



مجلة الكوفة للعلوم القانونية والسياسية

ISSN

٢٠٧٠٩٨٣٨ (مطبوع) ٣٠٠٦٧٦٧٧ (إلكتروني)

العدد الثالث / المجلد السابع عشر

تاريخ النشر

٢٠٢٥ / ٩ / ٢٠

التحديات الأمنية السياسية في إقليم كردستان العراق: منظور أمني نسوي

Political Security Threats in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: A Feminist Security Perspective

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الأمن السياسي، الأمن، إقليم كردستان العراق، السياسة

Political Security , Security , Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Politica



Abstract

This study examines political security issues in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) through a feminist security framework. It critically analyzes the impact of internal political dynamics, particularly the conflicts between political parties, and the role of women in politics on the region's stability and national security. It addresses the following central questions: 1. How does the Feminist Security lens critique the political security sector in the KRI? 2. What is the impact of women's political engagement on the national security landscape of the KRI? Employing qualitative methodology has been implied. It aims to identify gaps in the current understanding of security in the KRI through a feminist security perspective, revealing how traditional security frameworks may inadequately address the experiences and needs of different genders. The findings indicate that ongoing conflicts between major political parties significantly threaten the KRI's political security by undermining government legitimacy and authority. Additionally, internal governance weaknesses and legitimacy issues exacerbate security vulnerabilities. The study highlights the critical role of women in the region's political processes, examining their participation in political parties, involvement in the 2017 independence referendum, and contributions to political security. The study discusses the broader implications of these findings for the KRI's national security, arguing that resolving political party conflicts, reinforcing government structures, and advancing gender inclusion in political processes is crucial for enhancing the region's political stability and security. Women's active political participation is not only a matter of equity but, also a strategic advantage that can lead to more effective and comprehensive security policies. By integrating women's perspectives into political and security strategies, the KRI can develop a more resilient and inclusive political system, ultimately strengthening its overall security framework.

الملخص

ملخص / تتناول هذه الدراسة قضايا الأمن السياسي في إقليم كردستان العراق من خلال إطار أمني نسوي. وهي تحلل بشكل نقدي تأثير الديناميكيات السياسية الداخلية، وخاصة الصراعات بين الأحزاب السياسية، ودور المرأة في السياسة على استقرار المنطقة والأمن الوطني. وتتناول الأسئلة المركزية التالية: ١. كيف تنتقد عدسة الأمن النسوي قطاع الأمن السياسي في إقليم كردستان العراق؟

٢. ما هو تأثير المشاركة السياسية للمرأة على المشهد الأمني الوطني لإقليم كردستان العراق؟ تم استخدام منهجية نوعية ضمنية. وتهدف إلى تحديد الثغرات في الفهم الحالي للأمن في إقليم كردستان العراق من خلال منظور أمني نسوي، وكشف كيف قد تعالج أطر الأمن التقليدية بشكل غير كاف تجارب واحتياجات الجنسين المختلفين. تشير النتائج إلى أن الصراعات المستمرة بين الأحزاب السياسية الرئيسية تهدد بشكل كبير الأمن السياسي لإقليم كردستان العراق من خلال تقويض شرعية الحكومة وسلطتها. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تؤدي نقاط الضعف في الحكم الداخلي وقضايا الشرعية إلى تفاقم نقاط الضعف الأمنية. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الدور الحاسم الذي تلعبه المرأة في العمليات السياسية في المنطقة، وتفحص مشاركتها في الأحزاب السياسية، ومشاركتها في استفتاء الاستقلال عام ٢٠١٧، ومساهماتها في الأمن السياسي. وتناقش الدراسة الآثار الأوسع لهذه النتائج على الأمن الوطني لإقليم كردستان العراق، وتجادل بأن حل النزاعات بين الأحزاب السياسية، وتعزيز الهياكل الحكومية، وتعزيز إدماج النوع الاجتماعي في العمليات السياسية أمر بالغ الأهمية لتعزيز الاستقرار السياسي والأمن في المنطقة. إن المشاركة السياسية النشطة للمرأة ليست مجرد مسألة مساواة، بل هي أيضًا ميزة استراتيجية يمكن أن تؤدي إلى سياسات أمنية أكثر فعالية وشاملة. ومن خلال دمج وجهات نظر المرأة في الاستراتيجيات السياسية والأمنية، يمكن لإقليم كردستان العراق تطوير نظام سياسي أكثر مرونة وشاملاً، مما يعزز في نهاية المطاف إطاره الأمني الشامل.

المقدمة

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
CSS	Copenhagen School of Security Studies
FSS	Feminist Security Studies
FYF	Free Yezidi Foundation
IHERC	The Independent High Electoral and Referendum Commission
IFSC	Iraqi Federal Supreme Court
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Sham
PMF	The Popular Mobilization Forces
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Region Government
KR-I	Kurdistan Region-Iraq
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UN	United Nations



1: Introduction and Conceptual Frameworks

1.1 Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, national security has expanded beyond traditional state-centric concerns to encompass a broader spectrum of identity groups, including ethnic communities and women¹. This broadened understanding is crucial for analyzing the nature of conflicts where civil conflicts often dominate over international wars, requiring changes in behavior rather than mere political or military interventions by the state² (Spillmann, et al., 2000). In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), internal political conflicts, particularly between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), have undermined political stability and national security, with profound implications for women's political participation. This study, using a feminist security lens, aims to explore how these conflicts and governance challenges affect women's roles in political decision-making and broader security concerns.

The study aims to uncover the complexities that shape governance and legitimacy in the KRI. Additionally, the feminist perspective employed in this analysis sheds light on the often-overlooked role of women in political decision-making and governance, highlighting their influence on political security dynamics. The key objectives are:

1. **Analyze Internal Political Conflicts:** Analyze how internal political conflicts impact KRI's national security and stability.
2. **Assess Governance Challenges:** Examine the structural and legitimacy issues within the KRI government and their effects on political stability.
3. **Apply Feminist Security Critiques:** Explore the role of women in the KRI's political sphere, including their involvement in political parties, leadership roles, and contributions to national security.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the political security threats in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq through a feminist security lens. It draws on an extensive literature review to provide a comprehensive analysis of the KRI's political landscape. The feminist security framework is applied to examine the intersection of political party conflicts, governance challenges, and women's involvement in politics. Data is gathered from various sources including academic articles, reports, and



historical records, ensuring a robust and well-rounded analysis. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the Feminist Security lens critique the political security sector in the KRI?
2. What is the impact of women's political engagement on the national security of the KRI?

These questions aim to uncover the underlying dynamics that influence governance and legitimacy in the KRI, providing insights into how internal political conflicts and the role of women intersect to impact the region's national security. By integrating feminist security approaches, this study offers a critical perspective on traditional security models, enhancing the understanding of political security in the KRI and suggesting potential pathways for strengthening governance and stability in the region.

This study is structured to provide an in-depth analysis of the political security threats in the Kurdistan Region from a feminist security perspective. It begins with an introduction that sets the stage for the discussion. The first major section analyzes the concept of political security according to the Copenhagen Security School, particularly focusing on Bary Buzan's contributions to KRI's political security. The second section focuses on the feminist security perspective within the political sector. The study then transitions into a feminist examination of political security, where it assesses the role of women in the political sphere, including their involvement in political parties, the 2017 independence referendum, and their contributions to national security. It further explores women's participation in leadership and decision-making within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the KRI Parliament.

1.2 Conceptual Frameworks

1.2.1 Political Security According to Copenhagen's Security School (State Structure and Gender Dynamics)

The Kurdistan Region, established in 1992, has become a significant political, territorial, and economic entity in the Middle East. However, internal political conflicts continue to undermine its political security^٢. The absence of Kurdish statehood, coupled with external threats such as Turkey's military actions, severely hampers the region's political stability. These external pressures, in turn, exacerbate internal political vulnerabilities, leading to threats such as intervention by neighboring



countries. The lack of an independent Kurdish state remains a core political security issue, as the Kurdish people's primary aim is self-determination^٤. Buzan's concept of political security focuses on the organizational stability of governments and their structures, and there are five elements of state security such as military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors^٥, that directly question the durability of the Kurdistan Region's political system. Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and others within the Copenhagen School propose a broader understanding of security, including civilian threats that undermine both nations and individuals. Buzan argues for a balanced approach that combines elements of power and peace for a comprehensive view of security^٦. So, Political security in this framework focuses on the stability of the state structure^٧. Feminist critiques emphasize the need to consider individual security, especially how political repression affects women and marginalized groups. In this framework, political security is not limited to military concerns but also focuses on the resilience of state structures. Feminist critiques, however, highlight the need to address the security of individuals within the state, particularly how political repression disproportionately affects women and marginalized groups. Political risks are often ambiguous, manifesting as a clash of values, external pressures, or challenges to state ideology and institutions^٨. According to the Human Development Report (1994)^٩, political security includes protection from militarism, human rights violations, and governmental repression. It involves the stability of governmental structures and the ideologies underpinning them^{١٠}. Political threats target state stability by pressuring governments, inciting secession, or disrupting political order, thereby increasing vulnerability to military attacks. These threats challenge a state's ideology, national identity, and institutions, and for weaker states, such political threats in the KRI can be as severe as military ones. Often, they involve granting or withholding legitimacy and international support, which can have significant political ramifications^{١١}.

1.2.2 Deconstructing Political Security from the Feminist Security Perspective

Feminism has various meanings but fundamentally emphasizes women's perspectives in understanding societal issues^{١٢}. Whether as a theory or movement, it highlights the oppression women face because of their gender^{١٣}. Feminists argue that traditional security approaches, like those from the Copenhagen School, overlook



individual security and prioritize state security. Blanchard notes that "national security discourses are part of the elite, masculine world of high politics"¹⁶, while Tickner adds the state's national security policies are frequently justified regarding masculine characteristics¹⁰. Feminist security studies challenge male-dominated paradigms, advocating for gender considerations in security. This approach critiques the male bias in politics and government, which frequently sidelines women's voices, deeming traditional theories inadequate for modern realities. Feminists push for an expanded understanding of security, including women's roles and issues like domestic violence, economic, food, and environmental security¹¹. They view national security as reflecting male dominance¹². Feminist security studies emphasize neglecting gendered security aspects within traditional state-centric security frameworks. Feminist scholars advocate for "gender mainstreaming" in security studies, urging the integration of gender perspectives in all aspects of security analysis¹³. Since the Cold War, feminist views in international politics and security have gained more acceptance, evident in UN initiatives like Security Council Resolution 1325, which urges greater female participation in peace and security decision-making¹⁴. This feminist analysis critiques male domination in security and its neglect of women's issues.

Feminist international relations scholars, like Tickner, aim to redefine global perspectives, particularly by reevaluating the public-private divide. Tickner's critique addresses the public-private gap, identifying its role in perpetuating domestic violence and calling for a reevaluation of power dynamics¹⁵. Feminist perspectives on power as mutual enablement aim to "feminize" both domestic and international spheres, multifaceted challenges feminists pose to prevailing notions of political security¹⁶. This endeavor seeks to eliminate the coercive element of power, challenging the prevailing structures that seek to impose the state's hegemony through dominance. The feminist perspective, rooted in collaborative empowerment, advocates for a fundamental shift in power distribution, rejecting traditional notions of dominance within political security. Feminism, as a critical lens, introduces alternative perspectives on phenomena, research topics, discourse narratives, and historical accounts. This vantage point encourages a nuanced analysis of conflict and war, emphasizing the substantive involvement of women rather than just *adding women and stirring*¹⁷.



In many countries, women remain underrepresented in politics and security decision-making^{٢٢}. Despite the variety of roles women play in combat, few hold leadership positions in military and political structures, particularly during peacetime^{٢٣}. This reinforces male dominance in political security and portrays women as weak, requiring protection from men. Feminists argue that involving women in peace negotiations leads to more inclusive and moderate outcomes that benefit marginalized groups^{٢٤}. This means that the lack of women's roles in the state is a factor in politics operated by male dominance. So, political security goes around the absence of the female stereotype because when the masculine protects the feminine, the general attribution of the strong protects the weak. This undermines women's identity as females as if they are a weak gender that requires another gender to protect themselves. This perspective is particularly important for analyzing security in the KRI, where gendered experiences of insecurity are often neglected in favor of more traditional security concerns.

According to liberal feminism, they frequently utilize the legal and governmental structures of power to protect rights and enhance the lives of women in the society's order's current political and economic structure^{٢٥}. The Copenhagen School and other traditional security theories have been accused of reinforcing a masculine bias in security studies by prioritizing military threats, state sovereignty, and power politics^{٢٦}. Furthermore, Hansen's critique highlights the potential for securitization processes to perpetuate gender hierarchies. Criticism of the Copenhagen School includes neglecting women's agency in security dynamics, with feminist scholars asserting that women play significant roles in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and security. Moreover, Hansen points out the potential for securitization processes to contribute to the reproduction of gender hierarchies^{٢٧}.

1.3 Feminist Examination of Political Security in the KRI's National Security (Women's Political Representation)

Feminist scholars argue that national security should encompass the security needs of individuals and communities within the nation-state, including addressing gender-based issues. Traditional security approaches prioritize state and military power, and often ignore the experiences of women and other marginalized groups,



leading to an incomplete understanding of security, critiqued the Copenhagen School of Security (CSS) for failing to address gender issues, exhibiting a gender-blind and masculinist bias in security discourse²⁹. A feminist critique of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) political sector is essential for understanding how women's involvement impacts regional security. The support and participation of citizens, especially women, are crucial for improving governance structures and maintaining regional stability. Women play a critical role in shaping policies, and their perspectives must be integrated into decision-making processes aimed at safeguarding national security.

Despite global and regional advancements in women's participation in politics, the KRI still faces challenges in ensuring equitable representation. This section examines women's representation in leadership roles and decision-making bodies, and both political parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). It also provides a feminist analysis of women's roles during the 2017 referendum and their broader contributions to regional security.

1.3.1 Women's Participation in Leadership and Decision-Making

Female involvement in leadership and governance is not only a step toward gender equality but is also crucial for enhancing the national security framework by incorporating diverse perspectives. In the KRI, while women's participation in government and parliamentary roles has gradually increased, they still face significant challenges rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has a direct impact on the security sector, as it limits the diversity of perspectives necessary for addressing the full spectrum of security needs. Overcoming these obstacles requires reforms that promote equal opportunities, coupled with support from international organizations and civil society. This section evaluates the proportion of women in key leadership roles and decision-making bodies, assessing their contributions to governance and the national security of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). A feminist perspective highlights the importance of women's voices in shaping security policies, ensuring that gendered dimensions of security are considered alongside traditional concerns.



1.3.1.1 Evaluation of Women's Representation in the KRG

Women's participation in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has grown over the years, but challenges remain. In the KRI, women's involvement in governance and security is crucial for addressing the complex security challenges facing the region. Feminist scholars argue that states with significant gender gaps in governance—referred to as "masculine states"—marginalize women's identities and contributions, ultimately leading to weakened national security^{٣٠}. The marginalization of women in governance structures limits the range of perspectives considered in security policies, resulting in policies that fail to address the specific security needs of women and other marginalized groups. This entails pushing for increased representation of women in government, diplomacy, defense, and intelligence sectors, and also encouraging their active involvement in peace negotiations, conflict resolution, and efforts to rebuild after conflicts. Therefore, genuine female participation in decision-making bodies, such as the legislature and executive branches, signifies a healthy governance system, which ultimately impacts the region's security. Therefore, the KRI provided a quota system to increase women's political participation.

The Impact of Quotas on Women's Representation: The implication of quotas in the KRG was a significant step towards improving women's political representation. Article 4 of Law No. 3 of 2009 of the Provincial Law of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (30%) representation for women in provincial and district local councils^{٣١}. This allocated marked the first time women were given this percentage in provincial and district councils. The implementation of gender quotas is a tool that promotes women's involvement in political and administrative affairs, providing opportunities for women to gain experience and navigate the political landscape. This has led to an increase in the number of women participating in politics. However, feminist critiques argue that quotas, while necessary in the short term, may not foster active participation or merit-based selection^{٣٢}. Critics point out that quotas can sometimes perpetuate a system where women are seen as token participants, rather than active contributors based on their skills and qualifications.

Additionally, critics argue that it contradicts the principles of gender equality.

Opponents claim that quotas compensate for historical injustices at the expense of



current individuals, prioritizing identity over merit^{٣٣}. They argue that it benefits minorities and past victims while placing a burden on today's citizens. In essence, minorities who were previously oppressed must now receive support, even if it requires current voters and representatives to bear the cost. Despite these criticisms, feminist scholars view quotas as a necessary mechanism to dismantle patriarchal structures that have historically limited women's advancement in politics and governance. They argue that achieving gender equality in decision-making bodies requires deliberate efforts to elevate women's voices, allowing them to shape policies that address the interests of both men and women^{٣٤}.

Current State of Women's Representation in the KRG: In the high positions or decision-making centers women are seen in a few ranges, in the eighth KRG cabinet (2014-2019), there was only one female minister, a number that increased to three in the current ninth cabinet (2019-present). While this represents progress, it still falls short of achieving equal representation in governance^{٣٥}. Feminist scholars emphasize that increasing the number of women in leadership is crucial for ensuring that women's perspectives and needs are reflected in policymaking processes. Without this, the government risks perpetuating policies that fail to address gender-specific security concerns, thereby weakening the region's overall security. The composition of the ninth KRG cabinet reflects the ongoing challenges of gender representation in leadership positions. Despite some advancements, the KRG has yet to appoint a woman as prime minister or deputy prime minister since its establishment in 1992. Additionally, only 3 out of 22 ministers in the current cabinet are women, and only one woman holds a leadership position, which is the High Council for Women^{٣٦}. This underrepresentation raises concerns about the government's commitment to gender equality, especially in high-level decision-making roles. The cabinet's agenda briefly mentions the importance of women's participation in various fields and acknowledges the need for women to take on important roles in society based on their skills and abilities. However, while women's participation is encouraged, it is often treated as a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive commitment to change. This inconsistency between the quota system—which guarantees women a fixed percentage of seats in government—and the government's actual policies underscores a broader issue: women are often included in



decision-making bodies without regard for their qualifications or expertise. Feminist critiques argue that a more comprehensive approach is needed to promote women's participation, one that genuinely values their contributions and provides pathways for their professional advancement^{٢٧}.

Feminist Critique of Women's Representation in the KRG: From a feminist standpoint, the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles in the KRG reflects a broader pattern of gender inequality in governance. FSS emphasizes that true security cannot be achieved unless the voices and perspectives of women are integrated into national security strategies. They critique the existing system for failing to provide women with equal opportunities to participate in shaping security policies. They argue that increasing women's representation in key sectors like government, diplomacy, defense, and intelligence is essential for building a more secure and inclusive society^{٢٨}.

Moreover, feminist critiques of the KRG's political system highlight the need for more comprehensive programs that promote women's active participation, rather than simply filling quotas. This means creating environments where women can contribute meaningfully to governance and security decisions, ensuring that their voices are heard at every level of government. In sum, while the KRG has made strides toward increasing women's participation in governance, the region still faces significant challenges in achieving true gender equality in leadership roles. A feminist analysis reveals that addressing these challenges requires more than symbolic gestures or quotas—it demands a fundamental shift in the way women's contributions are valued and integrated into the national security framework. Without this shift, the region's security policies will continue to overlook the critical perspectives and needs of half its population, leaving its security structure incomplete.

1.3.1.2 Women's Participation in the KRI Parliament

The KRI Parliament has seen a gradual increase in female representation, with women taking on roles that influence policy-making. However, the presence of women in parliament alone does not guarantee that their perspectives are integrated into national security policies. This section analyzes the barriers women face in



parliamentary positions and the impact of their involvement in regional security strategies.

Historical Context of Women's Representation in the KRI Parliament: Following the Kurdish uprising in 1991 and the establishment of a safe haven by the United Nations^{٣٩}, an administrative and political vacuum emerged in the region. In the aftermath, the Kurdistan Front led discussions to form a legislative body, which culminated in the passing of Law No. 1 for the 1992 Election Law, establishing the Kurdistan Parliament^{٤٠}. The legal framework provided the basis for the region's

The region has a fifth parliament term, the last term was in 2018, in .political system which the turnout rate was 59%. Twenty-nine lists participated in the election, sixteen lists won parliamentary seats and both political parties (KDP, PUK) won the majority sets. Of the 111 parliamentary seats, 34 were held by women^{٤١}, marking a significant moment in Kurdish history as women took on key leadership roles, including the chief of parliament and the second deputy^{٤٢}. In the context of FSS women's political leadership is essential not only for symbolic representation but also for ensuring that the security needs of marginalized groups, including women, are adequately addressed.

Quotas and Barriers to Meaningful Participation: According to the fourth amendment to the Kurdistan National Assembly Election Law No. 1 of 1992, in Law No. 2 of (25/3/2009), stated that any list with three candidates must include a woman^{٤٣}. This law marked the first time in the region that such an opportunity was given to women to enter the political arena, particularly in the important institution of the legislature. While quotas are crucial for providing women access to political institutions, feminist critiques argue that quotas alone are insufficient to ensure meaningful participation. Women's presence in parliament does not automatically lead to substantial influence over security policies unless they are empowered to engage in decision-making processes. The reserved quota seats for women in the KRI parliament, while designed to promote gender equality, often result in tokenistic representation. Parties are required to nominate women for these positions, but in practice, women are frequently appointed to fill quotas rather than based on merit or qualifications. This reflects a broader issue within patriarchal political systems, where women are sidelined from real



power and decision-making roles, this approach reinforces traditional gender roles and limits the transformative potential of women's leadership in national security and governance^{٤٤}.

Additionally, the Independent High Electoral and Referendum Commission (IHERC) sets criteria for parliamentary candidates, which do not place sufficient emphasis on educational and professional qualifications^{٤٥}. Reports from the PAY Institute indicate that only for the fifth term (2019-2022), out of 111 parliament members, only 29 have PhD and MA degrees. It was also noted that in the upcoming parliament election, 50% of the candidate names presented to the IHERC do not have the required qualifications^{٤٦}. This suggests that while women may be filling seats, the lack of emphasis on merit and expertise weakens their ability to influence key decisions related to regional security. From a feminist perspective, true security is not only about increasing numbers but also ensuring that women in leadership positions have the qualifications and authority to shape policies. Despite these challenges, women's participation in the KRI Parliament has had a noticeable impact on the region's governance, especially in conflict resolution and political negotiations. Women in politics are often seen as effective communicators, utilizing diplomatic skills to de-escalate tensions and foster cooperation. Feminist theorists such as Carol Cohn argue that the inclusion of women in security discussions leads to more collaborative and inclusive decision-making processes^{٤٧}, which are critical in fragile political environments like the KRI.

The 2018 parliamentary election marked a breakthrough with women holding leadership positions for the first time in the region. These roles, however, are not immune to the structural barriers that limit women's power. While women may serve as symbolic figures of progress, their ability to influence security policies remains constrained by entrenched political practices that favor male leadership. Feminist scholars argue that for women to make a meaningful impact on national security, their roles must go beyond mere representation. Women must be involved in the development and implementation of security policies that address the specific needs of women and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, while quotas have succeeded in bringing more women into parliament, they have not always translated into increased



authority or decision-making power. This has led to criticisms that the quota system, as implemented in the KRI, often results in the promotion of less qualified candidates, undermining the overall effectiveness of the parliament in addressing key security concerns. the focus should shift from filling seats to creating pathways for women to develop their skills, gain experience, and contribute meaningfully to governance and security^{٤٨}.

Feminist Critique of Women's Political Leadership: Women in politics often employ highly effective communication techniques to de-escalate tense situations and seek mutually beneficial solutions. Their diplomatic skills not only help in managing conflicts but also contribute to their resolution, making a meaningful difference in the political arena. The unique perspective offered by women's political leadership has a profound and positive impact on government and national security. Women's emphasis on collaboration, empathy, inclusion, effective communication, and long-term vision leads to the creation of more flexible and enduring policies^{٤٩}. As women continue to break down barriers and take on leadership roles, they significantly influence society and the political landscape. This shift is reshaping our understanding of political leadership.

However, feminist scholars argue that increasing women's representation in parliament is not sufficient if the political structures they operate remain exclusionary. Genuine security, from the FSS perspective, can only be achieved when women's voices are actively integrated into decision-making processes^{٥٠}. This means that women's influence on security policies must extend beyond token representation and into the realm of meaningful policy-making. Unfortunately, in many cases, appointments of women to political positions are not based on their qualifications or merit but are instead focused on filling quotas or securing political legitimacy. This often leads to missed opportunities for enhancing national security, as such appointments do not always translate into actual empowerment or influence in decision-making processes. In the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) parliament, reserved quota seats for women are implemented, compelling political parties to nominate a certain number of women outside the provincial centers such as Erbil, Sulaimani, Kirkuk, Duhok, and Halabja. While this demonstrates a formal commitment to women's advancement, the



reality is more complex. Many of the women filling these seats have not been elected by voters based on their skills or qualifications, but rather to fulfill quota requirements. This practice often results in giving a seat meant for a qualified male candidate to a woman with fewer votes or less experience, which weakens the potential impact women could have on decision-making, including in areas of national security⁶¹.

Based on feminist critiques emphasize that the tokenism inherent in the political system undermines the transformative potential of women's leadership⁶². For women to make a meaningful impact, they must be chosen based on merit rather than simply to fill a quota. The focus should shift from increasing numbers to ensuring that women in leadership positions have the qualifications, authority, and support to influence policies effectively. While women's participation in the KRI Parliament has increased in recent years, significant challenges remain. Feminist scholars argue that creating substantive opportunities for women to engage in policy-making, rather than merely meeting quotas, is essential. A shift toward merit-based representation and genuine empowerment of women leaders would enhance the region's capacity to address its complex security challenges, ensuring that the perspectives and needs of all citizens are reflected in a more inclusive, sustainable, and effective national security framework.

1.3.2 Assessing Women's Political Participation in the Region and Their Role in Providing National Security.

Women's political participation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) extends beyond leadership roles in government and parliament, encompassing their involvement in political parties and actions during key moments such as the 2017 referendum, which reflects their broader contributions to national security. From a feminist perspective, these contributions challenge traditional views of security by emphasizing human and societal dimensions alongside military concerns. Examining women's political engagement in the KRI is essential for understanding their role in national security. Their participation in political affairs not only promotes democratic governance but also helps shape more inclusive and effective security policies. Greater female representation in politics supports national security and enhances regional stability.

1.3.2.1 Feminist Analysis of Women's Roles in KRI Political Parties



The history of women's activity is intertwined with the Kurdish people's long-standing struggle for freedom and autonomy^{٥٧}. Despite these challenges, the Kurds have persisted in fighting for their national rights. Their struggle has led to the establishment of several political parties that are expected to play a pivotal role in advocating for Kurdish rights and promoting Kurdish culture and identity. Nonetheless, the representation of women within these parties, especially in leadership positions, is still limited, which has significant implications for the region's national security. This section will focus on the participation of women in the two main political parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Their roles will be analyzed from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the valuable contributions women bring to party politics and their influence on national security policies.

- Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP): The party defines itself as a national democratic party that believes in the principle of separation of powers^{٥٨}. It was founded in Mahabad, East Kurdistan in 1946. Mullah Mustafa Barzani was appointed as the party's leader. Originally called the Kurdish Democratic Party, the party changed its name to the Kurdistan Democratic Party during the third congress held on January 26, 1953, in Kirkuk (KDP Official page, 2024). The party has held 15 congresses during its existence.

However, there were no women members on the party's founding committee. From a feminist security perspective, the exclusion of women from leadership roles in political parties like the KDP presents critical challenges to national security. Feminist scholars argue that women's voices in political decision-making are crucial to creating more comprehensive, inclusive, and human-centered security policies^{٥٩}. It can be seen that in the last congress program in 2022, Women are mentioned only at the social and human level. Article 49 of the Rules of Procedure of the Fourth Congress mentions that women are given equal opportunities and an equal social environment is provided. Nowhere else is there any mention of women's political position, which gives them equal opportunities. A PDK cadre stated, "Women have been given more opportunities in this congress than in previous congresses and we hope that women According will pay more attention to their organizational work after this congress"^{٦٠}. to Article 17, Part II, Fourteenth Congress, "Women participants in the Central



Committee should not be less than 15%”, however, for the first time during its fourteenth congress, a woman engaged in the high position of this political party in the political bureau which was Amina Zikry^{ov}. These numbers are insufficient w according to feminist security goals, which advocate for broader representation of women in leadership roles.

The KDP lacks substantive female representation, with women making up only 15-25% of leadership roles. Of the 52 Central Committee members, just seven are women, and none hold positions in the five-member Executive Committee of the Political Bureau. Only one woman is among the 12 Political Bureau members. This limited presence in top leadership, like the Political Bureau or Supreme Committee of the Strugglers, keeps women's contributions symbolic, restricting their influence on national security policies and reinforcing a male-dominated decision-making structure. According to the Fourteenth Congress Rules of Procedure (Article 6, Paragraph 11), positive discrimination for women should be considered in party bodies and institutions. However, senior positions like the Monitoring and Follow-up Committee, High Committee of Strugglers, Political Bureau, and Vice President are not explicitly included^{oa}. While some measures have increased women's representation in lower structures, these positions lack direct influence on decision-making. As a result, women's roles remain limited, preventing them from shaping key political decisions. Feminist critiques argue that quotas must ensure women hold real power, especially in roles affecting national security and governance.

- Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK): The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is a political party founded in 1975, in Damascus, Syria, under the leadership of Jalal Talabani. According to Article 2, The party identifies itself as a socialist democratic party that strives for good governance, peace, social justice, democracy, citizenship, human rights, and the right to self-determination⁵⁹. The founding committee of the party consisted of eight members, all of whom were men. Since its inception, the PUK has held five congresses. The congresses have provided a platform for the party to discuss and adopt policies, elect leaders, and make decisions on various issues affecting the Kurdistan region.



From a feminist security perspective, the underrepresentation of women in the PUK's leadership poses significant challenges to creating a more inclusive political system. Like the KDP, the PUK has a hierarchical structure, with power flowing from the leadership council, which consists of 61 members and is responsible for setting the party's general policy. While Article 58 mandates that at least 25% of the leadership council should be women to promote gender equality, only 8 out of the 61 members (about 15%) are women, falling short of this target^{١٠}. In the Political Bureau, which has 14 members, only 3 are women. This data highlights the limited presence of women in key leadership roles, restricting their influence on critical political and security decisions within the party^{١١}.

In Paragraph 7 of its program, the PUK emphasizes gender equality, the elimination of gender discrimination, and equal rights and duties for men and women as key political priorities^{١٢}. Other sections outline the party's commitment to protecting women's rights, supporting women's economic independence, ensuring legal equality, and implementing international agreements on women's issues. Article 12, Paragraph C, of the PUK's internal regulations, is particularly notable, as it states that any party member who uses their position to commit violence against women will face suspension if there is sufficient evidence—a progressive stance not seen in other major KRI political parties. However, despite these policies, they have not yet resulted in greater political representation or influence for women within the party's leadership structures.

While the PUK has made strides in promoting gender equality at a policy level, the representation of women in decision-making roles remains insufficient. The gap between the party's internal rules and their implementation raises concerns about the depth of its commitment to gender equality. Feminist scholars emphasize that including women in lower positions is inadequate; high-level political and security decision-making roles are essential to ensure their perspectives shape national security policies^{١٣}. In conclusion, while the PUK has shown a progressive approach to addressing gender equality in its formal policies, the underrepresentation of women in key leadership positions limits the party's ability to fully integrate feminist perspectives into governance. A stronger commitment to implementing these policies at all levels



would enhance women's role in shaping national security strategies, which is critical for achieving comprehensive and inclusive security in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

1.3.2.2 Contributions of Women to the 2017 Referendum and Its Implications for KRI National Security

The 2017 referendum on independence for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was a pivotal moment in the region's political history, with women playing a critical role. women's involvement in both decision-making and execution was limited, raising concerns about the inclusiveness of the process and its implications for national security. The Kurds played a key role in Iraq's reconstruction post-2003, aiming to create a democratic Iraq while maintaining the right to self-determination. They supported the US-led coalition in toppling the regime and allowed coalition forces to operate from KRI¹⁶. However, mistrust in post-2003 Iraq led to the Kurds advocating for a federal system, successfully gaining autonomy for the Peshmerga forces through Article 117 of the Constitution¹⁰.

The KRI held an unofficial referendum on January 30, 2005, coinciding with the Iraqi parliamentary elections. While lacking legal standing, nearly all participants supported independence¹¹. The KRG reaffirmed its support for a united Iraq and rejected the outcome of the vote. The KRG and Iraqi Kurdish political parties utilized the results of this unofficial poll in their discussions with Baghdad. Another independence vote was conducted on September 25, 2017. This one was approved by the KRI parliament and endorsed by the KRG. But as Iraq, its neighbors, and the international community pointed out, it was a unilateral move. The outcome showed that almost 92 percent of voters supported independence, with a turnout of %72. Remarkably, even the people who abstained from the referendum expressed support for Kurdish independence; their disagreement stemmed from when exactly independence should be announced¹². The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and other Iraqi armed forces began a military assault to seize Kirkuk and KRI on October 15. Iraq's Supreme Federal Court ruled on Monday a Sept. 25 Kurdish independence referendum was unconstitutional¹³. Later, on October 25, KRG said that the results of the vote would be "frozen." The Iraqi Supreme Federal Court ruled on November 6 that the vote was invalid, and the KRG complied with the court's ruling.



Most of the people participated in the referendum, also, both political parties such as KDP and PUK directed people to vote. On July 6, 2017, Massoud Barzani, who was the President of the Kurdistan Region at the time and represented the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Presidency, met with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and others. They collectively decided to hold a referendum on Kurdistan's independence on September 25, 2017. The referendum campaign was led by Massoud Barzani, Salahaddin Mohammed Bahadin, Kosrat Rasul, Mohammed Haji Mahmood, and several other political figures. Only 68 of 111 parliament members attended without the Gorran Movement¹⁹. But later, they decided whether their members were free to participate or not. Also, there was a movement by the name "No" whose slogan was "Not at the moment", they didn't participate in the referendum voting^v. The fallout from the referendum weakened KRG's domestic and international standing. Internally, it sparked factional divisions within Kurdish political parties^{vi}. Externally, Baghdad responded with economic sanctions, military actions, and political isolation. As a result, the KRG lost significant revenue from the Kirkuk oil fields^{vi}. Following the events of October 16, the Peshmerga forces withdrew from the areas, resulting in the loss of 52% of the territory of South Kurdistan, except for Kirkuk, which included eight towns and 21 villages^{vi}.

From a feminist security perspective, the gender composition of the referendum's leadership is significant. The High Referendum Delegation, which negotiated with Baghdad, was predominantly male, with only one woman involved^{vi}. This lack of female representation in critical decision-making processes raises questions about whether a more inclusive committee could have influenced the referendum's outcome. Feminist security studies argue that including women in national security strategies leads to a range of gender perspectives and more comprehensive policies that consider social, economic, and human dimensions alongside military concerns. Women's political participation could have introduced alternative strategies or mitigated divisions. Research shows that women in politics often focus on diplomacy, conflict resolution, and peace-building^{vo}, which were notably absent from the post-referendum approach. Their exclusion likely contributed to the missteps that followed, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to national security. In conclusion,



the KRI 2017 referendum and its aftermath demonstrated the importance of integrating women into national security discussions. A feminist analysis underscores how gendered exclusions from leadership can have profound impacts on political outcomes. For the KRI, embracing a more inclusive political framework is essential for both gender equality and long-term national security.

1.4 Implications for National Security.

Feminist Critique of Western-Centric National Security and Its Relevance to the KRI: As discussed previously, traditional Western concepts of national security, particularly those grounded in realism, have shaped global security paradigms. Scholars argue that national security, as a concept, emerged primarily from Western perspectives, initially explaining US foreign policy^{vi}. According to Buzan and Hansen^{vii}, these Western views framed security as a response to perceived threats from hostile adversaries, establishing the state as the primary security provider and relying heavily on self-help strategies^{viii}. The Copenhagen School's framework, while recognizing various security sectors beyond the military, still marginalizes women's roles as active contributors to security^{ix}. Feminists argue that this exclusion reflects a deeper issue within Western-centric security paradigms, which consistently overlook the gendered dimensions of security and the potential roles women can play in governance and conflict resolution. The relevance of these feminist critiques becomes evident when applied to the KRI. The current security framework, rooted in Western traditions, inadequately addresses regional political conflicts, such as those between the KDP and PUK, which have significant implications for national stability. A feminist security approach advocates for more inclusive governance structures, where increased women's participation in decision-making processes can enhance the region's ability to respond to internal threats and improve political security.

Redefining the Political Sector Framework in the KRI and Co-Presidency System:

The region's existing political and strategic framework must be reevaluated and adapted to meet the evolving security and governance needs of its population. As traditional notions of political security come under increasing strain, there is an urgent need to redefine the policy framework, incorporating both contemporary feminist and Eastern perspectives to address emerging threats. Advocates argue that this system



would promote a more inclusive and diverse decision-making[^] process, enhancing national security by ensuring that women have a more active leadership role. However, this approach is not without its critics. Some writers argue that the co-presidency system has, in practice, contributed to increased bureaucracy and slowed decision-making processes. Moreover, they contend that “women in co-presidency roles often hold symbolic positions, with real authority remaining concentrated with male counterparts”^{^1}. This has led to concerns that the system merely perpetuates patriarchal structures, with women’s involvement lacking real political influence. This critique highlights the broader issue of tokenism, where women may be placed in leadership roles due to quota systems rather than based on merit and active engagement. The feminist perspective emphasizes the importance of breaking away from symbolic representation and ensuring that women’s voices are integral to decision-making processes.

The Lack of Women’s Representation in the Political Sector Undermines the KRI’s National Security: Buzan’s view that political threats stem from the granting or withholding of legitimacy, support, or acknowledgment is critiqued by feminist scholars for overlooking women's contributions^{^r}. They argue that comprehensive security is impossible without women's active involvement. Feminist critics highlight that security discussions have historically been dominated by men, with women marginalized due to their limited representation in decision-making centers^{^r}. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), women remain underrepresented in key political, military, and economic roles. For example, women have not held positions such as deputies, president, prime minister, or In the current parliamentary structure, no women hold chairmanship or deputy roles in committees related to important positions^{^t}. Additionally, ministries like the Peshmerga, Interior, and Finance are predominantly led by men, and of the 20 ministers in the ninth cabinet, only three are women^{^o}.

Feminist security studies argue that women's participation in leadership and decision-making is crucial for justice, equality, effective governance, and national security. It is critical to restore feminist spaces within political movements and parties to enable women to collaborate and develop agendas focused on shared interests^{^1}.



However, in the KRI, adopting a feminist perspective and addressing patriarchal institutional structures can be challenging. These efforts may lead to political marginalization or exacerbate divisions among women, particularly due to political alliances. The underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles not only raises issues of equality but also affects national security. Increasing women's presence would bring diverse perspectives and diplomatic strategies, leading to a more comprehensive approach to security, including military, economic, and political aspects. Despite some women holding lower authority positions, the KRI's power structure remains male-dominated, with key decisions made by men. This marginalization undermines security, as seen during the 2016 KRI referendum, which excluded women from major decisions. Additionally, the cultural expectation that confines women to traditional roles as homemakers rather than professionals contributes to their political underrepresentation. While some women in KRG are active in public life, their lack of support compared to men limits their influence and opportunities^{AV}.

Political Party's Male Dominance and Its Effects on National Security

The dominance of the two main political parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has significantly hindered the effectiveness of the government, particularly in terms of gender equality. The lack of female representation across most sectors has led to male dominance and increased control within key institutions^{AA}. Women in the region often avoid political and decision-making roles, instead focusing on their social lives. This reluctance is partly due to the absence of protective laws against sexual harassment in workplaces, especially for women in senior positions. The judiciary, heavily influenced by members of the ruling parties (KDP and PUK), struggles to address these issues, undermining its independence and ability to address sexual harassment cases. As a result, women refrain from filing complaints, continuing their marginalization in decision-making roles, which threatens national security by limiting diverse perspectives in governance. The fear of harassment further discourages women from participating in leadership.

The hegemony of political parties in the KRI undermines national security by prioritizing party interests over national needs. This control, evident in key decision-making bodies, was notably harmful during the 2017 referendum. Driven by party



agendas, the referendum led to significant political and economic fallout for Kurdistan, including the occupation of parts of the region and suffering for its citizens^{٨٩}. Also, ongoing disputes between the KDP and PUK have disrupted the political security of the KRI. The Kurdistan Parliamentary Election Law No. 5 of 1998, amended by Law No. 1 of 1992, stipulates a four-year term for parliament, but political conflicts have caused multiple extensions, with over six delays and extensions recorded (Law No. 1 of 1995, Article 1; Law No. 2 of 1996, Article 1; Law No. 2 of 1998, Article 1; Law No. 19 of 2013, Article 1; Law No. 12 of 2022, Article 1)^{٩٠}. Although the Kurdistan Parliamentary Election Law mandates a four-year term, delaying the formation of a new KRG. The 2018 elections saw voter disillusionment, low turnout, and allegations of fraud, worsening the political stalemate and internal security risks^{٩١}. Also, political distrust between parties has worsened economic conditions and reduced citizen participation in elections. Women, in particular, suffer economically, with only 11% participating in the labor force compared to 89% of men^{٩٢}. This economic disparity affects women's political engagement and voting behavior, further weakening the region's political stability^{٩٣}.

Political instability in the KRI, with extended parliamentary terms and party conflicts, has undermined governance and affected citizens' livelihoods. This instability has raised concerns about the effectiveness of gender quotas, questioning whether female representatives genuinely reflect voter support or merely fulfill quota requirements. Although the parliamentary term is set for four years^{٩٤}, it was extended by two years due to political conflicts, disrupting the political process and democracy. Male-dominated decision-making centers control election schedules, and the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court (IFSC) declared the 2018-2022 parliamentary session illegitimate^{٩٥}. This decision could lead to declining living standards, especially with Baghdad's failure to pay salaries, affecting Kurdish people and salaried workers^{٩٦}. The instability threatens political security and undermines government legitimacy, fostering distrust among citizens.

Feminist Leadership Can Enhance Political Security in the KRI

The KRI has often overlooked international guidelines, such as Security Council Resolution 1325^{٩٧}, which calls for gender inclusivity in negotiations. Key discussions,



including the 2016 referendum and the 2023 oil management agreement between Erbil and Baghdad, lacked female representation^{٩٨}. Expanding women's roles in these negotiations is crucial for more effective peacebuilding and conflict prevention, as their involvement leads to more informed and comprehensive outcomes^{٩٩}. With over 3 million women in the KRI^{١٠٠}, integrating their perspectives is vital for political security. Female leaders, such as Rewas Fayaq, Speaker of Parliament for the 5th term, demonstrate the positive impact women can have in decision-making roles. Fayaq's decision to end the parliament's session after its term expired illustrates her influence. However, female leaders face significant obstacles, including political conflicts. As Fayaq explained, political party disputes in 2020 halted parliamentary meetings for five months: "As the Speaker of Parliament, I was affected by the political crisis in the Kurdistan Parliament"^{١٠١}. Addressing these challenges is key to empowering women and enhancing their leadership effectiveness. While women in decision-making roles can strengthen political security, concerns persist about whether their presence truly reflects political participation or is merely the result of quota systems^{١٠٢}. This raises questions about their effectiveness in parliament, which impacts national security. The Gendered Security approach emphasizes the importance of political security for national stability. Sahle-Work Zewde stated, "If there is no political security, there is no women's security"^{١٠٣}. In the KRI, political conflicts, particularly between the KDP and PUK, have significant effects, with women and children often bearing the brunt of instability. For instance, during the 2013-2018 term, political conflicts led to the KDP preventing the head of parliament from traveling to Erbil in 2016 to attend parliamentary sessions at the Prde checkpoint^{١٠٤}.

1.5 Conclusion and Findings

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of political security in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) through a feminist security lens, highlighting critical areas that impact both political stability and governance. A key finding is that persistent disputes between political parties, particularly the KDP and PUK, significantly threaten the region's political stability. These disputes disrupt the political landscape, undermine governmental legitimacy, and exacerbate vulnerabilities related to national security. The postponement of parliamentary elections and the dysfunction within government



institutions are clear examples of how party interests obstruct democratic governance and weaken the region's political security. Also, it identifies structural flaws in the KRI government, with political party conflicts contributing to instability, reducing public trust, and increasing the region's susceptibility to internal dissent and external threats. Political disputes, such as those over the 2017 referendum, highlight how party interests can overshadow national priorities, resulting in both political and economic repercussions for the KRI. From a feminist security perspective, the study underscores the critical role of women in politics and their potential to enhance national security. Women's participation in key political events, such as the referendum, and their roles in the KRG and KRI Parliament illustrate their significant impact on regional political and security dynamics. However, the analysis also highlights the lack of women's representation in crucial decision-making processes, especially in peacebuilding and political negotiations. Despite the contributions of women leaders systemic barriers persist.

The findings emphasize that addressing political disputes and structural inefficiencies is essential for restoring stability and strengthening national security in the KRI. A more inclusive political process—one that actively engages women in decision-making and negotiations—would significantly improve the region's political security. Moreover, implementing structural reforms, promoting political cohesion, and rebuilding public confidence through inclusive discourse and democratic reforms are crucial. This study contributes to the thesis by demonstrating how feminist security critiques enhance our understanding of political security in the KRI. It underscores the importance of gender dynamics in shaping political and security outcomes, and recommends measures such as increasing women's representation in political roles, reforming party practices to reduce conflict, and enhancing governmental transparency and legitimacy. Empowering women and integrating their perspectives can significantly improve the region's political stability and overall security

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