

Mapping Power: The Shifting De Facto Boundaries of Kurdish Control in Iraq and Syria, 2011–2023

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This paper examines the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Syrian Rojava from 2011 to 2023, focusing on the expansion, contraction and fragmentation of their de facto borders, and exploring the underlying driving forces and geopolitical implications after the Arab Awakening. By combining theories of cartographic politics with historical analysis, the paper traces the evolution of Kurdish boundaries since the First World War and examines territorial reconfigurations associated with the rise of the Islamic State (IS), the Syrian civil war, the vacuum of state authority in Iraq, and intervention by the United States, Russia, and Türkiye. It shows how Kurdish autonomous entities used counterterrorism cooperation to obtain external support and expand their territorial reach, and how declining support, containment by neighboring states, and internal political divisions led to the contraction and fragmentation of boundaries. The paper argues that the formation of the de facto Kurdish boundaries arose not solely from aspirations for national independence, but from the result of the combined effects of a vacuum in state power, the needs of counterterrorism, and strategic intervention by other states. Furthermore, the Kurdish question does not merely reflect the survival predicament of one ethnic group, but also the long-standing structural tensions among ethnic identity, state sovereignty and geopolitical strategy in the modern international order.

Keywords: cartographic politics, de facto boundaries, regional upheaval, Kurdish question, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Rojava

Introduction

The upheavals that swept the Middle East after 2011 changed the territorial reach of two Kurdish-led political entities in Iraq and Syria. After the Islamic State (IS) captured Mosul in 2014 and Iraqi government forces withdrew from much of the north, Kurdish force Peshmerga moved into Kirkuk and other disputed territories. They gained control of local oil resources, and accelerated the KRI's pursuit of greater autonomy. Yet less than a month after the 2017 independence referendum, Baghdad reestablished control over most of those territories, sharply contracting the de facto boundary of KRI (Ahram, 2019). In Syria, the partial withdrawal of government forces from Kurdish-populated areas in the north and northeast in July 2012 enabled the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed forces to establish an autonomous administration. With U.S. support in the

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campaign against IS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by the People's Protection Units (YPG), later expanded into large Arab-majority areas east of the Euphrates. Three Turkish cross-border operations between 2016 and 2019 then reduced and divided the territory under Kurdish-led control (Çevik, 2022; Tejel, 2021).

These territorial shifts involved non-state actors establishing effective administration within existing sovereign states. Existing scholarship has examined *de facto* state-building and party fragmentation in the KRI, the institutions and wartime development of Rojava, and the fluidity of Iraqi Kurdish *de facto* statehood in terms of the Erbil–Baghdad balance of power, internal fragmentation, strategies of international recognition, and changes in external support (Palani, 2023; Schmidinger, 2018; Stansfield, 2003). However, much of this work emphasizes either macro-level geopolitical patterns or micro-level case narratives. A meso-level account that connects a theory of boundary change to comparative evidence remains underdeveloped. Therefore, this article asks why Kurdish *de facto* boundaries expanded so quickly, yet could not be converted into stable, legally recognized, institutionalized boundaries. It also examines how those changes affected parent-state territorial governance, the security policies of neighboring states, and the regional order of sovereignty.

Critical cartography and critical geopolitics illuminate the power embedded in maps and spatial narratives, while border studies treat boundaries as institutional processes that must continually be demarcated, legitimated, and managed (Harley, 1989; Newman, 2006; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Paasi, 1998). Building on these insights, this article uses cartographic politics to connect representations of space with practices of territorial control. It examines how Kurdish political actors map and circulate territorial imaginaries, invoke constitutions, social contracts, and official discourse to legitimate their claims, and translate those claims into effective jurisdiction through military control and civil administration. These practices form a three-part analytical framework: mapping–claim legitimization–boundary control. Claim legitimization means using legal texts and political discourse to give a territorial claim normative form; it does not imply recognition under international law. The principal observation period is 2011–2023, with earlier developments included where necessary to explain contemporary change.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Critical Cartography: From Spatial Representation to Practices of Power

Conventional cartography treated the maps as mirrors of the world and mapmaking as a value-neutral scientific endeavor. Since the late 1980s, that premise has been challenged systematically. J. B. Harley argued that maps are shaped both by external power—states, empires and patrons; and by internal power exercised through cartographers' choices of selection, generalization, and hierarchy. Denis Wood and John Fels went further: maps do not merely describe an existing space; they actively participate in producing social realities such as property relations, jurisdiction, and administrative divisions (Harley, 1989; Wood & Fels, 1992).

Jeremy Crampton and John Krygier subsequently characterized critical cartography as the conjunction of theoretical critique and new mapping practices: it situates maps within specific power relations while examining how state institutions and other actors leverage new cartographic techniques to advance competing claims (Crampton & Krygier, 2006). This perspective is directly relevant to the Kurdish question. Maps of a national homeland, autonomous territories, or zones of control envisioned, produced, and circulated by Kurdish organizations are not neutral depictions of Kurdish territory. They are political interventions in territorial disputes. By the same token, official maps issued by Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye carry significant political stakes when they represent Kurdish-populated regions and therefore cannot serve as value-neutral benchmarks.

Cartographic Politics: From Fixed Territory to the Production of Spatial Order

Critical geopolitics extends the inquiry from maps themselves to the relationship between geographical knowledge and political space. David Harvey observes that space and time are “basic categories of human existence,” yet their meanings are socially produced rather than naturally given (1989). Gearóid Ó Tuathail understands geopolitics as a practice of writing space and emphasizes the relationship between geographical knowledge and state power (1996). John Agnew’s “territorial trap” identifies three geographical assumptions embedded in conventional international relations: states are fixed sovereign spaces, domestic and international realms are cleanly separated, and the state contains society (1994). These assumptions can make internationally recognized borders appear to be self-evident starting points for political analysis, thereby overlooking the process by which borders are formed and the spatial practices of non-state political actors.

Cartographic politics, as used here, is neither a fully unified school of theory nor a simple substitute for traditional geopolitics. It is an analytical perspective synthesized from critical cartography and critical geopolitics. Whereas traditional geopolitics is primarily concerned with how geographical conditions affect state strategy, cartographic politics asks how the spatial objects called “territory” and “boundary” are drawn and interpreted, which actors are authorized to make spatial claims, and how such claims are converted into jurisdictions that can be governed and defended. The sovereign state is therefore not the only unit of analysis. Kurdish political organizations and other actors capable of formulating and enforcing territorial claims are brought into focus as well. The focus shifts from boundaries taken as given to the conditions and practices through which actors represent a territorial extent, legitimate their claims to it, and transform it into effective jurisdiction.

Border Studies: Defining the de Facto Boundary and its Scope

Border studies provide an additional theoretical foundation for understanding this spatial competition. Anssi Paasi rejects the reduction of boundaries to fixed geographical lines. In his account, boundaries are both institutions and symbols, continually reproduced and transformed through social practices and cultural discourse (Paasi, 1998). David Newman likewise treats the boundary as an institution that requires ongoing maintenance. Beyond separating spaces, boundaries legitimize jurisdiction, acquire social meaning, and regulate the movement of people and resources (Newman, 2006). The existence of a boundary cannot therefore be inferred from a line on a map alone; it also depends on whether the relevant actors make that line operative in security, administration, and social life.

The term “de facto boundary” is related to, but distinct from, concepts such as “de facto state” and “quasi-state”. There are substantial terminological differences within the field of de facto state studies itself. Pål Kolstø argues that an unrecognized quasi-state ordinarily controls most of the territory it claims, seeks but has not obtained international recognition, and persists for a meaningful period (2006). Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava differ in international recognition, institutional autonomy, and their stated relationship to independence; neither satisfies these conditions at every point in time. This article therefore does not presuppose that they constitute full-fledged de facto states. Instead, it treats the de facto boundary as a separate, heuristic concept with which to compare how political entities of different legal status establish and modify effective jurisdictions.

A de facto boundary is defined here as the perimeter of an effective jurisdiction produced through relatively durable military control and civil administration, but which is not recognized as an international legal border. It is identified by three criteria. First, the effective jurisdiction and its outer boundary must be discernible. Second, control must possess some durability, rather than merely tracking a front line that shifts with a single battle. Third,

the controlled area must feature civil administration, rather than short-term military presence alone. A de facto boundary does not require international recognition or fully exclusive control in every domain, as Kurdish political entities may share or overlap jurisdiction with the parent-state government, foreign forces, or local organizations.

Mapping–Claim Legitimation–Boundary Control: Framework and Enabling Conditions

In Jordan Branch's study of maps and the formation of the modern sovereign state, he identifies a mutually constitutive relationship among representations of political space, conceptions of political authority, and authoritative political practices: maps reshape how actors understand authority, while new conceptions of authority are enacted through political practice and, in turn, stimulate further mapmaking (2014). This article adopts that relational insight without importing Branch's historical explanation wholesale. Applied to the Kurdish cases, the production of de facto boundaries can be analyzed through three analytical dimensions: mapping, claim legitimation, and boundary control.

Mapping operates at the level of spatial representation, comprising selection, representation, and circulation of a historical homeland, an autonomous region, or an area of actual control. Claim legitimation is not the confirmation of a legal right under international law but operates at the normative level, referring to the normative practice through which political actors use constitutions, social contracts, referendum documents, and official discourse to furnish mapped territories with political legitimacy and normative justification. Boundary control represents the practice of effective jurisdiction: deploying armed forces, operating checkpoints, organizing administration, providing public services, and managing resources and infrastructure to translate a spatial claim into a governable territorial reach.

The three dimensions interact without forming a fixed chronological sequence. Armed forces may establish control before a normative text exists, while legal claims may never be translated into control on the ground. A change in effective control may itself induce political actors to redraw maps and revise their legitimating discourse. The framework therefore distinguishes practices of boundary production; it does not assume a causal sequence in which mapping necessarily produces claim legitimation and claim legitimation necessarily produces boundary control.

To explain when the three dimensions converge or diverge, this article specifies four conditions: parent-state capacity, external support, international recognition environment, and internal political integration and governance capacity. Parent-state capacity shapes opportunities for territorial expansion and counteraction; external support relates to military and economic support; the international recognition constrains the conversion of de facto boundaries into legal arrangements; and internal integration and governance capacity influence how long an existing jurisdiction can endure. These conditions work together intricately rather than function independently, jointly shaping the expansion, maintenance, contraction, and institutionalization of de facto boundaries.

The Formation of Kurdish De Facto Boundaries and the Conditions for Expansion

Kurdish de facto boundaries emerged and changed through three major turning points. After the First World War, Kurdish territorial claims first appeared in international treaties and maps. After 1991, the KRI developed a relatively stable autonomous jurisdiction. After 2011, both the KRI and Syrian Rojava exploited declining state control to expand their territorial reach. Under what conditions, then, did Kurdish de facto boundaries form and expand?

Cartographic Imagination and Legal Foreclosure: From Sèvres to Lausanne, 1918–1923

After the First World War, the principle of national self-determination arose to international attention. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points called for non-Turkish nationalities under Ottoman rule to receive an opportunity for autonomous development (Wilson, 1918). Kurdish elites could invoke this formulation as a normative basis for demands for autonomy. At the same time, specific teams such as the U.S. "Inquiry" used knowledge about population, nationality, identity, language, and racial classification to devise postwar territorial schemes through demographic classification and mapmaking (Crampton, 2010).

Articles 62–64 of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres went further. They provided for a scheme of local autonomy in predominantly Kurdish areas east of the Euphrates, south of the Armenian frontier, and north of the borders with Syria and Mesopotamia. If the Kurdish population in those areas sought independence within one year and the League of Nations judged it capable of independence. Türkiye was to renounce its rights over the relevant territory; Kurds in the former Mosul Vilayet could then choose to join this independent Kurdish state (Treaty of Sèvres, 1920) (see Figure 1). "Kurdistan" thus appeared as a territorial whole within an international legal framework. The treaty established a procedure for drafting a scheme, while it did not append an agreed boundary for Kurdistan.

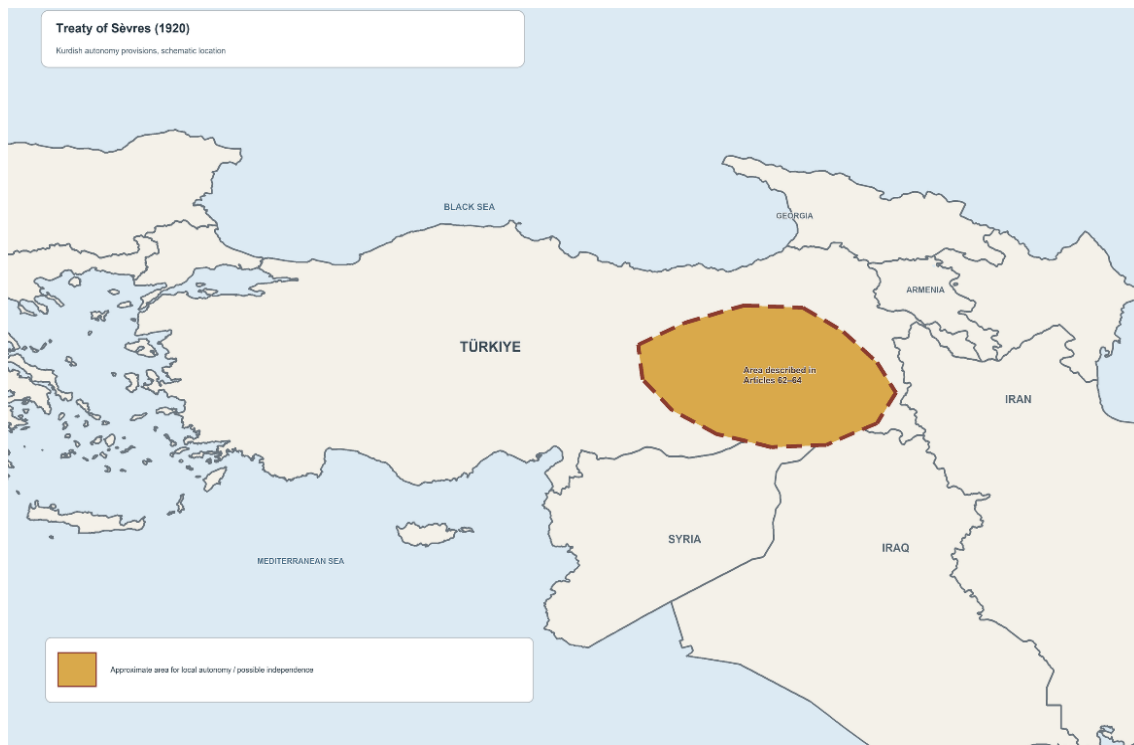


Figure 1. Schematic location of the predominantly Kurdish areas described in Articles 62–64 of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920).

Note. The shaded area is approximate and does not represent an agreed or treaty-annexed boundary. Present-day country outlines are shown solely for orientation. Source: Authors' own map based on the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), Articles 62–64; base-map data from Natural Earth (public domain).

The victory of the Turkish War of Independence rendered the Treaty of Sèvres inoperative before it could take effect, and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne superseded it with a new settlement on territory and minority rights. Articles 38–39 guaranteed life, religion, equality before the law, and language use for all inhabitants or nationals

of Türkiye, whereas the collective rights concerning schools, religious institutions, and personal status applied principally to non-Muslim minorities. The treaty did not mention the Kurds or preserve a special arrangement for Kurdish autonomy or independence (Treaty of Lausanne, 1923). When Lausanne displaced Sèvres, the latter's provisions for Kurdish autonomy and possible independence disappeared, and the Kurds were no longer recognized as a minority possessing specific collective rights.

The postwar borders placed Kurdish political movements within the domestic politics of Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Ahram argues that the Kurdish homeland was imagined from the outset through divisions imposed by existing states and rival political organizations; the self-determination agendas of Kurds in each country were increasingly conditioned by the political setting in which they operated (Ahram, 2019). A fundamental contradiction thereby emerged. Although Kurdish movements clearly articulated a territorial extent through maps and political claims, they could not transform it into an internationally recognized legal boundary. Consequently, “mapping” and “claim legitimation” became detached.

The First Contraction of State Power: Autonomous Jurisdiction under International Protection, 1991–2010

Before 1991, the Iraqi government relied on military operations, population transfers, and administrative redistricting to restrict the territorial reach of Kurdish political organizations. The Anfal campaign of 1987–1988 and the chemical attack on Halabja caused mass casualties and destroyed villages, the memory of these atrocities was later transformed by Kurdish political organizations into a vital historical resource for national mobilization and appeals for external support (Liu, 2020). After the 1991 Gulf War, the Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq, the government's violent suppression, and the ensuing refugee crisis prompted international intervention. UN Security Council Resolution 688 condemned the repression of Iraqi civilians and demanded humanitarian access (UN Security Council, 1991). The United States, the United Kingdom, and their partners then invoked the resolution when establishing a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, restricting Iraqi military operations in the north. Baghdad also withdrew part of its administrative and security apparatus. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) capitalized on the opportunity to assume effective control, held elections in 1992, and established a regional parliament and government.

The de facto state-building in Iraqi Kurdistan was not simply the outcome of territorial conquest by Kurdish forces acting alone: international protection and the Iraqi government's withdrawal were the enabling conditions for its emergence. The civil war of 1994–1998 between KDP and PUK further demonstrated that external protection did not automatically produce internal integration. Although the two parties controlled separate areas, both enlisted external powers against the other, thereby constraining institution-building and unified administration (Jüde, 2017).

The 2003 Iraq War marked a second turning point for the status of the Kurdistan Region. Peshmerga forces operated with U.S. Special Forces in northern Iraq, strengthening Kurdish parties' position in the postwar settlement (Jüde, 2017; Peltier, 2005). Article 117 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution recognized the Kurdistan Region as a federal region. Article 140 prescribed normalization, a census, and a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories, to be completed by the end of 2007 (Constitution of the Republic of Iraq, 2005). The first provision secured parent-state constitutional recognition for Kurdish autonomy; the second created a legal procedure for the disputed territories. Because the Article 140 referendum did not occur, the gap between the constitutionally recognized autonomous region and the territory claimed by Kurdish actors persisted over the long term.

The 2009 *Draft Constitution of the Kurdistan Region–Iraq* further illustrated this discrepancy. Article 1 defined Iraqi Kurdistan as a region within the federal state of Iraq. Article 2 included Kirkuk and several districts in Nineveh, Diyala, and other governorates in the geographical area of the Kurdistan Region while stipulating that implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution would determine its political boundary (Kurdistan Parliament–Iraq, 2009). Although the draft never formally entered into force, it translated the Kurdish territorial claim into an explicit legal text. Developments between 1991 and 2010 produced three distinct, noncongruent categories of boundaries: the area of effective control formed under the safe-zone and no-fly-zone arrangements; the autonomous region recognized by the 2005 Constitution; and disputed territories whose legal status remained unresolved.

The Second Contraction of State Power: Boundary Expansion in Iraq and Syria, 2011–2017

The Syrian civil war after 2011 and the large-scale IS offensive in northern Iraq in 2014 once again weakened central-government control over northern regions. In Syria, government forces partially withdrew from Kurdish-populated areas in July 2012, allowing the PYD and YPG to gradually take control of major Kurdish towns. The cantons of al-Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin were established in 2014. In 2015, the YPG joined Arab and other ethnically based armed groups to form the SDF. Supported by the U.S.-led campaign against IS, the SDF then extended its control beyond the main Kurdish-populated areas to include Raqqa and extensive Arab-majority territories east of the Euphrates (Schmidinger, 2018; Tejel, 2021). However, U.S. military support was directed primarily at defeating ISIS; it did not constitute recognition of Rojava's territorial claims or political status.

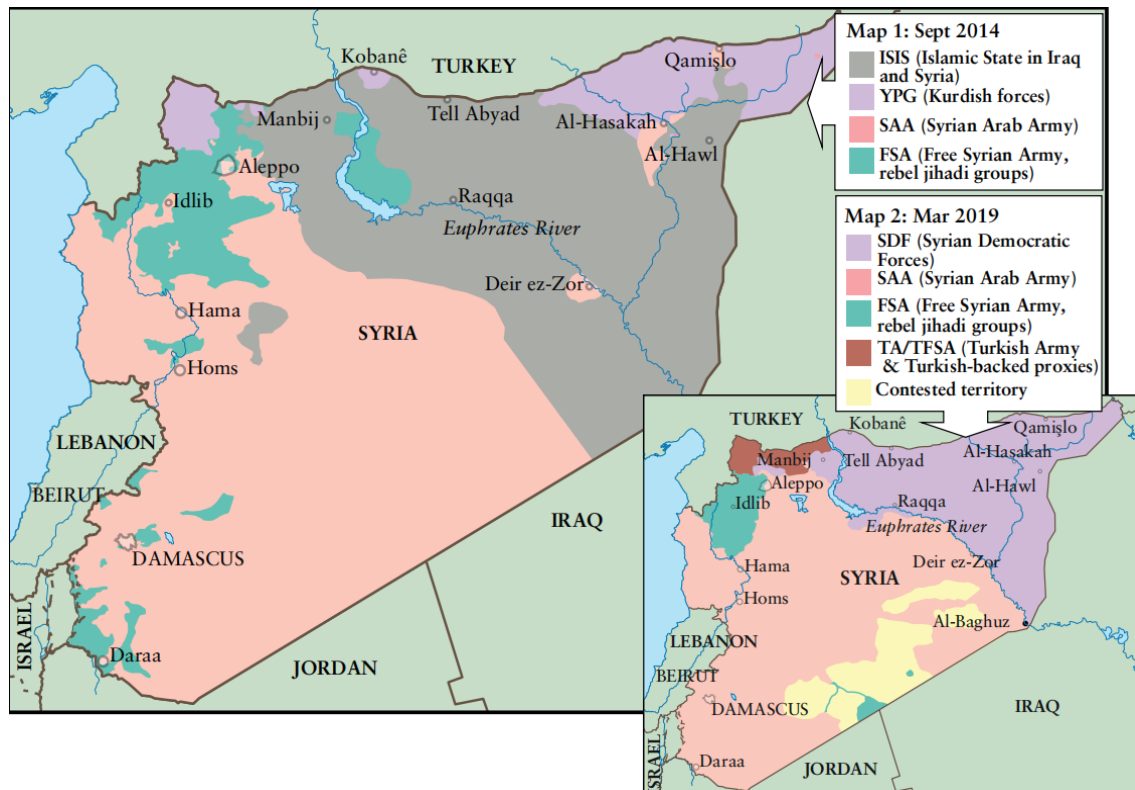


Figure 2. Expansion of Rojava-controlled territory, September 2014 and March 2019. Purple indicates YPG-controlled territory in the upper map and SDF-controlled territory in the lower map; brown indicates territory controlled by Türkiye and Türkiye-backed forces. Source: Nash, E., & Searle, A., *Kurdish armour against ISIS: YPG/SDF tanks, technicals and AFVs in the Syrian Civil War, 2014–19*, Osprey Publishing, 2021, p. 4.

In Iraq, IS captured Mosul in June 2014, causing Iraqi government forces to withdraw from multiple northern areas. Peshmerga forces immediately entered Kirkuk and other disputed territories, expanding Kurdish effective control far beyond the statutory autonomous region into vast areas with unresolved status. Once the KRG gained access to oil fields near Kirkuk, its oil sales temporarily rose to approximately four times its pre-June 2014 level, thereby significantly enhancing resource extraction for boundary control (Ahram, 2019). Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava consequently saw their de facto boundaries reach the greatest territorial extent in their modern histories. Yet the status of Iraq's disputed territories still had not been resolved through the procedure prescribed by Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution.

The two cases show that declining parent-state control creates an opportunity for de facto expansion, but power contraction alone is insufficient to explain its extent or duration. Kurdish organizations required military and administrative capacity to take over the territories in question, and the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition significantly enhanced that capacity. Yet this assistance served a specific security objective and did not amount to recognition of Kurdish territorial claims or independence. De facto boundaries could rapidly expand as a result, without necessarily securing parallel legal recognition or long-term resource support.

Practices of Boundary Production: Comparing Mapping, Claim Legitimation, and Boundary Control

The preceding discussion defined “mapping–claim legitimation–boundary control” as three interacting practices rather than successive stages. This section moves beyond tracing the historical sequence of de facto expansion to compare how Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava represented their spatial extent, furnished jurisdictional claims with normative foundations, and translated those claims into sustainable military and administrative control.

Mapping: Representing de Facto Boundaries

The introduction to *The Cambridge History of the Kurds* notes that, from the 1920s onward, Kurds gradually developed a shared cartographic imagination, sustaining a cross-border national identity through flags, anthems, historical narratives, and the collective memory of a “divided Kurdistan” (Bozarslan et al., 2021, p. 5). This imaginary did not supply a universally accepted border. It provided a spatial framework that could repeatedly be redrawn.

In the Iraqi case, the constitutionally defined autonomous region, the areas under effective Kurdish control, and the wider belt of disputed territories did not coincide. Figure 3 provides an author-compiled, district-level schematic of these overlapping territorial categories in mid-2017, distinguishing the statutory Kurdistan Region from areas under KRG/Peshmerga effective control beyond it and from other territories commonly treated as disputed. This spatial mismatch makes visible the gap between constitutional status, effective jurisdiction, and unresolved territorial claims.

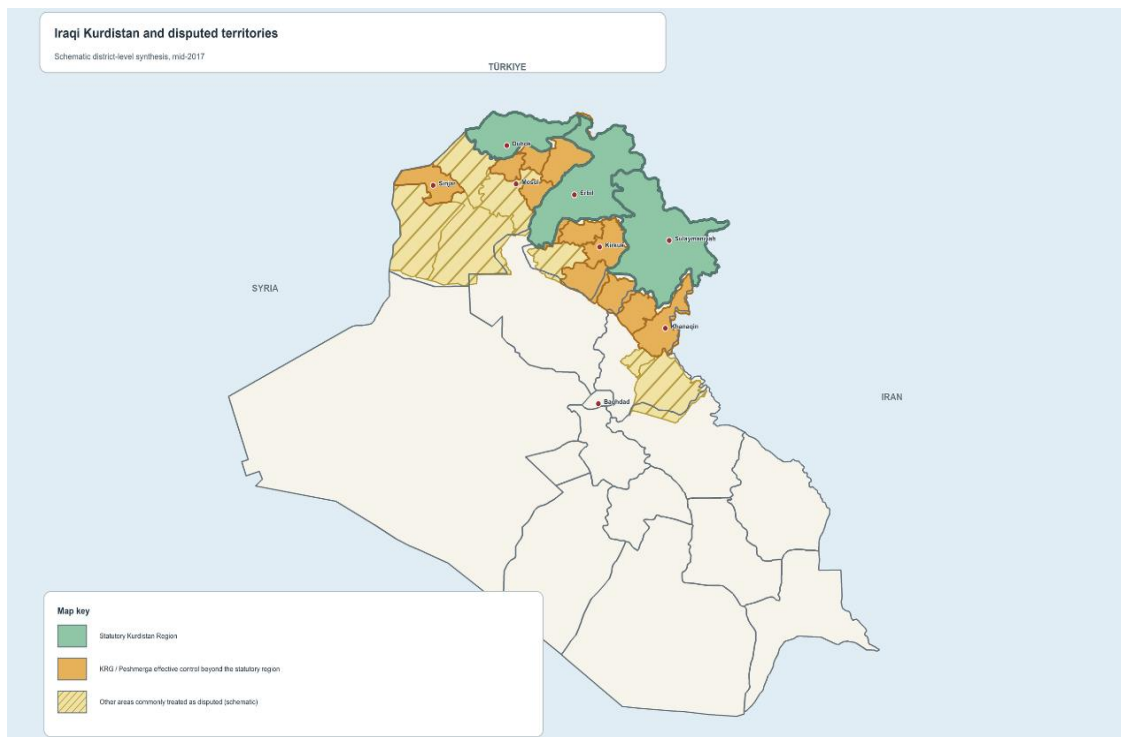


Figure 3. The statutory Kurdistan Region of Iraq, areas under KRG/Peshmerga effective control beyond the statutory region, and selected disputed territories, mid-2017.

Note. This is a schematic district-level synthesis and does not imply legal recognition or final boundary determination. Source: Authors' own compilation based on the Iraqi Constitution (2005), the Kurdistan Region Draft Constitution (Kurdistan Parliament–Iraq, 2009), Izady (2017), and Ahram (2019). Administrative boundary data were obtained from the Iraq Central Statistics Office and OCHA Iraq via geoBoundaries (CC BY 3.0 IGO); the data were generalized and the map design was produced by the authors.

Claim Legitimation: Giving Territorial Claims Normative Form

Spatial representation was accompanied by attempts to normalize claims to expanded jurisdiction. In Iraqi Kurdistan, these claims drew principally on the parent-state constitution, regional legal documents, and the referendum process. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution and the 2009 draft regional constitution discussed above exemplify this practice. They did not reject the Iraqi state framework. Rather, Kurdish actors sought to exploit unresolved territorial questions within the federal constitutional order to broaden the normative scope of regional authority.

The 2017 independence referendum raised this claim to a different level, yet the result did not amount to an immediate declaration of independence. The KRG Representation in Austria explicitly stated that the referendum was not an “automatic declaration of independence”; it gave the regional government a mandate to pursue peaceful separation negotiations with Baghdad. Kurdish leaders also viewed the result as a means of increasing their bargaining leverage with Baghdad (KRG Representation in Austria, 2017; Liu, 2020). The referendum was therefore both a political demonstration of the desire for national self-determination and a bargaining practice intended to reshape the Erbil–Baghdad power balance.

The Federal Supreme Court of Iraq, however, ruled the referendum unconstitutional and nullified its results and legal effects (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2017). Baghdad thus consistently framed the referendum through the constitutional order rather than national self-determination, reflecting the state’s logic of

using legal discourse to maintain the legitimacy of existing territorial boundaries. From the official narrative of the KRG, the 2017 referendum was framed not merely as an act of secession, but as part of a continuation of long-standing autonomy and historical political claims. The Presidency of the Kurdistan Region situated the referendum within a longer history of autonomy and political claims, specifying that it applied to “the Kurdistan Region and the disputed areas” and presenting the result as the population’s choice concerning its future political status (Presidency of the Kurdistan Region, 2017). This formulation incorporated the disputed territories into the political space of “Kurdistan”, exemplifying a strategy to expand the scope of de facto boundaries through linguistic and political narratives. Without broad recognition from Baghdad or the international community, however, effective control could not be converted into an institutionalized boundary.

Rojava adopted a different strategy. The Democratic Federation of Rojava–Northern Syria, formed in 2016, was reorganized in 2018 as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), a formal name that no longer foregrounded an exclusively Kurdish national territory. The preamble to the 2023 *Social Contract of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of the North and East Syria Region* names Kurds, Arabs, Syriac-Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Circassians, and Chechens as constituent peoples. Article 5 defines DAANES as “part of the Syrian Democratic Republic,” and Article 7 designates Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac as official languages (Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, 2023; Wang & Mu, 2022). Whereas the Iraqi Kurdish approach enumerated disputed territories, DAANES emphasized a multiethnic political community and democratic confederalism as the normative basis for autonomous rule within Syria.

The contrast is clear. Iraqi Kurdistan foregrounded territorial title, federal rights, and a procedure of self-determination. Rojava emphasized multi-ethnic autonomy and the decentralization of the Syrian state. Yet both forms of claim legitimation initially operated as internal norms of their respective political entities; neither altered the international legal boundaries of Iraq or Syria.

Boundary Control: Turning Jurisdictional Claims Into Practice

The durability of a de facto boundary ultimately depends on whether a political actor can sustain the deployment of security forces, organize civil administration, regulate resource flows, and provide public services throughout the territory. Boundary control therefore extends beyond military occupation to encompass the fiscal, transport, energy, and local-governance arrangements necessary to sustain jurisdiction.

In Iraq, Kurdish control over disputed territories rested on Peshmerga deployment, local administration, and oil infrastructure, however, its fiscal health and external access remained heavily constrained by Baghdad and neighboring states. After the KRG began exporting oil independently, Baghdad suspended transfers of the region’s share of the federal budget. Falling oil prices, the costs of the campaign against IS, and fiscal mismanagement subsequently produced large deficits and salary arrears. Following the 2017 referendum, the Peshmerga withdrew within a week from most disputed areas stretching from Khanaqin to Sinjar. Baghdad reestablished control over these territories and assumed, or sought to assume, control of border points toward Iran, Türkiye, and Syria. The KRI’s independent control over international airports, oil revenue, and external corridors declined accordingly (Rafaat, 2018). The KRG’s lack of economic diversification and limited multilateral commercial ties constituted a major impediment to sustaining long-term boundary control.

In Syria, the autonomous authorities incorporated armed forces and internal-security bodies into their institutional order. Article 111 of the 2023 *Social Contract* defines the SDF as DAANES’s legitimate defense force and the Kurdish force Asayish as responsible for internal security and stability (Democratic Autonomous

Administration of North and East Syria, 2023). Institutionalization did not produce exclusive territorial control, however. Türkiye launched three major military operations in 2016, 2018, and 2019, occupying parts of northern Syria and introducing administrative arrangements, public services, and currency practices involving officials from Turkish border provinces (Çevik, 2022). The result was not a boundary controlled exclusively by a single actor, but a composite jurisdictional space in which the autonomous administration, the Syrian government, Türkiye, and Turkish-backed armed groups were interwoven. (see Figure 4).

The two cases demonstrate that security forces can only give a de facto boundary ground-level effectiveness for a specific period. Its longer-term durability depends on whether a political entity can establish stable revenue sources, secure access to external corridors, foster a relatively unified governance system, and withstand ongoing countermeasures by the parent state and neighboring states.

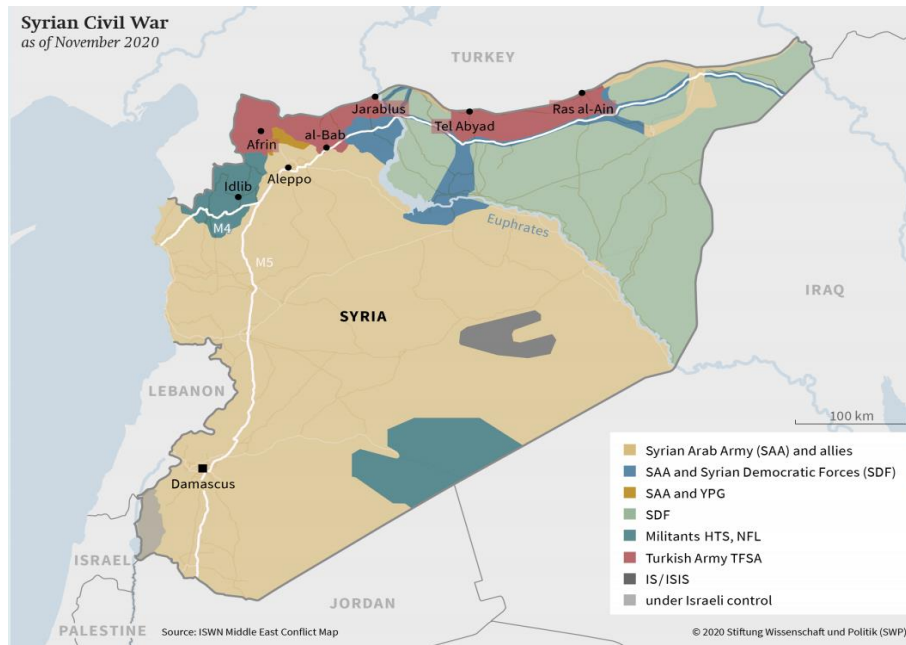


Figure 4. Territorial control in the Syrian civil war, November 2020. The map distinguishes SDF control, joint Syrian government–SDF control, and areas held by Turkish or Türkiye-backed forces. Source: Çevik, S., *Türkiye's military operations in Syria and Iraq* (SWP Comment No. 2022/C37), Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022, p. 3.

Taken together, mapping renders territorial extents visible; claim legitimization supplies a normative foundation for jurisdiction; and boundary control gives the claim practical effect through military, fiscal, and administrative practices that maintain effective jurisdiction for a period. The relationship is not a one-way progression. The three practices interact continuously and jointly shape the production, maintenance, and redrawing of de facto boundaries in Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava.

The Drivers of De Facto Boundary Change: Four Conditions in Combination

The preceding discussion outlined the historical trajectory of de facto boundary change and the practices of boundary production, but it does not by itself answer a central question: why do the same practices of mapping, claim legitimization, and boundary control produce expansion in some instances yet fail to sustain it in others? This article attributes the divergent outcomes to the interaction of four conditions: parent-state capacity, external support, the international recognition environment, and internal political integration and governance capacity.

Parent-state Capacity: Opening and Closing Windows for Expansion

Declining parent-state capacity creates opportunities for de facto boundary expansion, but a “power vacuum” is not a static condition. The retreat of Iraqi government forces in both 1991 and 2014 enabled Kurdish forces to enlarge their jurisdiction; however, once the central government reclaimed fiscal and military resources alongside external assistance, that opportunistic window closed. Bengio similarly observes that Kurdish nationalism in Iraq has repeatedly revived during external crises affecting the Iraqi state, creating a pronounced relationship between declining state capacity and the rise of Kurdish power. Baghdad’s recovery of the disputed territories in 2017 was not solely the product of renewed central-state capacity; Iranian-backed Shiite militias also played an important role (Bengio, 2012; Bozarslan et al., 2021). Parent-state capacity therefore shapes not whether Kurdish political organizations put forward territorial claims, but whether such claims can secure and maintain actual spatial control.

External Support: Extending Control Without Guaranteeing Political Status

External assistance can compensate for Kurdish entities’ deficiencies in air power, weapons, intelligence, and diplomatic resources, thereby enlarging the territory they are able to control. Yet such assistance usually serves the security objectives of the supporting state rather than a Kurdish project of independence. Rafaat describes U.S. support for Iraqi Kurdistan as limited and conditional patronage: Washington supported Kurdish participation in counterterrorism operations and the continuation of autonomy, but consistently prioritized the unity of Iraq over Kurdish independence (Rafaat, 2018). U.S. assistance to the SDF followed a similar logic. External support could increase Kurdish capacity for boundary control, but it could not automatically become a durable security guarantee. Once counterterrorism requirements diminished or a patron reordered its regional relationships, de facto boundaries became more vulnerable to contraction.

The International Recognition Environment: Constraining Institutionalization

The international recognition environment affects whether a de facto boundary can become a stable legal arrangement. After the 2017 referendum, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that the vote and its results lacked legitimacy and reaffirmed support for a united, federal, democratic Iraq (Ahram, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2017). The international community accepted autonomy within Iraq’s federal framework but not a change to Iraq’s internationally recognized borders based on the territory then under Kurdish control. DAANES limited its formal objectives to autonomy within Syria, yet Damascus opposed decentralized autonomy and sought the reintegration of the northeast (Wang & Mu, 2022). Without parent-state consent or formal external recognition, neither entity could turn internal acts of claim legitimation into international legal status.

Internal Political Integration and Governance Capacity: Determining Consolidation

Internal political integration and governance capacity cannot independently create an opportunity for expansion, but they determine whether newly acquired control can be consolidated. Stansfield shows that the KDP and PUK long maintained separate party-state systems centered on Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, leaving political parties, public administration, and security forces incompletely unified (Stansfield, 2003). This structure could sustain divided administration under stable conditions, but it weakened unified decision-making and military coordination under external pressure. Rojava likewise faced persistent disagreements between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council over external representation and domestic power-sharing (Wang & Mu, 2022). The weaker an entity’s governance capacity, the more difficult it becomes to transform military control into lasting administrative, fiscal, and social integration.

Consequently, Kurdish de facto boundaries tend to expand under conditions where parent-state capacity declines, external military support increases, the international community temporarily acquiesces, and Kurdish organizations maintain a baseline level of internal coordination. Their long-term survival additionally requires stable fiscal and governance capacities. When parent-state capacity recovers, external patronage recedes, international recognition remains blocked, and internal fractures emerge simultaneously, de facto boundaries may contract rapidly. The four conditions do not form a rigid cycle; rather, through different combinations, they generated distinct trajectories—specifically, the KRI's concentrated territorial withdrawal and Rojava's fragmentation and overlapping jurisdictions.

Implications of Changes in Kurdish De Facto Boundaries

Building on the framework of mapping–claim legitimation–boundary control, the de facto boundaries of Kurdish autonomous entities have remained dynamic. Their changes have affected regional security, rules of international recognition, and Kurdish national politics in three principal ways.

From a Domestic Political Question to a Regional Security Question

De facto boundary expansion converted an issue of domestic autonomy into a question of territorial control and regional security. After the 2017 referendum, Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara coordinated to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity. In Syria, Turkish regional control coupled with Damascus's demand to restore central-state authority compressed the autonomous administration's room for maneuver from different directions. These countermeasures did not eliminate Kurdish autonomy, but they increasingly organized the relationship between Kurdish entities, their parent states, and neighboring states around military deployments, border corridors, and resource control. Consequently, autonomy shifted from an issue for political negotiation toward one of security governance.

Functional Acquiescence Alongside Legal Constraint

Both cases show that the international community may tolerate a relatively stable non-state jurisdiction under counter-terrorism or humanitarian objectives, while continuing to maintain the sovereignty and territorial integrity of existing states as the outer boundary of recognition. When Kurdish forces provided security as a public good, their de facto control could receive external support; however, when they sought to convert that control into independent status or permanent boundaries, external supporters reemphasized parent-state sovereignty. This relational dynamic, dominated by specific functions provided by a non-state actor during particular periods, yet constrained by parent-state legal frameworks and denied formal political status, endowed de facto boundaries with practical governance functions, while leaving them perpetually open to readjustment by the parent state or neighboring powers.

Stronger Cross-border National Identity, Divergent Political Trajectories

Maps, historical memory, and autonomous institutions reinforced a cross-border Kurdish national identity, but a shared identity did not produce unified political action. Iraqi Kurdish political mobilization centered on federal rights, disputed territories, and independence negotiations, whereas Rojava constructed its political community through multi-ethnic autonomy and democratic confederalism. Divisions between the KDP and PUK, and between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council, further limited coordination across jurisdictions (Stansfield, 2003; Wang & Mu, 2022). Boundary dynamics have therefore rendered “Kurdistan” more distinct as

a national space, even as Kurdish political movements in different states have pursued divergent developmental paths shaped by their respective institutional and security environments.

Conclusion

Focusing on Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Rojava, this article has examined the expansion, contraction, and frustrated institutionalization of Kurdish de facto boundaries between 2011 and 2023. It has shown that a de facto boundary is not a geographical line that emerges automatically when state power recedes. Rather, it is a jurisdiction continually produced through mapping, claim legitimation, and boundary control. Expansion depends on a conjunction of declining parent-state capacity, external support, temporary international acquiescence, and internal coordination; its continuation additionally requires fiscal and governance capacities. When parent-state capacity recovers, external patronage diminishes, international recognition remains blocked, and internal fractures intensify, a de facto boundary contracts or becomes a space of overlapping jurisdiction.

The two cases display a common structural pattern: de facto boundaries can expand, but they are difficult to institutionalize. Non-state actors may perform security and administrative functions during war and state failure, yet effective control alone rarely changes an existing international border. The Kurdish cases therefore demonstrate that the modern sovereign order does not exclude non-state actors from territorial governance, but it sharply restricts their ability to transform empirical governance into legal sovereignty. A boundary on a map is at once an expression of state power and the contingent outcome of continuing competition among parent states, local political entities, and external powers.

The evolution of Kurdish de facto boundaries visually demonstrates how non-state actors exploit structural imbalances in governance and power allocation within the modern international order to breach the traditional Westphalian sovereign framework and reshape regional space. Concurrently, it exposes the inherent contradiction of contemporary geopolitics in an era of globalization: the international community may acquiesce to temporary governance by non-state entities, but firmly prohibits de facto jurisdiction from rewriting statutory borders. This phenomenon reflects a broader universality across cross-border ethnic issues worldwide: even when non-state actors establish effective jurisdiction through “mapping, claim legitimation, and boundary control”, they ultimately fail to achieve a legal transformation of their boundaries. The Kurdish question thus serves as a quintessential microcosm of global cross-border territorial conflicts, laying bare the deep-seated structural tensions that the modern international order remains unable to reconcile.

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