16,74]

Legal status of Kurdish identity	No recognition as a distinct people in the citizenship framework [13,56]	Federal Kurdistan Region constitutionally recognised in 2005; Kurdish an official language [96,99]	Persian official; regional languages allowed in media and literature teaching but not as instruction language [15]	Long denied; stateless population created in 1962; citizenship decree for stateless Kurds in January 2026 [54,112]
Language policy trajectory	Prohibition until 1991, then conditional tolerance [56]	Restricted under the Ba'ath regime, official after 2005 [55,99]	Subordinate cultural role [15,72]	Restricted in public life and publishing [16,54]
Benchmark episodes of mass violence	Dersim 1937–38; village evacuations in the 1990s; urban curfews in 2015–16 with 355,000–500,000 displaced [57,85,88]	Anfal 1988 with 50,000–100,000 dead by HRW's estimate; Halabja [53,97]	Offensives of 1979–80s; 290 Kurds verified killed in January 2026 protests [73,76]	2004 Qamishli unrest; displacement from Afrin after 2018; January 2026 offensive [16,80,90]
Principal legal-institutional instruments	Party closures; 10% threshold until 2022; anti-terror law; replacement of elected mayors [58,68]	Census manipulation and citizenship categories; federal court rulings; budget and salary conditionality [95,100]	Security courts and charges of enmity against God or corruption on earth [110]	1962 census; Arab Belt; restrictions on property and names [16,54]
Kurdish political representation	Pro-Kurdish parties repeatedly banned yet present in parliament and municipalities [68,69]	Autonomous regional government with its own forces, but fiscally dependent [70,103]	No legal Kurdish party; exiled armed opposition [72,73]	De facto autonomous administration, now under negotiated integration [75,80]
Transnational reach	Cross-border operations in Iraq and Syria [91]	Joined regional pressure in 2017 [104]	Cross-border strikes and assassinations [1,73]	Previously hosted the PKK; target of Turkish operations [62,90]
Direction, 2024 to 2026	Negotiated PKK disarmament without recognition of national rights [78,79]	Fiscal and oil disputes, partially eased by temporary arrangements [103]	Intensified executions and arrests, with Kurds heavily represented [76,77]	Phased integration agreement of January 2026 [80,113]

9.2 Patterns of convergence and divergence (RQ1 and RQ2)

Three findings stand out. First, no state has accepted independence, and none has accepted the existence of a Kurdish nation as a constitutional subject on equal terms with the dominant nation. Iraq comes closest by recognising a federal region and a second official language [99]. Second, the channel mix differs. Turkey's distinctive instruments are legal-institutional, namely party bans, thresholds and anti-terror law, backed by large-scale counter-insurgency [51,68]. Iraq's signature instruments were demographic engineering and mass violence under the Ba'ath regime, followed by fiscal-constitutional control since 2005 [53,95,103]. Iran relies on a securitised criminal-justice apparatus that handles Kurdish dissent as a matter of national security [76,110]. Syria relied on the creation of a stateless underclass and on settlement policies, and is now exploring integration under strong central control [54,80].

Third, over time all four states have shifted from overt elimination towards control and selective accommodation, but the shift is incomplete and reversible. Turkey's reforms of the early 2000s were followed by the securitised turn of 2015 [57,89]. Iraq's federal accommodation has coexisted with the military reversal of 2017 [106]. These reversals illustrate a general lesson from the repression literature: concessions made under pressure, without institutional guarantees, are easily withdrawn [32,33].

9.3 Is the convergence coordinated? (RQ3)

Historical evidence suggests that inter-state cooperation against Kurdish nationalism has been real but conditional. The Saadabad Pact of 1937 among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan included security cooperation aimed in part at border subversion. The Algiers Accord of 1975 ended Iranian support for Iraqi Kurds in exchange for border concessions from Baghdad, an agreement that precipitated the collapse of the Kurdish revolt of that time [1,3]. In the 1980s, Turkey and Iraq agreed on cross-border pursuit arrangements, and in 1998 Turkish pressure led Syria to expel the PKK leader from Damascus [62,63]. Yet the same states repeatedly used Kurds against one another. Iran supported Iraqi Kurdish insurgents in the 1960s and 1970s, Iraq supported Iranian Kurdish groups, and Syria for years harboured the PKK as leverage over Turkey [1,62,63]. The best summary is therefore that the four states compete in using the Kurds but cooperate in preventing Kurdish statehood. The former behaviour fragments Kurdish politics; the latter produces the remarkable consistency of outcomes. The 2017 referendum, when rivals aligned within days, is the clearest demonstration that the cooperation is triggered by a specific threat, namely international recognition of a Kurdish state [42,104].

9.4 Cross-cutting layers: digital control and human cost

Two layers cut across all four cases. The first is digital. Contemporary governance increasingly extends sovereignty claims into information space through surveillance, connectivity restrictions and the framing of online activism as a security threat. The conceptual literature on techno-authoritarianism and on the weaponisation of the internet by states offers tools for analysing this shift [17,18]. For Kurdish communities, whose transnational networks and diaspora media are a major resource, digital channels are both a means of mobilisation and a target of control. Online communities have also become spaces where identity is performed and contested through humour, symbols and shared memory [116]. Systematic empirical measurement of how each of the four states regulates Kurdish online expression, however, has

not yet been undertaken in the sources reviewed, and it is one of the most promising research directions identified here.

The second layer is human cost. Mass displacement, destroyed settlements, landmine contamination and prolonged insecurity leave long-term consequences for health, education and livelihoods [77,88]. Research from other conflict-affected regions indicates that displaced populations carry a high burden of trauma-related mental-health problems [84]. Although the Kurdish case has been studied mainly through political and legal lenses, these findings suggest that sustainable settlement requires attention to the social repair of communities as well as to constitutional arrangements.

10. Analysis of Different Perspectives

10.1 The security perspective

Governments in Ankara, Baghdad, Tehran and Damascus argue that armed groups have attacked civilians and security forces and that territorial integrity is a core duty of the state. This argument has empirical foundations: the PKK did conduct a prolonged armed campaign, and armed Kurdish parties in Iran and Syria have also used force [52,81]. The weakness of the perspective is its tendency to treat the political demands and cultural claims of Kurdish civilians as extensions of militancy. Judicial findings, such as the European Court's recognition of an ulterior political purpose in Demirtaş's prosecution, show that security rationales can be used to restrict legitimate political activity [58].

10.2 The Kurdish nationalist perspective and its internal critics

The nationalist account identifies a pattern of colonial-style rule and mass atrocity, and the evidence for atrocity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran is well established [53,57,76]. Two qualifications are needed. The first is that Kurdish organisations have themselves been criticised for authoritarian practices, factional violence and exclusion of rivals, and the 1990s civil war in Iraqi Kurdistan was fought between Kurdish parties [70,71]. The second is that independence has not been the consistent aim of all Kurdish actors; many parties have pursued autonomy, federalism or democratisation instead [7,67]. Treating "the Kurds" as a single actor with a single objective therefore overstates the case for both coherence and suppression.

10.3 The legal perspective

International law supports the protection of minorities' cultural and linguistic rights and condemns genocide, but it does not offer a clear route to secession in non-colonial contexts [40,41]. Kymlicka's argument that liberal states should accommodate national minorities through territorial autonomy and language rights provides a normative alternative to both assimilation and secession [117]. The legal question is therefore less whether Kurds possess rights than whether states are willing to institutionalise them in ways that are credible and enforceable. Comparative evidence from other constitutional democracies suggests that rights on paper do not guarantee equitable outcomes. Studies of multilingual India, for example, show that policies promoting mother-tongue education coexist with persistent structural inequality. This implies that language reform must be accompanied by resource and equity measures [118,119].

10.4 The great-power perspective

Great-power rivalry shapes Kurdish options. Studies of recognition show that new states depend on sponsor support, and recent work on strategic competition between major powers argues that shifting alignments reorder the value of regional partners [42,120]. The relationship between the United States and Kurdish actors has historically been transactional and reversible [107]. The January 2026 offensive against a force that had once been Washington's main Syrian ally illustrates how limited external protection can be [80]. Broader global realignments, including those linked to the politics of climate and resource agreements, may further alter state calculations about the Middle East's water, energy and borders. The evidence for direct effects on Kurdish politics is still thin [121].

10.5 The critical-sociological perspective

Critical sociology draws attention to nationalist myth and symbolic power. The way in which states craft stories of national authenticity and golden pasts, whether through the "mountain Turk" thesis or Arabist historiography, helps naturalise exclusion [25,66]. Digital communities, meanwhile, have become new arenas in which minority identity and resistance are expressed and contested [116]. This perspective is valuable because it reveals how containment is sustained at the level of meaning as well as force. Its limitation is that it risks overlooking hard security and economic variables, which is why it is combined here with the structural-comparative approach.

10.6 An integrative reading

The five perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and the evidence suggests that each describes one part of a self-reinforcing cycle. State insecurity leads to restrictive laws and coercion. Restriction and violence generate grievance and, in some cases, recruitment to armed groups. Armed action then reinforces the security narrative that justified the restriction in the first place [7,51,52]. Internal Kurdish rivalry and external patronage add further turns to the cycle by making unified Kurdish strategy difficult and by giving each state opportunities to play Kurdish actors against one another [63,70]. Research on repression suggests that cycles of this kind are most likely to be broken when institutions provide credible guarantees that political participation will not be criminalised, and when states shift from diffuse control towards genuinely inclusive arrangements [32,33,117]. The evidence from 2024 to 2026 can thus be read as an early and fragile test of whether negotiated institutional change can interrupt a spiral that coercion alone has failed to end.

11. Discussion, Propositions and Implications

11.1 Answering the research questions

RQ1 and RQ2. The four states have used the same four broad channels of containment but weighted them differently. Coercion was most extreme in Iraq in 1988 and most sustained in Turkey from 1984 onwards. Legal-institutional control was most elaborate in Turkey and most radical in Syria's denationalisation. Discursive-cultural control was most explicit in Turkey's denial and in Iran's Persian-centred nation-building. The transnational channel has been exercised by all, with Turkey and Iran the most active beyond their borders [15,53,54,66,68,91].

RQ3. The evidence supports a model of competitive instrumentalisation and cooperative veto, not of continuous coordination. Each state has at times sponsored Kurdish groups against its neighbours, but all have acted together when a Kurdish entity approached recognition [62,63,104].

RQ4. The developments of 2024 to 2026 indicate that the containment system is adapting. The Turkey–PKK process and the Syrian integration agreement both replace open armed confrontation with institutional bargaining, but neither concedes independence, and both leave key issues unresolved [79,80]. In Iran, by contrast, monitoring data indicate intensification rather than relaxation [76,77]. In Iraq the principal conflict has moved to budgets and oil [103]. The system is therefore moving unevenly, with accommodation in some places and repression in others.

11.2 Five testable propositions

The following propositions are original analytical contributions of this paper. They are stated so that they can be tested through comparative case studies, process tracing or quantitative designs, and they may be cited as hypotheses derived from this review.

Proposition 1 (channel substitution). When one channel of containment becomes diplomatically or domestically costly, states substitute another channel rather than abandoning the objective of preventing secession. Evidence: the shift from overt violence to fiscal control in Iraq, and from armed confrontation to legal negotiation in Turkey and Syria [79,80,103].

Proposition 2 (conditional cooperation). Cooperation among states against Kurdish statehood is intermittent in ordinary periods but becomes rapid and near-unanimous when a Kurdish entity seeks international recognition. Evidence: the response to the 2017 referendum [104,106].

Proposition 3 (fragmentation multiplier). The effectiveness of containment increases with the degree of rivalry among Kurdish parties and with their dependence on competing external patrons. Evidence: the intra-Kurdish conflict in Iraq in the 1990s and the party–patron networks across borders [70,71,98].

Proposition 4 (demand downscaling). The more credible the external veto against secession, the earlier and more completely Kurdish actors reframe their demands from independence to autonomy, federalism or citizenship. Evidence: the PKK's shift from independence towards democratic autonomy, the Syrian Kurdish call for decentralisation and Erbil's current federal framing [67,75,102].

Proposition 5 (fiscal and digital substitution). As overt violence becomes more costly in terms of legitimacy, fiscal dependence and digital control become more central to containment. Evidence: Baghdad's budget leverage and the broader literature on techno-authoritarian control [17,18,102,103]. This proposition is the least empirically grounded for the Kurdish case and is the one most in need of direct testing.

11.3 Implications for research and policy

For researchers, the first priority is the construction of harmonised, publicly available datasets of state actions against Kurdish communities in all four countries, with transparent coding rules. Independent verification of monitoring-group statistics, ideally through methods such as satellite imagery and open-source investigation, would reduce reliance on single advocacy sources. Qualitative work that centres Kurdish voices, including women and minorities within the Kurdish population, should complement state-centred analysis [50].

For policymakers and international organisations, the evidence supports several measures that do not require a position on statehood. Fair-trial standards that match those found in constitutional democracies are essential in Turkey and Iran. These include safeguards for the accused such as access to counsel and protection against arbitrary detention [58,122]. Language rights in education and administration should be protected in ways that are backed by resources [56,118]. Accountability for past mass atrocities, including documentation and recognition of the Anfal campaign and its victims, remains important for reconciliation [53,83]. Finally, the long-term psychosocial burden of conflict and displacement should be addressed through trauma-informed services. Evidence from other conflict-affected regions shows a high prevalence of trauma-related disorders among refugees and displaced persons, and organisational approaches to trauma-informed care are increasingly recognised as important for service delivery [84,123]. Because these two studies concern other regions, they should be read as indicative of likely needs rather than as measurements of Kurdish populations, for whom dedicated epidemiological research is lacking.

12. Limitations

Several limitations qualify the findings. First, as noted in Section 2, the review is PRISMA-ScR-informed rather than a fully replicable database search, so some relevant literature, particularly in Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic and Persian, may have been missed. Second, for events from 2024 to 2026 the paper depends on news reports and advocacy-organisation data that have not yet been tested in the scholarly literature, and some of the situations described, especially in Syria and Turkey, are still evolving. Third, casualty and arrest figures differ across sources and are often minimum counts; the paper reports them with attribution and does not treat them as definitive. Fourth, a four-case comparison cannot support statistical inference, and the propositions advanced here are hypotheses. Fifth, the conceptual works drawn from the researcher-supplied collection concern digital authoritarianism, sociology of law, national identity, language and displacement in general rather than the Kurdish case specifically. They are used to frame analysis, not as direct evidence. Sixth, the author's reliance on English-language sources may under-represent the perspectives of Kurdish communities, and the paper should be read with that bias in mind.

13. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the suppression of Kurdish independence by Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria is best understood not as a single policy but as an adaptive containment system. It operates through coercive, legal-institutional, discursive-cultural and transnational-digital channels. The comparative evidence shows that the four states differ markedly in the mix and intensity of these instruments. Turkey relied on legal engineering and counter-insurgency, Iraq

on demographic engineering, mass violence and later fiscal control, Iran on securitised justice and cross-border pressure, and Syria on statelessness and, most recently, negotiated integration.

The common outcome, namely that no Kurdish state exists, is not explained by overwhelming military superiority alone. It reflects the interaction of repression, selective accommodation, Kurdish political fragmentation and the external veto that follows when a Kurdish entity approaches recognition. The developments between 2024 and 2026 show that containment is changing form, with negotiation replacing open warfare in Turkey and Syria while intensified repression continues in Iran and fiscal conflict persists in Iraq. None of these developments has altered the fundamental refusal of the four states to accept Kurdish independence.

For scholars, the five propositions offered here provide a basis for testing whether the Kurdish pattern is exceptional or typical of secessionist containment. For policymakers, the evidence points towards durable protections for language, representation and due process as the most realistic route to reducing violence. Whether such protections will be established, and whether Kurdish political actors will accept them as an alternative to statehood, remains an open question that will define the next phase of Kurdish politics.

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