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Iraqi Kurdistan's Insecurity Trap: Elite Insecurity and Political Deadlock in a Semi-Autonomous Region

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Abstract:

Emerging as the principal winners of the region's 2024 elections, Iraqi Kurdistan's ruling parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—have continued their struggle for power and failed to form a new Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) nearly two years after the elections. The resulting prolonged political deadlock is likely to undermine the stability and standing of the region as a semi-autonomous entity and may call into question the legitimacy of its governing institutions. How can the continuing power struggle between Iraqi Kurdistan's ruling parties and the subsequent political deadlock be explained? Guided by the concept of the *insecurity trap*, this study attributes the PUK–KDP power struggle to leadership insecurity arising from perceptions of political exclusion, declining access to political and economic resources, party fragmentation, and the emergence of a new generation of leaders with limited political experience and strategic vision. By offering a theoretically grounded analysis of leadership insecurity and linking it to the region's prolonged political deadlock, the study contributes to the literature on Iraqi Kurdistan's political dynamics and development.

Key words: Insecurity trap, elite insecurity, political exclusion, Iraqi Kurdistan, political deadlock, patronage networks, power sharing, political opportunism.

الملخص:

بعد أن برزا بوصفهما الفائزين الرئيسيين في انتخابات إقليم كوردستان العراق لعام 2024، واصل الحزبان الحاكمان في الإقليم، الاتحاد الوطني الكردستاني والحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني، صراعهما على السلطة، وفشلا في تشكيل حكومة إقليم كوردستان جديدة بعد مرور ما يقرب من عامين على إجراء الانتخابات. ومن المرجح أن يؤدي هذا الجمود السياسي المطوّل إلى تقويض استقرار الإقليم ومكانته بوصفه كياناً يتمتع بالحكم الذاتي، كما قد يثير تساؤلات حول شرعية مؤسساته الحاكمة. فكيف يمكن تفسير استمرار الصراع على السلطة بين الحزبين الحاكمين في إقليم كوردستان العراق وما ترتب عليه من جمود سياسي؟ بالاستناد إلى مفهوم (فخّ انعدام الأمن)، تُرجع هذه الدراسة الصراع على السلطة بين الحزب الديمقراطي الكوردستاني والاتحاد الوطني الكوردستاني إلى حالة انعدام الأمن التي تعيشها القيادات السياسية، والناجمة عن تصوراتها للإقصاء السياسي، وتراجع فرص الوصول إلى الموارد السياسية والاقتصادية، والانقسامات داخل الحزبين، وظهور جيل جديد من القادة ذوي الخبرة السياسية والرؤية الاستراتيجية المحدودة. ومن خلال تقديم تحليل مؤطَّر نظرياً لانعدام الأمن لدى القيادات السياسية وربطه بحالة الجمود السياسي المطوّل في الإقليم، تُسهم الدراسة في الأدبيات المتعلقة بالديناميكيات والتطورات السياسية في إقليم كوردستان العراق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فخ انعدام الأمن، انعدام أمن النخب، الإقصاء السياسي، كردستان العراق، الجمود السياسي، شبكات المحسوبية، تقاسم السلطة، الانتهازية السياسية.

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پوختە:

وەک براوەی سەرەکی هەڵبژاردنەکانی ساڵی ٢٠٢٤، هەردوو حیزبی دەسەڵاتداری هەرێمی کوردستانی عێراق، هەر یەک لە یەکێتی نیشتمانی کوردستان و پارتی دیموکراتی کوردستان، بەردەوام بوون لە ململانێکانیان لەسەر هێز و دەسەڵات و بەو شێوەش شکستیان هێناوە لە پێکهێنانی کابینەی نوێی حکومەتی هەرێمی کوردستان پاش تێپەڕبوونی نزیکەی دوو ساڵ بەسەر هەڵبژاردنەکاندا. ململانێی بەردەوام و شکست لە پێکهێنانی کابینەی نوێدا بوونەتە هۆکاری بنبەستێکی سیاسی درێژخایەن کە دەکرێت کاریگەری نەرێنی هەبێت لەسەر جێگیری سیاسی و شەرعییەتی دامەزراوەکانی حوکمڕانی هەرێم. چۆن دەتوانین لێکدانەوە بکەین بۆ بەردەوامی ململانێی نێوان هەردوو حیزبی دەسەڵاتدار و لێکەوتەکانی، بە دیارکراوی ئەو چەقبستنە سیاسیە درێژخایەنەی کە لە هەرێم هەیە لە دوای کۆتا هەڵبژاردنەوە؟ پشتبەست بە چەمکی (داوی ناسەقامگیری)، ئەم توێژینەوەیە بەردەوامی ململانێی هەردوو حیزب لەسەر هێز و دەسەڵات دەگێڕێتەوە بۆ نائارامی سەرکردەکانی هەردوو حیزب کە لە فاکتەرەکانی وەک هەستکردن بە بێ بەشکردن لە دەسەڵات و کەمبوونەوەی دەستڕاگەشتنیان بە سەرچاوە ئابوری و دارایییەکان و دابەشبوونی ناوخۆیی هەردوو حیزب و هەروەها سەرهەڵدانی نەوەیەکی نوێ لە سەرکردە لە هەردوو حیزبدا بە ئەزموونی سیاسی و دیدی ستراتیژی سنووردارەوە سەرچاوەیان گرتووە. لە ڕێگەی پێشکەشکردنی شیکارییەک لەسەر بنەمای تیۆری و هەروەها بەستنەوە چەقبەستووی سیاسی بە نائارامی سەرکردەکانە لە هەرێم، ئەم توێژینەوەیە بەشداری دەکات لە گەشەپێدانی ئەدەبیاتی زانستی سەبارەت بە داینامیک و پەرەسەندنە سیاسیەکانی هەرێمی کوردستانی عێراق.

کلیلە وشە: داوی ناسەقامگیری، نائارامی نوخبە، بێبەشکردنی سیاسی، هەرێمی کوردستانی عێراق، بنبەستی سیاسی، مەحسوبیەت، دابەشکردنی دەسەڵات، هەڵپەرستی سیاسی.

Introduction

The semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has not been immune to the spill-over effects of the war and tensions that have engulfed the Middle East since 7 October 2023. Home to several U.S. military facilities as well as Iranian Kurdish opposition groups, the KRI has been subjected to numerous Iranian drone and ballistic missile attacks during the latest phase of the regional conflict, which began with the U.S.-Israeli offensive against the Islamic regime in Tehran in February 2026. Like the rest of the region, the KRI has also been economically affected by Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, leading to fuel shortages and rising energy prices that have affected both ordinary citizens and the operation of businesses and industries (Rauf, 2026).

However, amid mounting external security and economic pressures, the KRI's ruling parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—have continued to intensify their struggle for power, to the detriment of the region's overall stability and standing as a semi-autonomous entity (Saleem, 2024a). Despite holding elections in October 2024, the two parties—the principal winners of the election—have yet to reach an agreement on the formation of a new power-sharing Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The resulting political deadlock, which has persisted for 22 months at the time of writing, is likely to undermine the legitimacy of the region's institutions and, ultimately, its future survival (Rodgers, 2026a; Karim, 2026).

Even if the ruling parties eventually reach an agreement and form a government, the prolonged political deadlock and the underlying drivers of the region's destructive power struggle still deserve scholarly attention. This study therefore examines the roots of the political deadlock and the PUK–KDP power struggle beyond the 'historical rivalry' thesis that is pervasive in the popular discourse. It does so by addressing the following research question: How can the PUK–KDP political conflict and the subsequent political deadlock in the KRI be explained? The study answers this question

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through the lens of the concept of the insecurity trap, as developed by Mehler (2008). Broadly defined, the insecurity trap describes a situation in which political actors, operating within a neopatrimonial system[1] and driven by the insecurity of remaining in power, engage in actions that deepen intra-elite conflict and mutual distrust, thereby making political compromise and power sharing increasingly difficult. In essence, the insecurity trap constitutes a self-reinforcing cycle in which elite insecurity generates conflict, conflict reinforces distrust, and distrust further entrenches elite insecurity, prolonging power struggles and political deadlock.

The study uses the concept of the insecurity trap to shed light on the sources of the PUK–KDP competition for power and mutual distrust that have afflicted the KRI since the breakdown of the power-sharing agreement between the two parties in 2013 (Saleem & Skelton, 2019; Rodgers, 2023). In a previous study, the author demonstrated that elite insecurity—stemming from perceptions of political exclusion, the reduction in resources available to the ruling parties, party fragmentation, and the rise of a new generation of leaders (Saleem, 2024b:8–13)—was a principal driver of the intra-elite power struggle in Iraqi Kurdistan. The present study develops this earlier analysis by applying Mehler's concept of the insecurity trap to explain how leadership insecurity generates intra-elite conflict, deepens mutual distrust, reduces the willingness to compromise, and ultimately contributes to the prolonged government-formation deadlock following the October 2024 elections. The study thus contributes to the literature on Iraqi Kurdistan by offering a theoretically grounded explanation of the political dynamics underlying the region's persistent instability and political deadlock.

The research employs a theory-guided qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2018:15–20) to explain the causal mechanisms linking elite insecurity to political deadlock in Iraqi Kurdistan. A case study methodology is appropriate because it enables an in-depth analysis of complex political phenomena within their real-world context. Furthermore, the KRI represents a theoretically relevant case because it combines a neopatrimonial political order (Natali, 2010: 64) with prolonged intra-elite conflict and an unusually persistent government-formation deadlock following the 2024 parliamentary elections. Guided by Mehler's concept of the insecurity trap, the study examines whether perceptions of political exclusion, declining access to political and economic resources, fragmentation within the ruling parties, and the emergence of a new generation of leaders generated elite insecurity, which subsequently intensified intra-elite conflict, deepened mutual distrust, and reduced the willingness of political leaders to compromise and form a new power-sharing government.

Following the process-tracing method (Beach & Pedersen, 2019:1-18), the analysis traces political developments in the KRI from approximately 2013, when the PUK–KDP power-sharing arrangement began to deteriorate, through the 2024 regional elections and the subsequent failure to form a

[1] Broadly defined, a neopatrimonial system is a political system in which formal state institutions and rules coexist with informal networks of personal power, patronage, and loyalty. Political leaders use state resources and positions to reward supporters and maintain political loyalty, while formal institutions continue to operate alongside these informal practices. For a more in-depth analysis of neopatrimonial systems, see: Erdmann, G. and Engel, U., (2007). Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *45*(1), pp.95-119.

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government. Rather than merely demonstrating a correlation between elite insecurity and political deadlock, the study seeks to identify the causal mechanisms linking the two. Guided by the insecurity trap concept, it examines a number of theoretically derived themes, including elite insecurity, political exclusion, patronage and resource distribution, mutual distrust, political opportunism, and the refusal to compromise. These themes are derived deductively from the theoretical framework rather than inductively from the data. Evidence from multiple sources is then triangulated to assess whether it supports the proposed causal sequence.

The study adopts a qualitative data collection strategy, relying on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through fifteen semi-structured interviews with second-tier leaders from the PUK and the KDP. The interviews were conducted in person between February and November 2024, and almost all participants requested anonymity, primarily for political reasons. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, nine of which are directly cited in the article and listed at the end of the manuscript using anonymised identifiers. Additional primary data, consisting of public statements made by members of the KRI's ruling elite, were collected from local and international media. In addition to these primary sources, the study draws on relevant information and analysis from local and international media, policy reports, books, book chapters, and academic journal articles. The interviews conducted in 2024 are used primarily to examine elite perceptions, political calculations, and the antecedent conditions underlying the PUK–KDP power struggle, while developments following the 2024 elections are traced primarily through public statements, media reports, and other documentary sources.

The study proceeds as follows. The first section outlines the concept of the insecurity trap and explains its relationship to political deadlock. Guided by the key themes derived from this conceptual framework, the second and third sections examine Iraqi Kurdistan's insecurity trap and analyse the sources of elite insecurity, political conflict, and the region's prolonged political deadlock following the 2024 elections. Finally, the conclusion summarises the study's main findings and offers recommendations for breaking Iraqi Kurdistan's insecurity trap and overcoming the political deadlock.

1. Conceptual Framework: The Insecurity Trap and Political Deadlock

Generally, political deadlock refers to situations in which negotiating parties fail to resolve their differences and reach a political agreement (Gamble, 2010:25-27). An important example is a deadlock that prevents government formation following elections. Political parties and factions may seek to form a coalition government when no single party or coalition secures a clear majority in an election. However, efforts to establish power-sharing governments often reach an impasse because competing elites and parties disagree over the distribution of power and the benefits they expect to derive from the proposed arrangement. Such government-formation stalemates may persist for prolonged periods, adversely affecting governance, the economy (Albalate &Bel, 2020), and overall political stability. What causes these prolonged political deadlocks? While the causes of political stalemates vary across contexts, this study focuses on the role of the insecurity trap in deepening divisions among competing elites and preventing the formation of a power-sharing government.

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According to Mehler (2008, p. 5), 'elites can be confined in an "insecurity trap," suffering from and perpetuating acts which instill ever more distrust and pave the way to the widespread use of violence.' In Mehler's conceptualisation, elite insecurity, rather than distrust, is the primary driver of the insecurity trap. As he argues, "It should be stated from the outset that trust/distrust is not seen as the cause of elite insecurity, but rather as an aggravating or prolonging factor of intra-elite struggles" (Mehler, 2008:6). This distinction is important because it locates the origins of elite conflict in underlying insecurity, while viewing distrust as a mechanism that intensifies and prolongs existing political struggles rather than initiating them.

Leaders can become insecure when they face real or perceived threats to either their physical or political survival. Political leaders may fear that domestic or foreign opponents will resort to violence to eliminate them (Ash, 2016). At the same time, elites may become insecure when they face perceived or tangible threats to their hold on power (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016: 508). In essence, political leaders likely tie their security to survival in power.

Indeed, insecurity arising from challenges to elites' hold on power is integral to Mehler's conceptualization of the insecurity trap. He attributes the emergence of the insecurity trap in Africa to intra-elite conflicts following the 'breakdown of neopatrimonial systems' (Mehler, 2008:9), with the prospect of exclusion from power playing a central role in these conflicts (Mehler, 2008:12). As Mehler (2008:12–13) explains, intra-elite conflicts emerge and intensify when a segment of the ruling elite seeks to monopolize power by excluding rival elites from government decision-making and access to state resources. Although exclusion from power may appear to be a rational strategy for those who pursue it, it leaves the excluded elites feeling insecure and generates counter-reactions. These responses may be radical, aimed at challenging the monopolizing elite, thereby intensifying intra-elite power struggles and deepening mutual distrust.

The insecurity trap, however, often emerges within political systems where neopatrimonial practices are pervasive. These practices include elite capture and the use of state institutions and resources for personal and private gain. Within neopatrimonial systems (Erdmann & Engel, 2007), elites use their control over and access to state institutions and financial resources to build and expand patronage and clientelist networks on which their political power is based (von Soest, 2010, pp. 7–8). In such systems, a resource distribution arrangement is usually in place, granting different factions of the ruling elite access to government positions and financial resources and enabling them to maintain their political power. Because such networks underlie their political power (Guliyev, 2011: 583–585; Snyder,1992:379), denying elites access to government positions and state resources threatens their political survival by undermining the patronage networks on which their power depends, thereby generating elite insecurity. For Mehler (2008:9), the exclusion of elite factions from this resource distribution arrangement marks the breakdown of the neopatrimonial system and triggers intra-elite conflict and, eventually, the insecurity trap.

Under the insecurity trap, no section of the elite is secure. While the excluded faction of the elite becomes insecure because it is denied access to power and resources, those who practice exclusion fear being removed from power by the responses of the excluded. The subsequent struggle for power leads to intra-elite conflict while deepening mutual mistrust and political polarization. In essence, politics becomes a self-reinforcing cycle of elite competition and mutual insecurity.

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Breaking the insecurity trap and addressing the resulting polarisation become difficult when elites are insecure and unwilling to compromise or share power. The impact of leadership insecurity on perpetuating the insecurity trap is arguably greater when leaders' sense of insecurity is existential. As Akkoyunlu and Öktem (2016:508) argue, "Existential insecurity instils an all-or-nothing logic to decision-making, rendering meaningful concessions and power sharing costly, risky and even seemingly suicidal." As such, elite insecurity and the subsequent insecurity trap cause conflict, prevent compromise and power sharing and prolong political deadlocks (See diagram 1).

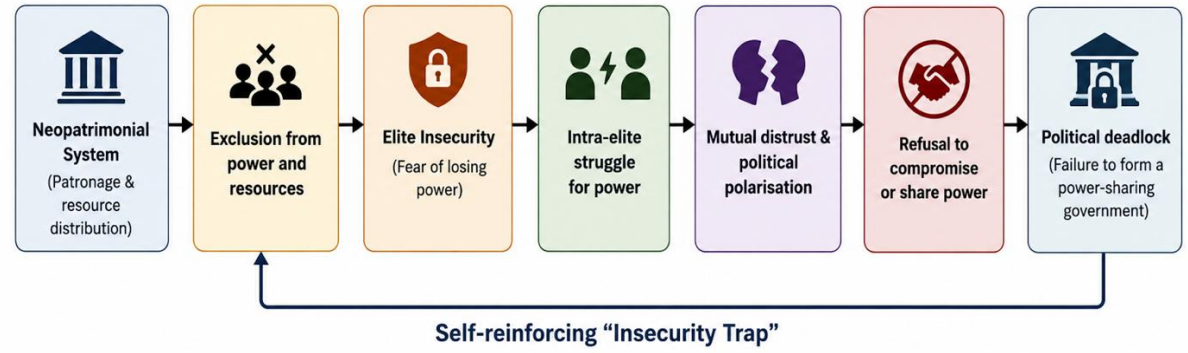


Diagram (1): The Insecurity Trap Reenforcing Cycle

Source: based on analysis found in (Mehler, 2008; Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016; Erdmann & Engel, 2007; and von Soest, 2010).

In the following sections, the concept of the insecurity trap, as defined and discussed here, is used to shed light on how and why the ruling elites in Iraqi Kurdistan intensified their struggle for power, refused to compromise, and failed to form a power-sharing KRG nearly two years after the region's elections.

2. Iraqi Kurdistan's Insecurity Trap

The KRI's political stalemate following the October 2024 regional elections (van Wilgenburg, 2024) closely resembles the insecurity trap outlined in the previous section. The region's politics has become deeply polarized, with the PUK and the KDP—jointly governing the KRI through a duopoly since 2006 (Saleem &Skelton, 2019)—engaged in a sustained war of words, exchanging harsh accusations while simultaneously pursuing tactical political manoeuvres aimed at securing short-term political gains at each other's expense. This polarization has been driven primarily by a deep sense of political exclusion among the PUK's top leadership, which has attributed both the party's declining political influence and the deteriorating living conditions in the sub-region under its control to the KDP leadership and its pursuit of dominance. Consequently, the PUK leadership has sought to rebalance the region's political order by demanding a greater share of power and a more influential role in the next KRG. The KDP leadership, whose party has long occupied the region's top executive positions and controlled key ministries, has rejected these demands, seeking instead to preserve its position by refusing to make concessions that it considers disproportionate to the PUK's electoral performance and true political weight. This struggle for power has, in turn, led to repeated failures in government formation negotiations between the two parties, reinforcing the region's political stalemate and deepening political polarization.

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Political exclusion is a prominent theme in the PUK leadership's discourse. The party argues that KDP-aligned government officials have sought to monopolize decision-making and public resources by sidelining PUK-affiliated officials and marginalizing the PUK's sphere of territorial control since 2019 (Interviews with PUK-02, PUK-03, and PUK-05). As a PUK leader remarked, "The KDP has either treated us as a junior partner at best or sought to marginalize us at worst" (Interview with PUK-03, Erbil, March 2024). Following the region's 2018 parliamentary elections, the two parties formed a power-sharing government in which the KDP secured the positions of President and Prime Minister, while the PUK assumed the posts of Deputy Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament (Al Jazeera, 2019). The arrangement, however, proved unstable, as PUK-affiliated officials increasingly felt marginalized by the KDP-led government under Prime Minister Masrour Barzani (Interviews with PUK-02 and PUK-04). These tensions escalated to the point that, in 2023, the PUK's ministerial team, led by Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, boycotted meetings of the Council of Ministers for nearly a year (Draw Media, 2023).

The sense of exclusion from government decision-making, combined with the perception that the KDP has withheld public resources from the PUK-controlled areas, has reinforced the PUK leadership's belief that the KDP is deliberately seeking to weaken its political influence and, ultimately, threaten its political survival (Interviews with PUK-02, PUK-03, PUK-04, and PUK-05). A PUK politburo member claimed that "KDP-affiliated officials at the top of the KRG are withholding finances from Sulaymaniyah to undermine our party." (Interview with PUK-04, Sulaymaniyah, September 2024) The bloody civil war between the two parties (1994–1998) divided the KRI into two distinct zones of security, administrative, and political control, with the PUK controlling Sulaimaniyah Governorate and the KDP dominating Erbil and Duhok Governorates (Stansfield, 2001:276-282). Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the two parties agreed to reunify the region under a single KRG. The legacy of this division, however, has persisted, with each party continuing to tie its political influence and survival to maintaining control over its respective sphere of territorial influence (See map 1).

From the perspective of the two parties' leaderships, the inability to access the financial resources necessary to sustain their patronage networks and maintain support among constituencies within their respective areas of control constitutes a threat to their political survival. The PUK leadership has, thus, expressed serious concern over what it perceives as an unequal distribution of infrastructure investment across the region, with the KDP-controlled Erbil and Duhok experiencing greater development than the PUK-controlled Sulaimaniyah (Interviews with PUK-02, PUK-03, PUK-04, and PUK-05).

Concern for its political influence and survival has shaped the PUK leadership's strategy, including its approach to government formation, which has centred on securing key positions in the KRG. Having won 23 of the 100 parliamentary seats in the 2024 regional elections (See table 1), the PUK has sought to obtain senior government positions and secure guarantees from the KDP leadership ensuring equal access to government decision-making, as well as to the region's financial and public resources. Although its public discourse has emphasized the need to rebalance the region's governance and political order, the PUK leadership views continued access to government power and resources as essential to its political survival.

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Map (1): Distribution of power in Iraqi Kurdistan
the PUK and KDP maintain separate zones of control

Source: https://amwaj.media/en/article/intra-kurdish-tensions-in-iraq-fade-dreams-of-independence

The KDP leadership, by contrast, has regarded the PUK's demands for a greater share of power in the next KRG as unjustified and has consequently rejected them. Framing its position in terms of electoral performance, the KDP leadership has pointed to the party's stronger showing in the 2024 regional elections, in which it won 39 parliamentary seats (See table 1), arguing that this electoral mandate entitles it to retain the most senior government positions. Furthermore, the KDP leadership has rejected the PUK's claims that KDP-aligned officials have deliberately restricted Sulaimaniyah's access to the region's financial resources in an effort to weaken the PUK. Instead, it has attributed the governorate's infrastructure deficits and financial difficulties to the PUK's own governance (Interviews with KDP-01, KDP-03, and KDP-04). In this respect, a KDP leader stated, "*the PUK wants to siphon off revenues from Erbil and Duhok, while hoarding finances generated in Sulaymaniyah. This is unacceptable to us*." (Interview with KDP-03, Erbil, September 2024).

The KDP's reliance on electoral performance as the primary basis for maintaining its power position has clashed with the continued de facto division of the region along party lines. KDP leaders have repeatedly argued that the previous 50–50 power-sharing arrangement is no longer tenable and that the PUK must accept the outcome of the electoral process (Interviews with KDP-01, KDP-02, and KDP-04). At the same time, however, the KDP has been unable to secure the 50+1 parliamentary majority required to form a government on its own following the latest elections. It has also remained aware that governing the entire region requires the cooperation of the PUK, which continues to exercise security, administrative, and political control over Sulaimaniyah. Despite this, however, the KDP has maintained an uncompromising position, refusing to offer the PUK a greater share of power than it held under the previous power-sharing government.

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Table (1): Results of the Kurdistan Region 2024 Elections

Political Party	Seats	Votes (Number)
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	39	809,197
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	23	408,141
New Generation Movement	15	290,991
Kurdistan Islamic Union	7	116,981
Helwest Movement	4	55,775
People's Front	2	33,365
Gorran Movement	1	11,621
Kurdistan Region Alliance	1	12,929
Total	**92**	**1,739,000**

Source: Iraq High Electoral Commission (IHEC)

The KDP's negotiating strategy has, nevertheless, left the party's leaders less secure. While refusing to accept the KDP's offers regarding its share in the next KRG, the PUK leadership has continued to challenge the KDP in both the KRI and the rest of Iraq. The PUK, for instance, allowed anti-KRG demonstrations over public services and salary payments to take place in its zone of control (Salar, 2021), which, from the perspective of the KDP leadership, were intended to tarnish the image and undermine the authority of the KDP-affiliated KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani (Interviews with KDP-01, KDP-03, and KDP-04). Furthermore, the PUK's top leader, Bafel Talabani, has further aligned with Baghdad-based parties and factions that have been rivals of the KDP at the national level. Additionally, the PUK supported some of the rulings of the Baghdad-based Federal Supreme Court (FSC) that the KDP viewed as encroaching upon the Kurdistan region's internal affairs and diminishing the KRG's constitutionally mandated powers (Ottaway, 2023). Finally, the PUK sought to use its alliances with influential Shia factions in Baghdad to secure Sulaimaniyah's share of the national budget by bypassing the KRG (Saleem, 2024a).

The PUK's political manoeuvring generated concerns in the KDP leadership, deepening the rifts between the two parties. During a February 2024 interview, the KDP's top leader, Masud Barzani, reflected on the PUK's actions by arguing that the differences separating his party from the PUK concerned "strategic matters" associated with the very survival of the KRI. "It is not permissible to collaborate with those who want to dismantle the region. It is not permissible to ally with those who want to end the region. These are the strategic matters," Barzani added (Masud Barzani, 2024). While it is correct to highlight how the power struggle between the two parties undermines the KRI's position vis-à-vis the government in Baghdad, the KDP leadership has underestimated the PUK leadership's ability to address the power imbalance in the region and exert greater pressure on the KDP.

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Most recently, the PUK was able to forge an alliance with the Sulaimaniyah-based opposition party New Generation, which secured 15 seats in the 2024 regional elections (Rodgers, 2026b). Together, the PUK and New Generation now control almost the same number of parliamentary seats (38) as the KDP (39), challenging the latter's claim to key government positions on the basis of its electoral performance. Bolstered by its increased parliamentary strength, the PUK leadership has demanded the most significant executive position—the office of Prime Minister— in the next KRG. While the KDP is unlikely to concede to this demand, its leadership is now less secure in its hold on power.

With the leaders of both parties insecure about their survival in power, the concessions and compromises necessary to transcend the KRI's insecurity trap and break the political stalemate have been difficult to achieve. The next section examines the sources of elite insecurity in Iraqi Kurdistan.

3. Sources of Leadership Insecurity in Iraqi Kurdistan: Economic Vulnerabilities, Party Fragmentation and The Role of a New Generation of Leaders

Before discussing the drivers of elite insecurity, it is important to explain how political elites, rather than formal institutions, have become the principal actors within the KRI's political system and have significantly shaped the region's political dynamics and outcomes. As discussed in the first section, an insecurity trap emerges in contexts where certain elites capture state institutions and engage in neopatrimonial practices. Indeed, the institutions of the KRG have played only a limited role in the region's politics beyond a few powerful individuals from the Talabani and Barzani families who sit at the apex of the PUK and KDP, respectively. Whether in or outside government, these individuals have remained influential by monopolizing key decision-making processes, enjoying unrestricted access to public resources and finances, and maintaining control over the region's coercive apparatus—the Peshmerga, Asayish (internal security), and special forces. Finally, commanding extensive patronage and clientelist networks across government institutions, party organizations, and the wider population has enabled the leading members of the Barzani and Talabani families to maintain and reproduce their power and influence (Saleem &Skelton:2020).

The influence of the Barzani and Talabani families, and the role of their respective parties in the region's politics, are rooted in the Iraqi Kurds' struggle for recognition and autonomy, which dates back to the 1940s. Following the establishment of the Kurdistan Region in 1991, the Barzani-controlled KDP and the Talabani-controlled PUK emerged as the dominant political actors (Gunter, 1996), building influence within the nascent institutions of the KRG and across the region's population.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the two parties' top leaders—Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani (who died in 2017)—set aside their differences and chose to collaborate, motivated by the political and economic opportunities created by regime change (Leezenberg, 2005:639). This collaboration culminated in the 2006 strategic agreement which sought to end the legacy of the civil war and unify Iraqi Kurdistan under a single KRG. Rather than building and strengthening the region's formal institutions, however, the agreement became a backroom arrangement between Masud Barzani and the late Jalal Talabani for distributing government positions and resources among themselves and their close associates (Khalil, 2009:9-10 & 21-29). The agreement constituted an exclusive power-

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sharing pact designed to ensure the two parties' domination of the region's political and economic life. As Jüde (2017:857) observes:

> [T]he agreement served the domestic purpose of excluding smaller parties from rule. Access to revenues and power remained completely under the control of the two parties. The KDP and the PUK use[d] this preponderant position to dominate economic life and to co-opt followers by generating employment in the large state sector.

For almost a decade following the U.S.-led invasion (2003–2012), collaboration between the two parties reached unprecedented levels. For instance, they contested both the regional and national elections as a single electoral list. Furthermore, Masud Barzani and the late Jalal Talabani agreed to divide the Kurdish-held presidencies in the Kurdistan Region and federal Iraq—allocated to the Kurds under the ethno-sectarian quota system—between themselves, allowing the former to serve as President of the Kurdistan Region (2005–2017) and the latter as President of Iraq (2005–2014). Additionally, this collaboration enabled the leadership of both parties to make significant economic gains. They exercised control over the region's resources while also accessing substantial funding from the federal budget.

A sense of political security among the top leadership of both parties made the decade-long collaboration and the subsequent relative stability in the region possible. Both Masud Barzani and the late Jalal Talabani commanded relatively cohesive political organizations and possessed the strategic vision necessary to make the concessions and compromises required for stable power-sharing and collaboration. Furthermore, this stable power-sharing arrangement was facilitated by the abundance of resources and financial revenues, which were sufficient to satisfy the needs of both parties' leaderships.

As will be demonstrated below, however, a number of internal and external factors, including reduction in resources, party fragmentation, the rise of a new generation of leaders, and party-driven regional alignments have left these ruling elites increasingly insecure, thereby rendering collaboration and power-sharing far more difficult.

3.1. Reduction In Accessible Resources

The leaders of the PUK and the KDP are increasingly insecure due to the Kurdistan Region's deepening economic and financial crisis. Historically, a steady flow of revenue allowed both parties to expropriate and utilize these funds to sustain patronage and clientelist networks, which are central to their power. However, funding disruptions beginning with 2014 (DeWeaver, 2015; Al-Nashmi, 2025; Baban, 2026) placed both parties in a precarious position with respect to their support bases. As the two parties competed over shrinking resources, their rivalry intensified.

As stated earlier, economic incentives played a crucial role in PUK-KDP cooperation during the decade following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. With a unified stance, the two parties effectively secured a near-monopoly on revenue inflows from various sources, including the 17% of the federal budget allocated to the KRG (Natali, 2013a:73), the region's oil and gas sector, and taxation on international trade at border crossings with Iran and Turkey. They also made significant amounts of money from local businesses and government construction projects, whose contracts were often awarded to

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companies aligned with the parties (Saleem & Skelton, 2020:13-16). Beyond the self-enrichment of the senior leadership, the parties used public revenues under their control to build extensive patronage networks. They offered jobs to supporters within KRG institutions, party organizations, and affiliated security forces and companies (Chorev, 2007:7-9). Resource abundance motivated and enabled the PUK and the KDP to set aside their differences and cooperate in jointly ruling the region.

However, the good times were not to last. The parties' heavy involvement in rent-seeking and corruption (Hassan, 2015), financial pressure from Baghdad (Aydŏgan & Alaca, 2023), the loss of access to Kirkuk's oil following the KRG's failed 2017 independence referendum (Wahab, 2023), reduced the revenues available to both parties. Essentially, the region's ruling elites acted like classic predators using resources in order to build and maintain their own political basis (Thies, 2009). In so doing, however, they contributed to deepening the region's economic and financial crisis which, in turn, challenged their hold on power. The ruling elite's political predation in Iraqi Kurdistan created a situation described by Goldsmith (2004:9):

> National leaders depend on selective incentives (patronage, graft) to build up their political base. Yet an excess of selective incentives yields fiscal deficits, inflation and economic stagnation. Poor economic performance will threaten the leader's hold on power. The politician's dilemma is to distribute sufficient resources to keep the loyalists happy (so they will finance campaigns, canvass neighbourhoods, intimidate rivals), while avoiding economic hardship that may alienate the rest of society and destabilize the government.

The ruling elite in Iraqi Kurdistan has failed to manage this dilemma. Their involvement in corruption and nepotism did generate public pressure. For instance, in 2011, Sulaimaniyah Governorate witnessed widespread demonstrations against the two parties' corruption and economic mismanagement. Rather than pursuing economic and financial reforms, however, the leadership of the two parties relied on patronage and clientelist strategies to counter this popular challenge, including targeted provision of services, housing and marriage loans, and expanded public-sector employment within KRG institutions (Natali, 2013b), which contributed to significant public-sector expansion (Jabary & Hira, 2013). The patronage strategy, combined with the suspension of the region's share of the federal budget and the onset of the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, further compounded the region's economic crisis, to the detriment of both its population and the leadership of the ruling parties.

In this challenging context, the PUK has arguably been more adversely affected, primarily due to its deeper internal factionalism and the strength of opposition groups within its zone of influence. Instead of collaborating to address their shared insecurities and resolve the region's financial troubles, the leadership of the two parties has chosen to compete, as reflected in the PUK's attribution of Sulaimaniyah's infrastructure underdevelopment and financial difficulties to the KDP. Setting aside the blame game, it appears that the KDP, with its greater economic and governmental power, has concluded that maintaining its power base in Erbil and Duhok offers greater immediate strategic advantages than collaborating with the PUK and sharing revenues for the benefit of the Kurdistan Region as a whole. In response, the PUK has sought to secure additional funding directly from Baghdad, albeit with little success to date.

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3.2. Deepening Divisions Within the Two Parties

Growing fragmentation within both the PUK and the KDP contributes to a sense of insecurity for the leaders of the two parties. Both parties opportunistically try to exploit the internal problems of their rival, which only serves to drive them further apart. During the respective leaderships of Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani, internal coherence provided a sense of security for the leaders of both parties. As a result, the PUK[2] and the KDP were able to maintain balance relative to each other, project an image of strength to their supporters, and negotiate and sustain power-sharing agreements that secured political and economic gains for both parties. However, this is no longer the case, as the PUK and the KDP have experienced varying degrees of internal fragmentation in recent years.

Compared to the KDP, the PUK has experienced greater internal divisions, which have persisted under the current leadership of Bafel Talabani, the son of Jalal Talabani (Aydŏgan, & Alaca, 2023). Since 2021, the party has tried to centralize its decision making. A PUK politburo member asserted that "*the PUK is united under Bafel's leadership. All leading members respect the final decisions of the party and adhere to them. Those PUK leaders who succumb to KDP pressure are sidelined and no longer play a role in the PUK's decision making*." (Interview with PUK-01, Erbil, July 2024) However, recent events suggest otherwise. In 2022, for example, the KDP opposed Bafel's preferred candidate for the Iraqi presidency, Barham Salih, and instead supported another PUK party member, Latif Rasheed.[3] Ultimately, Rasheed won out and became president, highlighting how the KDP successfully exploited divisions within the PUK to undermine the latter's leadership.

Aggravated by the KDP's ongoing interference in its affairs, the PUK leadership has sought to return the favour and exploit divisions within the KDP. The Barzani family has dominated the party since the 1940s and demonstrates remarkable unity, which makes its top leadership less susceptible to external interference than the PUK (Muhammed, 2019a). But the internal stability of the party might be changing due to emerging competition between Masrour and Nechirvan, the son and the nephew of Masoud respectively (Muhammed, 2018a &2019b). Nechirvan Barzani and Masrour Barzani are the first and second deputy presidents, respectively, of KDP President Masoud Barzani. Since 2019, they have also occupied the two highest positions in the KRG, with Nechirvan serving as President and Masrour as Prime Minister. Both cousins wield significant influence within the KDP and are widely regarded as potential successors to the 79-year-old Masoud Barzani(*Awene.com*, 2021; Aziz, 2022). However, through his continued influence, the elder Barzani has so far managed to keep

[2] A major blow to the PUK's internal coherence was when Gorran (Change) movement, led by the late Nawshirwan Mustafa, split from the party in 2009. For more detail on the rise, impact and demise of Gorran, see: Saleem, Zmkan & Skleton, Mac, 2019. 'Protest and power: Lessons from Iraqi Kurdistan's Opposition Movement'. LSE/Middle East Centre, 10 November. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/11/10/protests-and-power-lessons-from-iraqi-kurdistans-opposition-movement/

[3] Latif Rasheed is not a senior member of the PUK; he is the husband of Shanaz Ibrahim Ahmed, a PUK politburo member and the aunt of Bafel. The fact that Rasheed competed against Barham Salih and refused to withdraw to allow Bafel's candidate to win the race highlighted the persistent divisions within the upper echelons of the PUK's ruling elite. See: Amwaj.media. (2022). 'Deep Dive: Iraq has a new president, on track for new government.' 14 October. Available at: https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/abdul-latif-rashid-elected-as-iraq-s-sixth-president

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the competition between them at a manageable level, preventing it from jeopardizing the KDP's coherence (Muhammed, 2019b).

Masrour's distrust of the PUK may have also contributed to his rivalry with his cousin, Nechirvan, who served as KRG prime minister between 2007 and 2009 and again between 2012 and 2019. During this time, Nechirvan built up considerable political, government, and economic influence. His power was further solidified in the years following the 2017 referendum, when Masoud stepped down as president and transferred some of his authority to Nechirvan. Between 2017 and 2019, he led the effort to end the region's isolation, continuing to strengthen and expand his regional and international ties. Unlike Masrour, Nechirvan has maintained a relationship with the PUK and the ruling Talabani family. During his tenure as prime minister, his pragmatism played a role in stabilizing relations between the two parties, despite ongoing disagreements and tensions between them. Nechirvan's power and his ability to accommodate the PUK could potentially weaken Masrour's role, but the latter has taken measures to ensure that his predecessor is effectively sidelined (*Diplomaticmagazine.net*, 2022).

Since assuming office in 2019, Masrour replaced many of Nechirvan's allies in top KRG positions with his own close allies. He prevents Nechirvan, who became Kurdistan Region president that same year, from exercising control over the Kurdistan Region Security Council, which oversees key sections of the region's security and intelligence forces, particularly those affiliated with the KDP (Rauf & Hama-Raf'at, 2019). Masrour's aligned media frequently attributes governance failures and problems the region's oil sector to decisions when Nechirvan was in power (Muhammed, 2020).

With Masrour serving as prime minister and his father, Masoud, continuing to exert significant influence as the party's formal leader and elder statesman, Nechirvan's formal role and practical power have been notably restricted. Nevertheless, he remains influential, maintaining control of major KDP economic assets such as the KAR Group company and access to some of the party's security forces. As president, he has been active in diplomatic efforts at the local, national, and international levels and he is a preferred interlocuter for key regional actors like Turkey and Iran (Okuducu, 2024; *Rudaw*, 2024). Nechirvan's continuing influence and ability to accommodate the PUK remains a challenge to Masrour and his ambition to consolidate power in the KDP, but one that is being effectively managed for now.

Nevertheless, the unity at highest level of the KDP has not prevented the PUK from attempting to exploit other divisions within the party. For example, the PUK's Bafel Talabani courted Adham Barzani, Masoud's cousin and a former KDP leader who is now estranged from Masoud (*Kurdstani Nwe*, 2024). Extending symbolic support to Adham, who currently has little influence within the KDP, may not directly destabilize the party. However, it is sufficient to signal the PUK's ambition of exploiting the KDP's own divisions if possible. In essence, party fragmentation and attempts to exploit intra-party divisions have left the top leaderships of both the PUK and the KDP less secure and less willing to collaborate with one another.

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3.3. The Role of a New Generation of Leaders

Insecurity runs deep among some of the key members of the younger generation of leaders in the PUK and the KDP, particularly Bafel Talabani and Masrour Barzani. They are the main figures that have exacerbated tensions between the two parties since coming to power. Both leaders have scant prior political experience and instead have backgrounds in party-aligned security forces. In terms of style, they both harbour suspicions about threats to their power and rely on narrow circles of loyalists. Each believes that the other is determined to undermine their power and their party and has acted on these assumptions. Their rise to political prominence is a consequence of the ongoing dominance of the Talabani and Barzani families over the PUK/KDP (International Crisis Group, 2019). The party patronage networks these two families maintain are responsible for their selection, rather than any rules-bound procedures.

Bafel has maintained a deeply distrustful view of Masrour, believing that the latter is intent on undermining the PUK, and has acted accordingly. He, for instance, intensified pressure on his cousin Lahur Talabani thinking the latter received Masrour's backing. In the past, Bafel and Lahur worked together within the PUK-aligned security and intelligence forces. Leveraging their family connections and roles within the party's security apparatus and taking advantage of the chaos following the KRG's 2017 referendum, they jointly secured the presidency of the PUK during a highly scripted party conference in December 2019. Subsequently, they served together as co-presidents for eighteen months. In July 2021, Bafel, with the support of his brother Qubad Talabani and PUK military leaders, ousted Lahur from his position (*Awene*, 2021; Aydogan & Alaca, 2021). Subsequently, Bafel was appointed as the party's president and has since worked to consolidate his position by surrounding himself with a small group of loyalists (Mohammed, 2022) and awarding key party and government positions to the leaders of prominent PUK factions.[4]

Exiled from his former party, Lahur nevertheless continued to be an irritant to Bafel's consolidation of power. He formed his own party, retained a loyal following, and participated in the 2024 regional elections, mainly targeting disillusioned PUK supporters in Sulaimaniyah and Erbil. Reportedly, Lahur softened his previously vigorous anti-KDP stance and repaired his relations with the KDP and Masrour. Media outlets close to Bafel claimed that this had led to an emerging alliance between the two directed against the PUK (*Esta.kurd*, 2024). This perceived collaboration between the erstwhile enemies may have played a role in Bafel's violent attack on Lahur's base in Sulaimaniyah, using PUK-aligned security and special forces in August 2025 (*The Economist*, 2025). Masrour's perceived backing of his rivals, along with the KDP's attempts to win over senior PUK intelligence officers (Ismail, 2022), likely deepened Bafel's distrust of Masrour and further alienated him from the KDP as a whole. Bafel's strong anti-Masrour sentiment has spread throughout the PUK. As one PUK leader put it: "*Any goodwill we previously built with the KDP was destroyed by Masrour. Masrour hates the PUK and is the worst prime minister the KRG has ever had*" (Interview with PUK-01, Erbil, July 2024).

[4] PUK leaders have acknowledged that some close affiliates of Bafel secured their positions not due to their effectiveness and skills but because of their loyalty to the Talabani family (Interviews with PUK-02 and PUK-03). See also: Saeed, Jawad, 2024. 'PUK in the shadow of generations', Awene, 6 September [In Kurdish]. Available at: https://www.awene.com/article?no=22556&auther=1319

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During his time as prime minister, Masrour's relationship with the PUK has been highly strained, a situation that KDP leaders attribute to his governance style. A KDP leader said that "Masrour Barzani is a very serious prime minister who wants to end party corruption within the government. That is why PUK leaders do not approve of him." (Interview with KDP-04, August 2024). Given the pervasive corruption in both parties, this statement can only be read as political spin. It is more likely that Masrour's approach to the PUK is driven by his security background and deep distrust of the PUK's current leadership. Prior to assuming his current roles as KDP vice president and KRG prime minister, Masrour worked in and oversaw several KDP-aligned special security and intelligence agencies (Muhammed, 2018b). A staunch advocate of the KRG's 2017 independence referendum, Masrour has maintained a deeply suspicious view of Bafel. He has accused him and other PUK leaders of treason, alleging that they colluded with the Baghdad government and surrendered Kirkuk in the aftermath of the referendum.

Masrour's distrustfulness of Bafel and the PUK has been manifested in action. A notable example is the 2022 assassination of a PUK intelligence officer, who had defected to Erbil along with the former head of the PUK's intelligence agency. The Kurdistan Region Security Council, under the control of Masrour (*Rudaw*, 2022), swiftly blamed the assassination on the PUK-affiliated Counterterrorism Group and its top commander, a close ally of Bafel. The KDP-controlled Ministry of Interior subsequently issued arrest warrants for PUK security commanders and courts in Erbil issued death sentences for them. Using his authority as KRG prime minister, Masrour went further and stopped salary payments to the Counterterrorism Group (Ismail, 2022). In a show of defiance, Bafel arrived at Erbil airport with the counterterrorism commander who the KDP had blamed for the assassination, nearly precipitating a violent reaction from the KDP.

The interaction between Masrour and Bafel has largely reflected the behaviour of leaders trapped in a cycle of insecurity analysed by political economy scholars. Rather than pursuing political compromise, insecure leaders may engage in political opportunism to gain and retain power. Although opportunistic behaviour may yield short-term gains for political elites (Goldsmith, 2004: 96), in the long run it is likely to undermine both elite power and the country's overall stability and survival. This dynamic is best captured by Goldsmith (2004, p. 105) in his analysis of predatory politics in Africa:

> Because leaders' expectations of other political actors affect their current decisions, and because they fear rivals will turn to opportunistic behaviour, leaders get trapped in self-fulfilling equilibria. It is prudent for all political actors to mimic one another so these equilibria may be quite stable, even if suboptimal and ultimately self-defeating.

Masrour's and Bafel's actions have been driven by similar logics. While Masrour, using his position as prime minister, resorted to political opportunism to prevent the PUK from exercising its power within the KRG (Ismail, 2022) Bafel's actions have been no less opportunistic. As discussed earlier, Bafel aligned the PUK with Baghdad-based parties and authorities to balance the KDP's power both within the KRI and in the rest of Iraq. From Masrour's perspective, Bafel's actions were intended to weaken and, ultimately, undermine his position. These actions, however, deepened mutual distrust and intensified the power struggle between the two parties, preventing the formation of a new KRG.

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Conclusions

The long-term stability of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been challenged by the failure of the region's ruling elites to form a new power-sharing government nearly two years after the region held elections in 2024. This study has analysed this failure through the lens of the insecurity trap, a concept that describes a situation in which real or perceived threats to political survival render leaders insecure, thereby generating conflict, mistrust, and an inability to make political concessions and compromise. The study demonstrated how a similar dynamic characterised the relationship between the region's dominant PUK and KDP leaderships ending their decade-long collaborative rule over Iraqi Kurdistan.

As shown, the key driver of the region's insecurity trap and the subsequent political deadlock is leadership insecurity generated by a sense of power deprivation in the PUK's leadership at the hands of the KDP leaders. In reality, however, a number of factors beyond the perceived fears of the parties have caused the leadership of both parties to be feel less secure. These factors have included: the economic vulnerabilities of the region, the divisions that have appeared within both parties and the rise of a new generation of leaders with little prior political experience and strategic insight.

Prior to 2014, when Iraqi Kurdistan was struck by severe economic shocks, the region's ruling elite controlled and distributed vast financial resources among themselves, enabling them to maintain and expand patronage and clientelist networks—a key pillar of their political power. In addition to this abundance of resources, the sense of security among the leaders of both parties was further strengthened by the relative cohesion of the PUK and the KDP. The KDP's Masoud Barzani and the late PUK leader Jalal Talabani, drawing on their long political experience and strategic vision, were able to overcome their differences, make political concessions, and cooperate through a power-sharing arrangement that underpinned the region's stability between 2003 and 2013.

However, the factors that had sustained the leadership's hold on power gradually changed, weakening leaders' sense of security and, consequently, their willingness to compromise and collaborate. As resources became scarcer, the two parties experienced varying degrees of internal fragmentation, with the PUK suffering more severe divisions. With insufficient resources, financial means, and government positions to maintain and expand patronage networks and retain power, and with intra-party divisions that could be exploited by rivals, the leadership of both parties became increasingly insecure.

Compounding leadership insecurity has been the rise of a younger generation of leaders with limited political experience and little strategic vision. With backgrounds in security and intelligence, some of the top leaders of the two parties have sought to secure short-term political gains through political opportunism, intensifying the power struggle and deepening mutual mistrust rather than pursuing the compromise needed to break the political deadlock by forming a new power-sharing government.

The leadership of the two parties may eventually succeed in reaching a new power-sharing agreement. However, as the experience of the past six years demonstrates, any such agreement is likely to remain fragile unless the leadership of both the ruling and opposition parties, civil society organisations, and interested national and international actors take meaningful steps to address the

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underlying sources of leadership insecurity in Iraqi Kurdistan. This requires a long-term commitment to gradually transforming the region's neopatrimonial and predatory political system into a genuinely democratic one. Such efforts should begin with comprehensive reforms of the region's economic, security, and financial sectors aimed at dismantling patronage and clientelist networks (Saleem & Skelton, 2020). Such reforms, however, should be carefully sequenced. Because access to political office and public resources currently provides the ruling parties with a degree of political security, an abrupt dismantling of patronage arrangements could initially deepen elite insecurity. Institutional reform therefore needs to be accompanied by credible guarantees of political inclusion, rules-based competition and protection against political exclusion.

In addition, international actors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, should use their influence and partnerships in Iraqi Kurdistan to promote the rule of law and strengthen the authority of the region's parliament and other accountability institutions. Ultimately, only a rules-based and institutionalised political system can reduce the insecurity of PUK and KDP leaders, creating the conditions necessary for compromise and collaboration in the interests of the Kurdish citizens of Iraq.

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