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From Zero-Min to Zero-Max:

Enhancing Kurdish Rights and Reducing Regional Development Gaps Through Multistate Coordination

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From Zero-Min to Zero-Max: Enhancing Kurdish Rights and Reducing Regional Development Gaps Through Multistate Coordination

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Abstract

Kurds are an important and viable ethnic group with historic roots and presence in four Middle Eastern countries: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The relations between the central governments of these countries and the Kurds have often been contentious and occasionally violent. In this article, I call for implementing two policy moves by these four countries regarding their respective Kurdish minorities. First, while remaining fully committed to the prevention of separatism, they should enhance the cultural and political rights of the Kurds and reduce the development gap of the predominantly Kurdish regions relative to the national average. Currently, this gap is visible in all countries other than Iraq. Second, the initiative to enhance the group rights of the Kurds and improve their economic conditions can be better realized if these countries coordinate their policy reforms in the framework of a regional agreement. The study analyzes the benefit of this coordination in the context of the two-player game model.

Introduction

In the contemporary Middle East, the Kurds live in four countries: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The exact size of their total population is unknown, but most studies estimate it between 25 and 35 million in total, with the largest concentration in Turkey, followed by Iran. Kurds are one of the oldest ethnic groups in West Asia, with a historical presence in southeast Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau, and Mesopotamia, which dates back more than three thousand years. Throughout most of this long history, however, the Kurds lived as minorities in states with predominantly Arab, Iranian, or Turkish majorities.

The ethnic tension between Kurds and the above countries' central governments remains unresolved. The aspirations of Kurds continue to collide with the concerns of these states about separatism and their desire to assimilate the ethnic minorities into their national culture and official language. This article introduces and analyzes two policy proposals with respect to the Kurdish population of the Middle East. First, it proposes a new approach called "Zero-Max" to the rights and responsibilities of ethnic minorities, particularly the Kurds, in the region. This approach calls for combining a policy of zero tolerance for separatism with a maximalist commitment to the elimination of cultural, economic, and political discrimination against the Kurds. Second, it argues that the policies pursued by each state in this new ZERO-MAX approach will be more effective and feasible if these states adopt the ZERO-MAX approach jointly and coordinate their policies toward their respective Kurdish minorities. In the analytical section of the article the benefits of these joint proposals will be analyzed.

The remaining segments of this article are organized as follows. The historical status of Kurds before and after World War One will be briefly discussed in section one. Section two will provide an overview of the relative economic underdevelopment of the Kurdish region, relative to the national average, in each host country. Section three will present the conceptual and theoretical framework of the two proposals; followed by an analysis of these proposals in section four.

1- Status of Kurds in the Middle East Before and After the First World War

Before the rise of nationalism in the Middle East in the late 19th century, the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, in which the Kurdish people resided, were governed as multi-ethnic empires. These empires did little to assimilate the Kurds into the dominant ethnicities' culture or language. Instead, they expected political submission, loyalty, taxes, and soldiers (when needed) from the Kurds, similar to other ethnic minorities. Under each empire, the Kurds initiated occasional uprisings with nationalist aspirations, which were suppressed by force.

Two factors intensified the tensions between the Kurdish tribes and the host countries in the 19th century. First, the Western colonial and semi-colonial domination of West Asia diminished the power and control of the Ottoman and Iranian empires in peripheral and borderland areas, where Kurds were residing. This created some space for Kurds to demand more autonomy. The British Empire, for example, had significant influence over the southern regions of Iran and routinely supported the ethnic minorities to undermine the authority of the central government. In the final decades of the Qajar dynasty (1860s

to 1925), the central government had minimal control over most territories because of Russian dominance in the North and British dominance in the south. Similarly, British and French interference weakened the Ottoman Empire's effective control over most Arab lands, such as Iraq and Syria.

The status of Kurds has had its unique trajectory in each country since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. There are, however, some similarities. Tension and occasional ethnic violence are a common occurrence in the interaction between the Kurds and the central government. Another similarity in the Kurdish experience is that the relative economic underdevelopment, lack of job opportunities, the high risk of sporadic conflict, and socioeconomic instability have forced many Kurds to migrate from their hometowns to other large cities in their host countries. Some have also moved involuntarily because of displacement policies or forced evacuations during the armed struggles between the state and Kurdish fighters.¹ Consequently, the number of Kurds living in Istanbul is larger than in any other city, most predominantly in the Kurdish cities in the southeast region of Turkey. Similarly, there are large concentrations of Kurds in Baghdad, Tehran, and Damascus.

The third common Kurdish experience is that the ethnic tensions have led to a gap in economic development between the predominantly Kurdish provinces and the national average for other provinces, which demonstrates the underdevelopment of the regions where Kurds predominantly live. This is an ongoing situation in Iran and Turkey, and it also applied to Iraq and Syria before the Kurdish areas of these countries gained some degree of autonomy because of civil war and external intervention.

The Kurdish region of Iraq has enjoyed autonomy and self-governance after the U.S. invasion of that country in 2003, which resulted in a new political arrangement among the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish populations under a new constitution.² The Kurdish region of Syria has also enjoyed de facto self-governance ever since the 2011 civil war, but without an agreement with the Assad regime's central government. The unexpected regime change that occurred in November 2024, however, can end this situation and increase the new Syrian government's control over the Kurdish region. While no economic development and economic performance data are available for the Kurdish region of Syria, the indicators for Iraq show that the Kurdish region of that country has overcome its development gap with the rest of Iraq. It has achieved a higher score than the national average³ on some indicators.

¹ In 1980 and 1990s the Iraqi government destroyed many Kurdish villages, which forced thousands of Kurds into internal migration to Baghdad, Mosul and other large cities (Ozeltin, et. al. 2019). The Kurdish population of Turkey also experienced a significant amount of voluntary and involuntary migration out of southeast Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s (Bozkurt, 2024). For an overview of internal migration and resettlement of Kurds in Iran see (Vali, 2011).

² For an overview of power sharing under Iraq's post-2003 constitution see (Shakir 2024).

³ For more details see Snow-Rackley, Elijah T., and Hassan Rahmanian. "The Political Economy of Autonomy: A Comparative Analysis of the State of Iraq and the Federal Region of Iraqi Kurdistan." (2017).

Before the recent developments in Syria, the core argument of this article (which will be presented in section 3) was relevant for Iran and Türkiye, in which the central government can fully assert its authority and political control over the Kurdish regions. Moving forward, it is likely to be relevant for Syria as well, because of the gradual enhancement of the Syrian government's sovereignty over the Kurdish region of that country. The balance of power between the central government and the Kurdish population in Iran, Türkiye, and possibly in the new Syria is such that the cultural and political rights of Kurds (and other ethnic minorities) remain at the discretion of the state. A new relevant development is the peace agreement between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which put an end to the armed struggle of the PKK. With the voluntary dissolution of the PKK, the Kurds have agreed to limit their activities to non-violent political activities within the existing constitution and political framework of Türkiye.

There are two dimensions to the aspirations of the Kurds in all four countries: a) demand for autonomy and creation of an independent Kurdish state; b) demand for ethnic rights, which include cultural rights, language rights, and equal political rights at the individual level. The response of the central governments to these aspirations is demonstrated in Table 1.

	Turkey	Iran	Iraq	Syria
A1) Creation of an Independent State	No	No	No	No
A2) Regional Autonomy	No	No	Yes (External protection)	Yes (External protection)
B1) Cultural rights: Language, education and media	Partial, Occasional	Partial, fragile	Yes (Under External protection)	Yes (Under External Protection)
B2) Equal access to public sector resources	No	No	Yes (Profit sharing arrangement with Baghdad)	Not applicable
B3) Political Participation	Vote: Yes, Appointments: limited	Vote: Yes, Appointments: Limited	Yes (Power Sharing)	Not applicable

As demonstrated in Table 1, the central governments in all four countries have consistently opposed and suppressed any demands for separatism and the creation of a Kurdish state. Iran and Türkiye have also successfully suppressed all demands for regional autonomy. Still, the weakness of the central government in Iraq after 2003 and in Syria after 2011 has facilitated some degree of Kurdish independence in these countries.

The culture and language policies of Iran and Türkiye toward the Kurds have varied over time. Still, both countries have adopted conservative policies and enforced a comprehensive cultural assimilation policy on minorities, including the Kurds, as part of their nation-building and cultural homogenization process around a single and common national identity. While, in Türkiye, some restrictions were reinforced in 1980 and even further in 1983, the legal limits on Kurdish literature and cultural activities were lifted in 1991.

After 2002, when the AKP government came to power, it offered several cultural and social rights to Kurds on a gradual basis. These initiatives were partly motivated by Türkiye's desire to meet the European Union's human rights requirements for accession. The Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) initiated limited (a few hours a week) radio and television programs in Kurdish in 2004, and a full-time TV channel (TRT-Kurdi) was launched in 2009 (Derince, 2013). These improvements were noticeable, but they were inconsistent and remained vulnerable to the ongoing tension between the PKK and the Turkish State.

Iran has historically shown more tolerance for the expression of Kurdish identity and Kurdish culture, in comparison to Türkiye. At the same time, it has resorted to violent suppression of Kurdish separatist movements⁴. The Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979) adopted cultural assimilation programs similar to those of Türkiye. Then, a more tolerant approach to ethnic cultures was adopted after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In both countries, some radio and television programs are available in Kurdish, but these programs are carefully monitored to prevent any promotion of ethnic political activism or separatism. These countries have also adopted a centralized and unitary educational system in which all subjects are taught in the national language.

While there is no formal ethnic discrimination in the legal systems of Iran and Türkiye, political and security considerations commonly influence opportunities for civil service employment, political appointments, and industrial investment in both countries⁵. The central government appoints the provincial governors in the Kurdish region of Iran, often non-Kurds⁶. In Türkiye, the entry-level and mid-level civil servant positions are open to Kurds, but promotion to key high-level positions faces considerable scrutiny and restrictions (Ahmed, 2022). The candidates for mayor and city council members are carefully vetted in Iran to reject candidates who might have separatist tendencies. In Türkiye, the political candidates are not subject to political screening before elections. Still, the central government has in recent years frequently annulled the local election results and removed elected officials who are perceived as sympathetic to the PKK.

The higher political and security risk levels in Kurdish regions have hurt both public and private investment. As a result, the industrial and manufacturing activity level in the Kurdish areas is below the national average and contributes to the lower per capita income levels.

Overall, the reaction of the state to Kurdish ethnic aspirations in Iran and Türkiye, after World War I, can be analyzed in two dimensions: a) the state response to demands for independence and autonomy, and b) the state response to demands for cultural, political, and economic rights. In our conceptual analysis in this section, the response in each dimension can range from zero to maximum accommodation, as shown in Table 2. Hence, a two-dimensional indicator can demonstrate a state's response to these two

⁴ Articles 15 and 19 of Iran's constitution recognize the language and cultural rights of Kurds and other ethnic minorities. Türkiye's constitution does not recognize any language other than Turkish. For more details see Hassaniyan (2024).

⁵ For evidence of labor market discrimination against Kurds in Iran see (Ale Ahmad 2024), and for Türkiye see (Balkan and Cilasun 2018).

⁶ For an analysis on the ethnicity of government officials in Iran see (Rasanah, 2017).

types of demands. For example, “Zero-Min” can be interpreted as “Zero” tolerance for autonomy and independence demands, plus “Minimum” toleration of Ethnic rights. Similarly, “Min-Max” would mean minimum tolerance for autonomy and maximum tolerance for ethnic rights.

As indicated in Table 2, all four host states have shown zero tolerance for separatism (creation of an independent Kurdish state). The Turkish state was at war with the PKK from the 1980s until 2024, and Iran has periodically used force against Kurdish separatist groups such as PJAK (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê* - Kurdistan Free Life Party)⁷. The zero tolerance for separatism is in line with the historic behavior of the ethnic majority in both advanced and developing countries.⁸

	Zero	Min.	Moderate	Max.
Autonomy, Independence	Iran, Turkey, Syria*, Iraq*			
Ethnic Rights: Cultural		Turkey	Iran, Iraq*, Syria*	
Ethnic Rights: Political		Iraq*, Syria*	Turkey, Iran	
Ethnic Rights: Language		Iran, Turkey, Iraq*, Syria*		
	*Iraq before 2003 and Syria before 2011			

Table 2 identifies three types of ethnic rights, and as discussed earlier, Iran and Türkiye are currently granting these freedoms at minimal or moderate levels. There was, for example, no Kurdish radio and television programming in Türkiye before 2009. Still, a more tolerant policy since that date has resulted in the operation of several Kurdish language stations, including the TRT/Kurdi, which is operated by the state-owned Türkiye Radio and Television Corporation (*Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu*). Iran has also adopted a similar policy, and the official radio and television corporation (IRIB) offers several TV programs in Kurdish, such as the IRIB/Kurdistan and Sahar TV.

In the category of ethnic political rights, the Kurds enjoy political rights as individual citizens, which include the right to vote and the right to compete in elections as candidates. They also enjoy the same rights as other citizens for participation in non-government organizations (NGOs) and political parties, so long as these organizations are non-ethnic.⁹ As a result, the level of political rights for Kurds is categorized as

⁷ See: <https://mappingmilitants.org/mmp-group/kurdistan-free-life-party>

⁸ The cases in which the state, representing the dominant majority, voluntarily concedes autonomy or independence to an ethnic minority are rare. This rarity in the case of Latin American states is demonstrated by Alberti and Mattiace (2023).

⁹ None of the four countries has ever tolerated the formation of pro-Kurdish political parties. In Türkiye some parties such as the People’s Democratic party (HDP) have a heavy Kurdish participation and

moderate in Table 2, which in this context reflects the gap between the political rights of the Kurdish citizens versus the ethnic-majority citizens of the host country.

advocate for ethnic rights of Kurds and other minorities. The Turkish state often imposes severe legal restrictions on these ethnic parties and arrests some of their leaders (Gunes and Lowe, 2015). In Iran several pro-Kurdish political parties, such as the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), have emerged in the past five decades, but the state regards them as illegal, and membership will result in severe punishment (Yildiz, 2007).

2 Economic Development Gap of Kurdish regions

One of the adverse consequences of the ethnic tensions between the Kurds and Central governments in the Middle Eastern countries is that it weakens the economic conditions of the Kurdish regions and leads to their relative underdevelopment. Several economic and development indicators for Iran, Iraq and Türkiye are available at the provincial level, allowing us to compare the conditions of predominantly Kurdish provinces with other provinces in each country. The available data shows that the Kurdish provinces in Iran and Turkey have relatively lower per-capita income and human development index value (HDI) compared to the national average. In Iraq, the opposite is true, and the autonomous Kurdistan region enjoys higher development and economic prosperity.

Türkiye: The province-level 2023 income per capita data (Figure 1) show a significant gap between Kurdish provinces clustered in the southeastern region and the prosperous provinces in the western region. As demonstrated in this figure, the per capita income gap between most Kurdish provinces and prosperous western provinces) exceeds 30%. We observe a similar gap for the Human Development Index (HDI) in Figure 2. The Turkish government launched a significant development project called the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) in the late 1970s, with considerable expansion in the 1980s. This project has had substantial positive results, which were partly offset by the decades-long war between the state and the PKK in these regions.

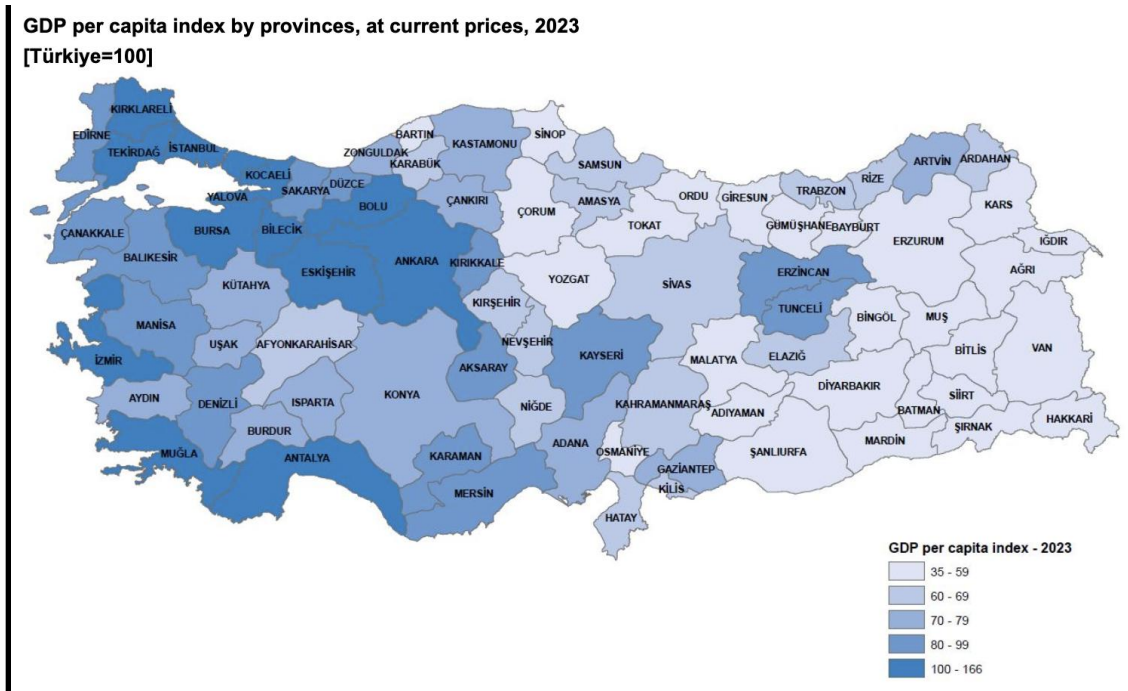


Figure 1, Source TURKSTAT Data portal: <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Gross-Domestic-Product-by-Provinces-2023-53575&dil=2> (The predominantly Kurdish provinces are located in the southeast region of Turkey. They are: Diyarbakır, Şırnak, Hakkâri, Batman, Siirt, Mardin, Bitlis, Van. There are also several provinces with a large Kurdish population, which does not exceed 50%: Ağrı, Muş, Bingöl, Elazığ, Tunceli, Adıyaman, Urfa (Şanlıurfa), and Malatya.

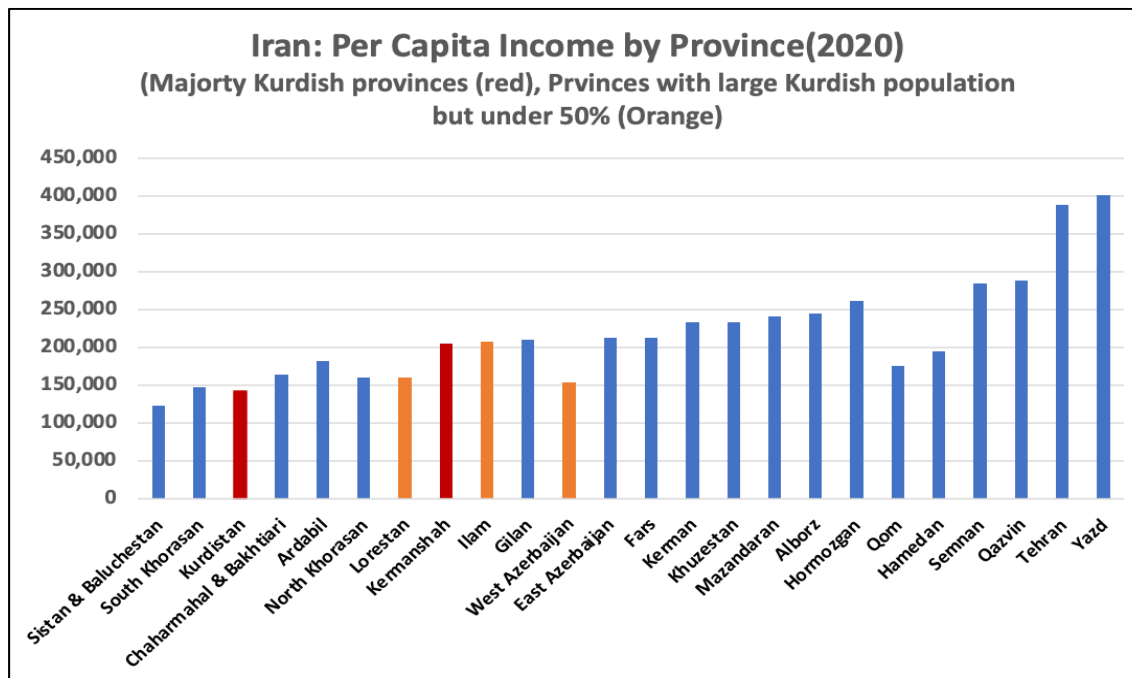


Figure 3, Source of data: Iran Statistical Center, reported in Iran Open Data;
https://iranopendata.org/en/dataset/ioid-02517-per-capita-gdp-of-the-province---one-thousand-rials-per-person/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

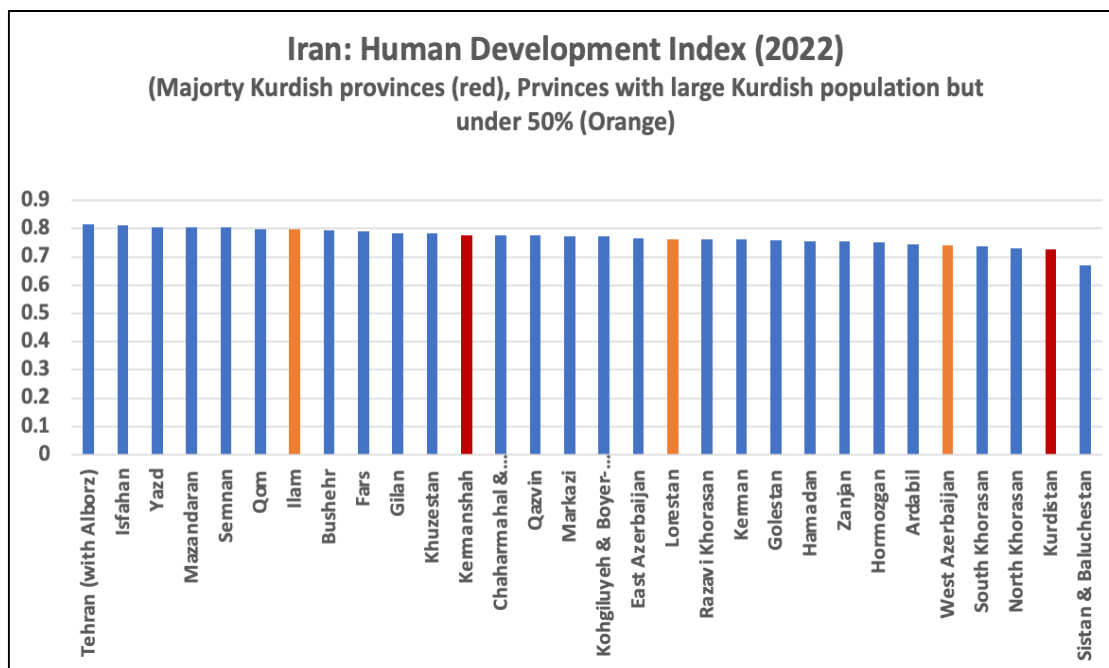


Figure 4, Source of data: Global Data Lab, subnational data (2022);
<https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/table/2022/shdi+shdi+shdi/IRN/>

Iraq: Unlike Iran and Türkiye, Iraq's Kurdish Region enjoys more economic prosperity than the rest of the country, as demonstrated in figures 5 and 6. The central government of Iraq does not release data on per capita income at the provincial level, but some estimates are available from other sources. As demonstrated in Figure 5, the per capita gross national income (GNI)¹⁰ in predominantly Kurdish regions (notably the central Kurdish provinces that the Kurdistan regional government governs) is higher than in other provinces of Iran. These provinces also enjoy higher scores on the Human Development Index (Figure 6).

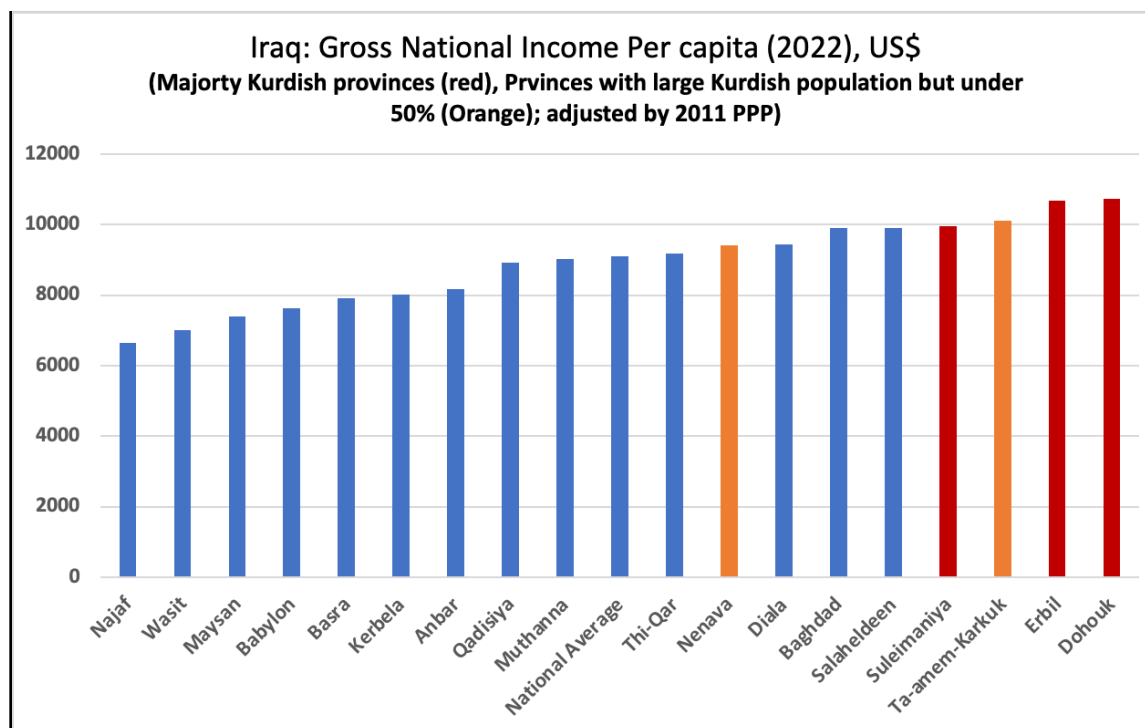


Figure 5, Source of data: Global Data Lab (2022), https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/table/lqnic/IRQ/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁰ GNI measures the income of the residents of each province from both domestic and foreign sources.

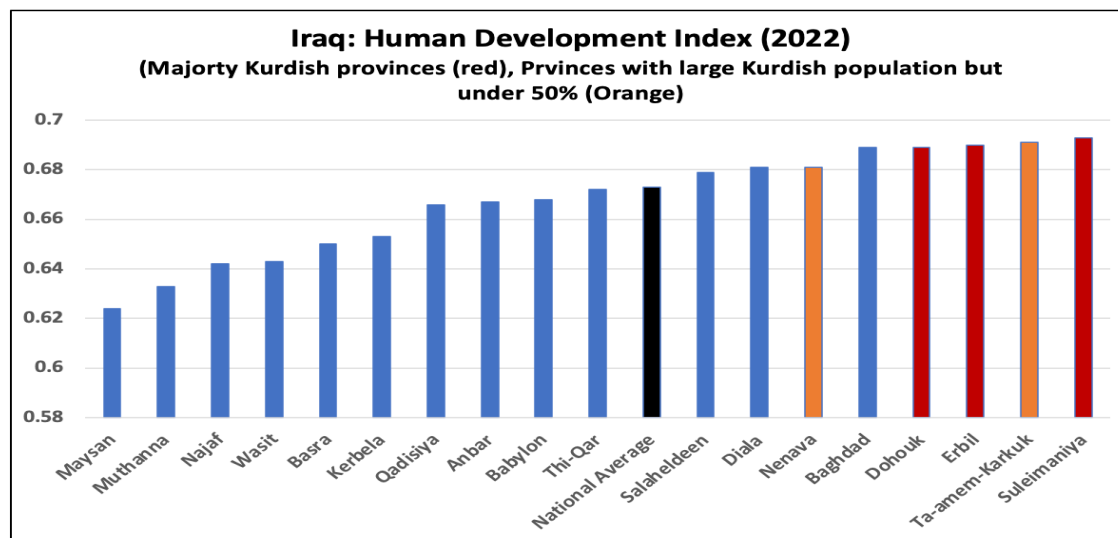


Figure 6, Source of data: Global Data Lab (2022), <https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/table/shdi/IRQ/?levels=1+4&years=2022&interpolation=0&extrapolation=0>

3 The vision: From Zero-Min to Coordinated Zero-Max

Considering the current ethnic relations between the central governments and the Kurds in Iran and Türkiye (and potentially Syria), this article offers two proposals about minority rights for the Kurds. First, the state in both countries is strong enough to suppress separatist tendencies while enhancing the ethnic rights of the Kurds. In other words, both countries can transition from a Zero-Min equilibrium to a Zero-Max equilibrium without worrying that such a move will increase the risk of insurgency and separatism. On the contrary, the state might reduce separatist tendencies by enhancing the Kurds' cultural, economic, and political rights. This positive effect has been demonstrated in many empirical studies on the status of ethnic minorities in various countries (Cedeman et. al. 2010; Stewart 2008; Kymlicka 1995). Second, both states will be more successful in enhancing Kurdish rights and reducing their economic development gap if they coordinate their policies. I refer to the combination of these two policies as the Coordinated Zero-Max Equilibrium.

Coordinated Zero-Max approach: The participating countries agree to support each other on two types of activities. First, they agree to help each other to prevent ethnic separatism and maintain territorial integrity (the Zero concept). Accordingly, they will not support Kurdish insurgency in each other's territory.¹¹ Second, they agree to coordinate

¹¹ On several occasions Iran and Türkiye have accused each other of supporting the Kurdish insurgency in their territory. There is also documented evidence that Iran and Iraq supported Kurdish insurgency against each other during periods of tension and conflict. Iran supported the Kurds of Iraq against Saddam Hussein's regime during the Iran-Iraq war. Iran supported the Kurdish insurgency against the

their programs to enhance the Kurds' cultural, political, and economic conditions (the Max concept). For example, suppose one country is replacing appointed governors with opportunities to elect governors through provincial elections. In that case, the two countries can discuss this policy to see if the second country can also offer a similar concession to its Kurdish population.

Benefits of Coordination: The coordination of policies can have several positive benefits for the transition toward enhanced rights for the Kurds. Coordination among the states can help them overcome the fear that enhancement of ethnic rights will result in ethnic insurgency and political instability. To understand this benefit, we must look at the concerns and interests of the majority ethnic population in each country about ethnic minorities. The Turks of Türkiye, the Persians of Iran, and the Arabs of Iraq and Syria prioritize nationalism, territorial integrity, and a unified national identity. With the emergence of modern states in the Middle East, after World War I, the central governments (representing the majority ethnic group) have supported cultural homogenization (assimilation of the ethnic groups in the national culture), and promotion of the national language, as essential requirements for state building, and prevention of ethnic fragmentation.¹² Not surprisingly, these policies have resulted in ethnic grievances and demands for further rights.¹³ Despite these grievances, the states have reservations about the demands of any ethnic minority for cultural expression and political self-governance.

The second factor that has affected the perception of the state and majority population in these countries about ethnic rights is their concern about the intervention of external powers in support of minority aspirations and possible uprisings. This fear is rooted in the historical experience of Middle Eastern countries. On many occasions of conflict and high tensions between Middle Eastern countries and external powers such as Russia, the United Kingdom, and others, the ethnic minorities, particularly those residing in border regions of a country, have been armed and assisted by these powers to launch insurgencies against the central governments.¹⁴ Policy makers in Iran and Türkiye also point to how external support for Kurds in Iraq and Syria during periods of state weakness resulted in the creation of semi-autonomous Kurdish regions in these countries.

The third consideration that discourages these states from granting more rights to the Kurds is the fear of each other. The majority ethnic group and its representative political elite that controls the state in each country are often concerned that if it offers social and political concessions to Kurds unilaterally, or offers more concessions to Kurds than its neighbors, they might engage in opportunistic behavior and exploit these concessions to

central government in Iraq on several occasions. Similarly, there have been several occasions in recent history in which Iran and Türkiye have accused each other of provoking ethnic unrest.

¹² For a review of these cultural homogenization policies and their consequences in Iran and Türkiye see Vali (2011) and Yegen (1996) respectively.

¹³ The discontent among Kurds and other ethnic groups have led to periodic ethnic insurgencies such as the PKK campaign in Türkiye.

¹⁴ For detailed accounts of these external supports for ethnic insurgency in MENA see: (Gunter, 2011), (Kalyvas, 2013), and (Natali, 2005).

provoke Kurdish separatist insurgency and violence. This perception is rooted in the prevalence of rivalry and distrust in the bilateral relations of Iran, Türkiye and the Arab world toward each other.

Hence, the lack of trust and coordination among the countries with Kurdish populations reduces their incentives to increase the ethnic rights of Kurds unilaterally. In social sciences this type of behavior can be analyzed with the help of the two-player game theory models. In these models two individuals or countries must choose between two options. In the context of our analysis, Iran and Türkiye are the two players. Each country's options are either to increase the rights of the Kurdish minority or maintain them at a low level. They operate in an environment in which, the outcome of their choices (the costs and benefits of each option,) will depend on the choice of the other player. Table 3 demonstrates this two-player game model, which helps us analyze the interactions of Iran and Türkiye as they decide the rights they can offer to their respective Kurdish minority. Each country can select between two policies: the low and high levels of ethnic rights (referred to as "Limited Rights" and "Enhanced Rights").

The pair of numbers in each cell represent the payoff (the net benefit) of the policies that they have selected. In this model the absolute value of numbers is not important and what matters is the difference between them, which is used for comparison. Cell A, for example, represents the status quo of the "Limited Rights" for Kurds in both countries and benefits for both countries is set at zero. In each cell the first number shows the benefit for Iran (which is considered the horizontal player,) and the second number shows the benefit for Türkiye (the vertical player). Since the benefit of these two policy choices for each country will depend on the behavior of the other country, each country will select its strategy based on how it anticipates the other country to behave. We assume they are both initially in the Zero-Min position identified by cell A. We will use this as the base stage of our analysis and set the payoff to the ruling majority in both countries at zero, which is shown as the pair (0, 0) in Table 3-A and Table 3-B.

Table 3: Perception of the Ruling Majority on Ethnic Rights under High and Low Trust Scenarios			
Table 3-A: Low Mutual Trust Scenario			
		Türkiye	
		Limited rights	Enhanced Right
Iran	Limited Rights	A: (0 , 0)	B: (1 , -2)
	Enhanced Rights	C: (-2 , 1)	D: (1 , 1)
Table 3-B: High Mutual Trust Scenario			
		Türkiye	
		Limited rights	Enhanced Right
Iran	Limited Rights	A: (0 , 0)	B: (1 , -1)
	Enhanced Rights	C: (-1 , 1)	D: (2 , 2)
*The pair of numbers in each cell represent the payoff of the pair of ethnic policies to Iran (left number) and Turkey (right number)			

In tables 3-A and 3-B, we analyze the behavior of Iran and Türkiye under two scenarios. Panel A shows the payoff table when the level of trust between the two countries is low, which arises when there is no consultation and coordination between them. Each country is aware that if it enhances the rights of Kurds and the other country adopts the same policy, it will be better off. This outcome can be achieved through coordination between the two countries so that they both transition from “Limited Rights” or “Enhanced Rights”, and it is demonstrated in cell D. Transition from cell A (which represents the Zero-Min condition) to cell D (representing the Zero-Max condition) will increase each country’s payoff. In the low mutual trust scenario (Table 3-A), this transition will increase the expected payoff for both countries by a small amount from zero to 0.5. This means that because of a lack of trust, each country discounts the benefits of enhancing ethnic rights. In the high mutual trust scenario (Table 3-B), which can be achieved through coordination and cooperation, this transition will increase the payoffs from zero to two for both countries.

In the low-trust scenario (without coordination), neither country is willing to adopt the “Enhanced Rights” policy. To see why this is the case, let’s consider Iran’s decision process. Iran asks what my best option would be if Türkiye selected the Limited Rights option. Iran’s payoff will be zero if it selects the Limited Rights option in this case, and it will be -2 if it selects the Enhanced Rights option. Similarly, if Türkiye selects the “Enhanced Rights” option, Iran will compare its payoffs in cell B, with a benefit of 1, and cell D, with a benefit of 0.5. In this case, Iran will select the Limited Rights option again. This means that due to a lack coordination with Türkiye, it is in Iran’s interest to select the Limited Rights option regardless of what Türkiye does. If we apply the same

reasoning to Türkiye's decision process, we will see that Türkiye will also select the "Limited-Rights" option. Hence, the expected outcome of this game in a low-trust (no coordination) environment is that both countries will choose the Limited-Rights policy.

Coordination and establishment of trust can change the outcome of this game, as demonstrated in Panel B of Table 3. As a result of coordination, the relative reward of the Enhanced-Rights strategy will increase for both countries. Under this scenario, if Iran believes that Türkiye will adopt the Enhanced Rights option, it will also select the Enhanced Rights option with a payoff of 2 (cell D), which is larger than what it will gain by choosing the Low Rights option (a payoff of 1 in cell B). Similarly, it will be advantageous for Türkiye to select the Enhanced Rights option if it believes Iran will do the same. Therefore, coordination and trust can facilitate the transition from Zero-Min (Limited Rights) to Zero-Max (Enhanced Rights) by increasing the willingness of both countries to offer more ethnic rights to Kurds.

4) Analysis

This analysis will focus on the second policy recommendation of section three, which calls for regional coordination to enhance ethnic rights for Kurds. Each country can move in the Zero-Max direction unilaterally, and a review of the ethnic policies in Iran and Türkiye points to a slow and gradual move. These reforms, however, are inconsistent, and even the moderate economic reforms are partially rolled back periodically. In Türkiye, for example, the state has offered and rolled back media rights to Kurds several times since 2002. Similarly, respect for the outcome of local elections (for mayor and city council members) has experienced ups and downs repeatedly. This lack of tangible and lasting progress is rooted in the distrust factors explained in the previous section.

These four countries (Iran and Türkiye, in particular) can partially overcome their fear of ethnic concessions to the Kurds if they can negotiate a common code of minority rights and adopt a coordinated implementation mechanism, which can generate trust. Iran, Iraq, and Türkiye (and at a later stage, a stable Syria) can coordinate their policies on several vital issues. First, they can agree that while all citizens must learn and use the national language, Kurds and other ethnicities will enjoy the right to learn and preserve their ethnic culture and language. Second, they can agree on the operations of Kurdish language media (Newspapers, radio, television, websites, etc.). Third, there can be coordination on political rights and political participation of Kurds in local and national government. This agreement can remove discrimination against Kurds in all elected and appointed public sector positions in all participating countries. Fourth, there can be regional coordination for the removal of social and economic discrimination against Kurds at the national level. This would imply a fair distribution of national resources, development funds, and government jobs, which would help reduce the development and income gap of the Kurds, with the ethnic majority in each country.

This type of regional coordination will make it easier for the majority ethnic group in each country to accept the concessions that they make to the Kurds. Furthermore, coordinated concessions have a better chance for success because the ethnic majority in each country would feel that the concessions that their government is making are not

one-sided and that their neighbors are also taking similar steps. Such a coordination will increase the likelihood that these concessions will move forward and reach a level that will substantially reduce the discrimination against the Kurds, and the development gap of the Kurdish region relative to the national average.

Several historical cases in other regions of the world demonstrate how multilateral coordination has contributed to the improvement of minority and ethnic rights. One of the oldest regional agreements on cross-border ethnic groups was signed between Norway and Sweden in 1751. The Lapp Codicil of 1751 agreement recognized the rights of the Saami people, who lived in both countries for crossing the border and remaining neutral in the times of war between the two countries. More recently a comprehensive agreement among Norway, Sweden, and Finland was negotiated in 2017, which calls for coordination and cooperation among three countries for enhancement of the rights of the Samsi people on a wide range of issues (Nilsen 2024).

Another more recent example is the recent steps taken by the eight member countries of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (OCTA). In August 2025 they approved a common ethnic rights policy called the Amazonian Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (MAPI), which calls for improving the socioeconomic status of the indigenous tribes in the Amazon region of all eight member countries. It also calls for active participation of indigenous tribes in governance OCTA.

MAPI introduces an innovative co-presidency model, with each OCTA member country represented by one government delegate and one indigenous delegate, ensuring parity and shared governance. (OCTA 2025)

In addition to OCTA there are also several other cases of regional coordination for protection of ethnic and indigenous rights that involve a smaller number of Latin American countries. The 1998 peace treaty between Peru and Ecuador, for example, included a plan for development of the border region, which included several policies for economic development and empowerment of the cross-border indigenous people (Martinetti 2018).

It should be noted that there have been several episodes of bilateral coordination among Iran, Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria ever since World War I, regarding Kurds. However, these can be categorized as security coordination against Kurdish insurgencies. In 1937, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Türkiye signed the Treaty of Saadabad, which included an article that called for military and security cooperation between Iran and Türkiye against Kurdish nationalist movements (Watt, 1962). Ever since, there have been several other security agreements between Iran and Türkiye against Kurdish insurgency, which involve intelligence sharing and the prevention of cross-border operations by Kurdish forces. Similarly, Türkiye has periodically signed bilateral agreements with Iraq and Syria to achieve the same objectives. A visible difference between these agreements and the Zero-Max Coordination proposal is that while Zero-Max calls for positive cooperation for the enhancement of Kurdish rights in combination with security cooperation against separatist insurgency, the previous agreements have focused only on the security cooperation against Kurds without any attention to their legitimate demands for social, economic, and political rights.

The successful coordination of these countries for improving the status of the Kurds can serve as a role model for addressing the status of other ethnicities that live in multiple countries. Iran and Pakistan both are home to large Baluch communities. The Baluchistan region in both countries suffers from poverty and economic underdevelopment, which has resulted in insurgency and occasional ethnic tensions. Similar to what has been proposed for the Kurds in this article, these two countries can reach a Coordinated Zero-Max agreement to coordinate their policies for improving the status of the Baluch population in their respective countries and bring peace and prosperity to their shared border regions.

Similarly, this proposal can apply to the status of cross-border ethnic minorities. The predominantly Shia Iran is home to a Sunni minority, while Saudi Arabia, which is predominantly Sunni has a Shia minority. Within the framework of a coordinated Zero-Max policy, Iran and Saudi Arabia can take coordinated steps to improve the status of their respective religious minorities.

5) Conclusion

Kurds are an important and viable ethnic group with historic roots and presence in four Middle Eastern countries: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye. The relations between the central governments of these countries and the Kurds have often been contentious and occasionally violent. In this article, I call for two policies by these four countries regarding their respective Kurdish minority. First, while remaining fully committed to the prevention of separatism, they should enhance the cultural and political rights of the Kurds and eliminate the development gap of the predominantly Kurdish regions relative to the national average. Currently, this gap is visible in all countries other than Iraq.

Second, I propose that the initiative to enhance the socio-cultural rights of the Kurds and improve their economic conditions can be better realized if these countries coordinate their policy reforms toward the Kurds with each other in the framework of a regional agreement. The study analyzes the benefit of this coordination in the framework of a two-player game model. The analysis argues that since one of the factors that prevents each country from empowering the Kurds is the lack of trust toward the other three countries, regional coordination can help each country overcome this distrust. There are two reasons for advocating regional coordination. First, it creates an atmosphere of equal sacrifice, and no country feels like it is offering more concessions to Kurds than its neighbors. Second, coordination alleviates the fear of each country that a rival neighbor might take advantage of these rights to promote separatism and ethnic insurgency among its Kurdish minority.

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