

THE KRG-GULF RELATIONS: REGIONAL-SUBSYSTEM COLLABORATION IN AN EMERGING MICRO-REGIONAL PARADIPLMACY*

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Abstract

This paper contributes the foreign policy analysis research elaborating the relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (the KRG) and the Gulf states. Notably, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar have rising relations with the KRG. . A primary question is central to this analysis: How do these actors (the KRG and Gulf states) propose their alliances amid the bigger picture of Middle East affairs? As an answer to this inquiry, the research defines this diplomatic endeavour among a sub-state actor and other regional powers as micro-regional paradiplomacy. These actors are part of an emerging micro-regional paradiplomacy with the KRG's role conception of regional-subsystem collaborator. The emerging role conceptions can bring further role adaptations for the KRG and the Gulf states to strengthen their actorness in the Middle East, despite potential role contestations.

Keywords: Role theory, Paradiplomacy, Gulf, Kurdistan Regional Government, Regional-subsystem collaboration

IKBY–Körfez İlişkileri: Mikro-Bölgesel Paradiplomasi ve Bölgesel Alt-Sistem İşbirliği

Öz

Makale, Irak Kürdistan Bölgesel Yönetimi (IKBY) ile Körfez devletleri arasındaki ilişkileri inceleyerek, dış politika analizi literatürüne katkı sunmaktadır. Özellikle Suudi Arabistan, Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri (BAE) ve Katar'ın IKBY ile gelişen ilişkileri çalışmanın odak noktasıdır. Çalışma temel olarak, IKBY ve Körfez devletlerinin ittifaklarını Orta Doğu siyasetinin bölgesel paradigmalarında nasıl şekillendirdiklerini tartışmaktadır. Araştırma kavramsal olarak bu ilişkileri bir alt-devlet aktörü ile bölgesel güç arasında gelişen mikro-bölgesel paradiplomasi olarak tanımlamaktadır. Makale, rol teorisinin sunduğu kavramsal çerçeveden hareketle, Körfez devletleri ile IKBY arasında gelişen ilişkilerin, IKBY'nin benimsediği "bölgesel alt-sistem işbirlikçisi" rol anlayışı etrafında şekillenen bir mikrobölgesel paradiplomasi örneği oluşturduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu çerçevede ortaya çıkan rol anlayışları, zaman zaman rol çatışmalarına yol açma potansiyeli taşısa da, IKBY ve Körfez devletlerinin Orta Doğu'daki aktörlük kapasitelerini güçlendirmelerine ve bölgesel siyasette daha görünür roller üstlenmelerine imkân sağlayabilecek yeni rol uyarlamalarını teşvik etmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Rol teorisi, Paradiplomasi, Körfez devletleri, Irak Kürdistan Bölgesel Yönetimi (IKBY), Bölgesel alt-sistem işbirliği

* Makale geliş tarihi / Received date: 19.06.2026
Makale kabul tarihi / Accepted date: 07.09.2026
Erken görünüm tarihi / Published online: 11.09.2026

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The KRG-Gulf Relations: Regional-Subsystem Collaboration in an Emerging Micro-Regional Paradiplomacy

Introduction

The Kurdistan regional government in Iraq was established as a political sub-national body after the first Gulf War and the following no-fly zone. (Zulal, 2012). This article aims to delve into the current portfolio and future of relations of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with the Gulf states. Notably, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar have rising relations with the KRG. Yet Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman are also included to the research as far as they are engaging within this emerging micro-regional paradiplomacy. There is a valid gap in the literature in analysis of the KRG's foreign policy making an a newly established, yet prominent political figure in the region (Zulal, 2012; Charountaki, 2016; Rasheed, 2018; Ababakr, 2020; Palani, 2022; Gulmohamad, 2022). Notably, the KRG's emerging alliances with the Gulf monarchies as an independent actor differentiating itself from the central government in Baghdad requires further scholarly attention, despite a few studies examining the ties (Plebani & Al Ubaydli, 2014; Charountaki, 2016; Cengiz, 2022; Saeed, 2023).

This research has several foci to reach a comprehensive outlook on these bilateral ties. In delving in the foreign policy making of the KGR, the initial factor is its external affairs with the central government and with the other entities to institutionalize its emergence as an independent actor. Put differently, the initial role conception and foreign policy making of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is its autonomous Kurdish identity. Therefore, this paper does not only use role theory, but also benefits from post-structural interpretation of role theory to include 'actorness' of a Kurdish sub-state actor (Nabers, 2011; Dogan-Akkas, 2024). However, the main research inquiry of the paper is not the KRG's 'Kurdish' foreign policy making around an identity or survival politics. Rather, the purpose of the research is to elaborate on the 'actorness' of the KRG regarding its role conceptions and its rising ties with the Gulf states. A primary question is central to analysing role conceptions, contestations and role adaptation of the KRG in its affairs: how do these actors (the KRG and Gulf states) propose their alliances

amid the bigger picture of Middle East affairs? As an answer to this initial inquiry, the research defines this diplomatic endeavour among a sub-state actor and other regional powers as micro-regional paradiplomacy. In the concluding discussion, the article briefly questions whether the emerging role conceptions can bring further role adaptations for the KRG and the Gulf states to strengthen their actorness in the Middle East, despite potential role contestations.

The article proceeds with the following sections: The very first section of the paper is devoted to the conceptual framework of micro-regional paradiplomacy depicting the KRG's external affairs. Later, I discuss the role theory defining the primary concepts of role conception and regional sub-system collaboration combining them with the empirical cases of the micro-regional diplomacy. The final section of the paper examines whether the Gulf states and the Kurdistan Regional Government can adapt to new roles within this emerging framework of micro-regional paradiplomacy. To explore this question, I analyze the repercussions of the Iranian missile and drone attacks on the parties as the recent case illustrating the potential for role adaptation and the gradual expansion of their cooperation beyond predominantly economic relations toward a broader security partnership.

1. Actorness Re-Defined: Micro-Regional Paradiplomacy

There has been a renewed interest in role theory that includes more cases from the Global South and a few notably from the Middle East (Ozdamar & Canpolat, 2023; Akbaba et al. 2019, Battaloglu, 2021; Dal & Ersen, 2014; Ozdamar, 2016; Kara & Sozen, 2016; Cuhadar et al., 2017; Dogan-Akkas, 2024). As these countries are not global hegemons, discussing their foreign policy making purely on tangible materials, such as economic power, military capabilities, or diplomatic role, does not provide the broader definition of power needed. Using role theory, researchers are able to move beyond a U.S.-centric or global-north-centric field to become more broadly comparative by using multidisciplinary power instruments (material, ideational); horizontal and vertical power rivalries; discursive formations, and role contestations.

Several points in use of the theoretical framework require attention before delineating the main discussion in following sections. First of all, the purpose here is not to discuss how the KRG's independent foreign policy making can bring problems or advantages for its relations with the central government in Baghdad. This is rather an attempt to elaborate more on a central context: the role conceptions and foreign policy behaviors of these two agencies in adopting new

alliances with each other, along with their ideational and material motivations encouraging their role performance.

Secondly, primary actors under the scope are different in their political formations. Excluding Saudi Arabia, all Gulf monarchies are small nation-states. Their foreign policy making is conducted in a monarchical rule, which refers to an elite-decision making process with almost no public opinion or democratic tools articulated to it (Wright, 2011). Whereas the Kurdistan Regional Government is a sub-state (or sub-national unit) actor with depending on the central government in Baghdad on several key issues- like its budget -as a federal governance (Palani, 2021). Its foreign policy making is also depend on a small group, despite certain democratic instruments are involved in the process of governance. This paper therefore is a significant contribution to the literature not only depicting these bilateral ties in a scholarly attempt, but also contributing role theory research with proposing a sub-state actor's paradiplomatic role conceptions.

A brief definition of the nature of the foreign policy making for a sub-state actor and the understanding of paradiplomacy is preliminary to proceed with the role conceptions articulated them. Sub-state diplomacy scholarship defines paradiplomacy, parallel diplomacy, as “the external contacts, activities, relations and actions of non-central governments (federal units, provinces, cantons, länder etc.) with other international actors, such as nation states, other local governments, transnational enterprises, international organizations and civil society organizations, among others (quoted in Schiavon 2019, p.6; Duchacek, 1990; Soldatos, 1990; 1993). These international, simple external activities “could conform, run parallel to or even conflict with the foreign policy of the national government” (Schiavon 2019, p.6). Foreign policy making of sub-state governments could be a purposeful projection to seek greater autonomy or the recognition of their identity nation-wide and internationally therefore it is normal for a parallel diplomacy narrative is in a conflictive nature with national foreign policy of the central state (Schiavon, 2019).

Since 2003, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq—despite being, in legal terms, an autonomous region under the authority of the Iraqi government within the framework of the permanent Iraqi Constitution established in 2005—has effectively become a semi-independent sub-state entity. Its foreign policy making with the GCC states, including Qatar, is initially motivated by the survival which is indirectly related to “the Kurdishness” in their external affairs. Via words of Zulal (2012, p.141),

after the uprising in 1991, and the establishment of a semi-autonomous entity in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish leaders realized that unless they

create alliances with neighboring countries, their control over the region would be short lived and their fate would be similar to other previous—and failed—attempts at establishing a Kurdish entity. Because the Kurdistan region is landlocked and its neighbors have never wanted to see an independent Kurdish entity in the region, diplomacy is vital for survival (p.141).

In this survival strategy, an economic diplomacy using oil and gas; ensuring security and stability of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, investing on the conflict resolutions with the neighbours are the priorities (Zulal, 2012, p.154). On the top of it, the paradiplomacy of the KRG rulers had a pragmatic self-governance approach without further intervention in the regional conflicts with wait-and-see policy (Zulal, 2012, p.154).

It is also important to note that the foreign-policy activities of KRG as a federated unit are diverse than another sub-national unite in the setting of an advanced industrial society or in a fully democratic state. Transparency and democratic decision-making process are both lacking in the case of the KRG and the central government in Iraq therefore it is a unique and diverse case study comparing to the other examples like Canada-Quebec or Catalonia-Spain (McMillan, 2008; Cantir, 2020). However, like other sub-state units, the KRG political elites are “consist of a group of individuals with common goals and who are able to interact in the international system, yet there is also an intra-Kurdish tension among two primary actors referring to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Saeed, 2023; Charountaki, 2015, p.342).

The Iraqi constitution of 2005 grants the Kurdistan region the right to establish offices in the Iraqi embassies and diplomatic missions abroad: “formulating foreign policy and diplomatic representation; negotiating, signing, and ratifying international treaties and agreements; negotiating, signing and ratifying debt policies and formulating foreign sovereign economic and trade policy” (IEDJA, n.d.). Excluding Oman and Bahrain, the rest the GCC states have diplomatic missions in Erbil. The UAE is the first Gulf country established its diplomatic representative in the KRG in 2012. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia followed the Emirati move opening consulates in 2015 and 2016. Qatar joined them in 2023. These diplomatic moves from the Gulf states helped the KRG to increase its diplomatic power towards the central government and Iran. As Saeed (2017) highlights, the Iranian narrative depicts these diplomatic engagements of the Arab Gulf states as an attempt to undermine Tehran’s interests in Iraq:

a senior Iranian commander questioned Saudi motives for seeking greater representation within the Kurdish enclave on the grounds that that there are

“no Arabs” in need of consular services and the real goal of any Saudi consulate in KRG territory must be undermining Tehran’s interests or even destabilization within Iran.

The foreign policy makers are attempting to acquire more international role or alliances for identity recognition and legitimization as a sub-national political entity which allows the literature to define the KRG’s external affairs as protodiplomacy (Paquin & Lachapelle, 2005, p.82). The studies refer protodiplomacy as a focus of diplomacy that deliberately raises tensions with the central government seeking a secessionist agenda (Cornago, 2018; Ababakr, 2020; Crikemans and Duran, 2016). Although the difference between these two concepts is blurred, in the case of KRG, this paper focused on its paradiplomacy which practically targets regional and international engagement to increase its presence in the international stage and for legitimacy, “developmental needs and economic growth” (Paquin & Lachapelle, 2005, p.78). Therefore, it has an indirect impact of the independence of the Kurdish nation with improving its trade, diplomatic experience and national engagement.

While Article 110 / 1 of the Constitution defines the federal government as the exclusive authority in “formulating foreign policy and diplomatic representation; negotiating, signing, and ratifying international treaties and agreements; negotiating, signing, and ratifying debt policies and formulating foreign sovereign economic and trade policy”, Article 121 established “a strong constitutional and legal structure” in building paradiplomacy of the KRG (Ababakr, 2020, p.317). In this respect, the KRG’s role conception towards regional state is constitutive that targets being a recognized member of the international community (Harnisch et al., 2011, p.8). This is not counter to its independency demands, rather, it is a complementary role to reach a level of foreign policy confidence as a sub-state actor.

There are two distinct yet interconnected typologies of paradiplomacy for sub-state unites combining seminal works of Soldatos (1990), Duchacek (1990) and Aguirre (1999): global and regional paradiplomacy. Global paradiplomacy “reflects the subnational awareness of global interdependence or through which federated units deal with issues concerning the whole international system” (Aguirre, 1999, p.191). Whereas regional paradiplomacy “represents a geographically circumscribed response to the risks and opportunities for cooperation arising from contiguity” (Duchacek, 1986, p.13 quoted in Aguirre, 1999, p. 188).

Although global paradiplomacy of the KRG is also critical in understanding its role conception in regard to cooperating with the Gulf, the regional paradiplomacy proposes more significant forms of discussion for this

case. Soldatos (1990) proposes two kinds of regional paradiplomacy: First one is macroregional and refers to dealing with issues concerning communities which are non-contiguous (Quebec and France). Second one is micro-regional and comprehends issues concerning geographical contiguity (Quebec and New England states). As Soldatos (1990) argues, “micro-regional paradiplomacy usually generates minimal controversy, macro-regional paradiplomacy, normally involving actors of different regional systems, can become politicized, even it refers to a 'low-politics' issue” (Soldatos, 1990, 37-8).

Table 1: Micro and Macro level regional paradiplomacy

	<i>Definition</i>	<i>KRG Example</i>
<i>Micro-regional paradiplomacy</i>	Diplomatic actions that can be transborder or transfrontier (when the contiguity implies common boundaries).	Syria, Türkiye, Iran as transfrontier examples; other Middle East countries as transborder examples including the GCC states, Egypt, Morocco etc.
<i>Macro-regional paradiplomacy</i>	Diplomatic actions that normally involving actors of different regional systems.	European countries, Asian countries, Russia etc.

Source: Author’s on elaboration based on Soldatos, 1990, p.37-38

As it is indicated above Table 1, for the KRG the focus of this paper is its micro-regional paradiplomacy as delving into its role conceptions for the Gulf sub-system. However, in a broader approach, its global and macro-regional paradiplomacy could be articulated to its role conceptions as these levels off foreign policy making propose overlapping instruments and motivations. The focus of this study is, however, on the actorness of the KRG in relation to its role conceptions in allying with Gulf countries to understand how the KRG-Gulf affairs can be examined in terms of a new actorness in regional-subsystem collaboration.

2. Regional-Subsystem Collaboration in an Emerging Micro-Regional Paradiplomacy

In this part, I will evaluate emerging micro-regional paradiplomacy between the KRG and the Gulf capitals delving into how and why actorness of these states in an emerging micro-regional paradiplomacy of regional-subsystem

collaboration might trigger new role conceptions. This mutual diplomatic endeavour with a role perception of KRG as a regional sub-system collaborator is an adaptation process for the involved parties provoking certain role contestations.

In recent years, the boundaries between domestic and foreign policy have become increasingly blurred, making foreign policy a contested political space. In the case of sub-regions like the Gulf and the regions like the Middle East, political space of the states also includes these extra-levels of analysis in examining how they do pursue certain roles and how they face challenges and rivalries in these levels, while considering their global image and domestic consolidation. It is even more challenging for the federal governance like the KRG as their hegemonic struggle with the central government or regional powers might bring further role contestations (Palani, 2022). To start with the initial concept, role conception of a state or sub-state actor

includes the policymakers' own definition of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems. It is their "image" of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment (Holsti 1970, p.245–246).

Role theory highlights the relative power position of a given political entity rather than of only roles that the political elites conceive for state and sub-state actors: "an understanding of specific advantages a state may have in a given international context" (Breuning, 2017). Any form of a role conception, display of a role, thus presumes states or non-state actors having multiple roles, if not actively at one time, yet at least potentially. Holsti (1970) recognized this, theorizing that the "policymakers of most states conceive of their state in terms of multiple sets of relationships and multiple roles and/or functions" (Holsti, 1970, p.277). These multiple roles and narratives against the sedimented discourse, could create conflict within a role (intra-role conflicts, state and its assumed expectations) and between roles (inter-role conflicts, states' multiple roles).

The roles of KRG in its external affairs combine ideational and material factors to get to the bottom of how its leadership conceptions of the regional governance's place in Iraq, in the Middle East and in the global politics interacting with both ideational and material constraints (Breuning 2011; Thies 2013; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016, p.3). The KRG- Gulf cooperation at the moment has been displaying behaviors of a new role conception: regional-subsystem collaborator. Regional-subsystem collaborator role refers to "far-reaching

commitments to cooperative efforts with other states to build wider communities, or to cross-cutting subsystems” (Holsti, 1970, p.265). This is not an occasional interposition or engagement into areas of conflict or cooperation (Holsti, 1970, p.265). Being a regional sub-system collaborator might be a target role for these entities in their role adaptation process, yet at the moment they do cooperate and enhance their alliances in a micro-regional paradiplomacy (Table 2, below).

Table 2: An emerging micro-regional paradiplomacy of Regional-subsystem collaborators

<i>States</i>	<i>Ideational and Material Motivations</i>	<i>Role Conception</i>	<i>“Significant other” for this role conception</i>	<i>FP Making</i>	<i>Potential Role Contestations</i>
<i>Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman</i>	Trade, contain Iranian influence in Iraq, supporting Iraqi unity, Development Road project (DRP), increasing diplomatic profile, cooperating with Turkey or other states using DRP.	regional-subsystem collaborator	Iran, Iraqi central government or another GCC state that has rival policies	Cooperation agreements, opening up the consulate, DRP, high-level visits	Intra-Gulf rivalry
<i>Kurdistan Regional Governance</i>	Trade, further recognition and international legitimacy, highlighting the potential of the Iraqi Kurdistan; contain Iranian influence, enhance power against the central government	regional-subsystem collaborator	Iran and Iraqi central government	Cooperation agreements, opening up the consulate, selling the KRG made products, high-level visits.	Iraq central government, Iran

Source: Author’s on elaboration based on the cited sources

While this study refers to the Gulf states as a collective category (Table 2, above), it does not imply a fully homogeneous stance in their engagement with the KRG. On the contrary, each Gulf state pursues its relations with the KRG in line with distinct interests, strategic calculations, and role conceptions. The present analysis, however, prioritizes a KRG-centered perspective, thereby situating these variations within the broader framework of the region’s foreign policy dynamics. To start with ideational motivations embedded in regional sub-

system collaboration, a Kurdish-Khaliji cooperation in political and economic affairs support the KRG's position in the local politics of Iraq (Saeed, 2023; 2025). When the KRG has a powerful diplomatic profile engaging regional actors and gaining experience through regional sub-system collaboration, its position as a sub-state actor might be consolidated (Charountaki, 2016). With a reinforced power, the KRG can have a broader and cooperative role in the Iraqi politics.

From the perspective of the Gulf states, the Kurdish political component of the Iraqi politics is a potential ally to contain Iranian influence in Iraq (Saeed, 2023). Iraq and the GCC states have historically had a complex relationship due to the Saddam regime and later a new Iraq without Saddam was a complete unknown to the Gulf (Charountaki, 2016). The Iraqi political elites comprehending Iraqi Kurds and Sunnis have enjoyed good relations with the Gulf countries since 2003 (Partrick, 2016; Cengiz, 2022). The relations between Sunni forces in Iraq and the Gulf have been in progress (Charountaki, 2016). However, the more Iran spread its power in the central Iraq, the more the GCC states started engaging with other forces in the country that have a joint anti-Iranian perspective for the Iraqi politics. In this respect, the political importance of Kurdish component has been underlined for the GCC monarchies not only to contain Iran in Iraq but also to support Iraqi unity with acknowledging the Kurdish role in it (Charountaki, 2016).

Thereby, the foreign policy actions of the GCC states, including Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia over their engagement with the KRG has been proposing an actorness to the Kurdish politics in the form of a regional-subsystem collaboration. However, this cooperation does not necessarily refer to a full political support to the independency of KRG. According to David Hearst (2017), the Saudi political elites have an official narrative for the KRG's independency demand which primary stands for the unity of Iraq and articulating the Kurdish political component to their overall Iraqi policy. Hearst (2017) avers that the unofficial narratives come from the several public figures such as a retired major general in the Saudi armed forces, Anwar Eshki, states that "the Kurds have the right to have a state of their own" and this could decrease Turkish and Iranian power in the region.

Looking at the bilateral engagements of the KRG with the Gulf states, the UAE is an example of rising and deepening relations with the KRG as supporting the referendum in 2017 and opening the first Gulf consulate in Erbil in 2012 (Charountaki, 2016; Saeed, 2023). Via words of Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani,

the UAE is very important to the Kurds. They have offered their services to help us in the region. We have very good relations with all [the GCC

members] but ties with the UAE are closer. The UAE are interested in investments and energy (Charountaki, 2016, p.205).

Despite their emerging diplomatic engagement, there is no political tension between Qatar and the KRG over its actorness or regional affairs. There has been cooperation in terms of trade and investment and- as an indication of an emerging diplomatic channel-several high-level visits were exchanged among the parties. However, Qatar does not have the highest GCC share in the KRG's micro-regional paradiplomacy. Politically, these two powers have diverse approaches on several issues that might not affect their further cooperation, yet needs attention. When Qatar was under the siege during the 2017 Gulf Crisis, the KRG leader, Barzani, was asked whether the independence referendum can bring an isolation to them as Qatar faces, Barzani stated "this issue is different. One of the reasons given for isolating Qatar is that they are sponsoring terror. But for us, we broke the myth of terror. We gave blood to break the myth of terror and defeat terror" (Palani et al., 2019, p.2278). This is a red line in the Qatari foreign policy as accusation of terror was unacceptable for Doha. In a similar vein, when the referendum was conducted in the KRG in 2017, the Qatari official narrative was supportive of Iraqi unity, rather than opening up a diplomatic angle towards independency of Kurdish region:

The State of Qatar voiced deep concerns over the referendum held in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, which would pose a threat to the unity of Iraq and the security and stability of the region...the referendum, which took place in the Iraqi Kurdistan region without consensus between the central government in Iraq and the Iraqi Kurdistan region, should not lead to further negative repercussions and exacerbate the division between the Iraqi people, at a time when focus must be on achieving security, stability and unity of Iraq and the elimination of terrorism (MOFA Qatar).

Recently, Bahraini-Kurdish ties also has gained speed. Kurdish Prime Minister Masrour Barzani first met with the King of Bahrain during the Manama Dialogue 2021. The following years have seen continued diplomatic visits, including multiple meetings with Bahr'in's Crown Prince and Prime Minister Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, and Foreign Minister Abdullatif Al Zayani (Kurdistan24, 2024). In a similar vein, Saudi and Kurdish delegations have been visiting each other, notably for investment and joint economic projects (Kurdistan24, 2018).

Another angle in discussing a regional-subsystem collaboration among the Gulf monarchies and the KRG is material motivations in a form of economic cooperation that might also by-pass the Baghdad government. The UAE is the second largest investor in the KRG after China with total economic input of five

Emirati companies worth to more than \$2.5 billion in 2023 (Saaed, 2023). Also, the Emirati company Dana GAS is charge of gas production in the Iraqi Kurdistan region until 2029 and responsible for the current gas production for the local consumption (Bechocha, 2024). The UAE is the only GCC state that initiated a joint economic council with the regional government to expand cooperation prospects between the two parties and also six Emirati banks are planning to open branches in the region. The UAE and the KRG are in attempt to “embark on a journey of mutual growth and prosperity” as the representatives of Invest Kurdistan stated in their official visit to the UAE in 2023 (Invest Kurdistan, n.d.). The KRG is branding its several agricultural products including honey, pomegranate, apple and potatoes. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are importers of these products, yet the exact numbers of the trade haven’t shared by the KRG’s ministry of trade.

Doha-Erbil relations is an emerging cooperation comparing it with political and economic share of UAE in the KRG. The Qatari investment is emerging comparing to the Emirates, yet to be with steady moves. Qatar Airways began operating direct flights to Erbil in 2012 (Ghafuri, 2020) and its consulate is open officially in Erbil to empower the relations. Kurdistan Board of Investment and Qatar Chamber highlighted hosted a joint economic forum in Qatar in September 2024 comprehending several sectors such as industry, tourism, trade, health, agriculture, and education. Mohamed bin Twar, First Vice-Chairman of Qatar Chamber stated during the joint economic forum that Qatar Chamber encourages “Qatari investors to explore these opportunities, bolster cooperation with their counterparts in Kurdistan Region and establish new commercial alliances and partnerships” (Qatar Chamber, 2024). In a similar supportive vein, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani stressed in the inauguration of Qatari consulate that

“the Kurdistan Government will provide Qatari investors with any facilities needed. The Kurdistan Region and Qatar have good relations. Senior Qatari officials have visited the Kurdistan Region in the past, and we have also visited the State of Qatar... Qatar’s remarkable success in investment, prosperity, construction, energy, and economic vitality presents an invaluable opportunity for the Kurdistan Region to leverage and learn from. We extend a warm invitation to Qatari investors to explore the potential of the Kurdistan Region and embark on ventures across diverse sectors” (Kurdistan24 Digital Media, 2024).

As the Qatari foreign minister, Shaikh Mohammed Al-Thani underlined in 2020, Doha has been showed an interest in developing the relations between the Kurdistan Region economically but also politically: “we look at the Kurdistan

region as an important element in reducing the tension in the region, since [it] plays a great role in mitigating the tension in Iraq” (Ghafuri, 2020).

In the case of a potential intra-Gulf rivalry in utilizing this regional sub-system collaboration with the KRG, I argue that the Saudi’s self-assertive role of being major player in Iraq apart from Iran could be an issue. This is different than the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as the Gulf monarchies has a unity in their policies over the Iranian power in Iraq (Palani, 2022). Rather, it might be more a form of intra-GCC rivalry in which the sub-regional hegemon, Saudi Arabia, has been threatened by expansion of smaller Gulf monarchies in the regional affairs. A regional-subsystem collaboration between the KRG and Qatar or the KRG and the UAE could be threatening for Saudi Arabia as their foreign policy centralizes on the influence of smaller Gulf states under control to assure their hegemonic power. This is where a triple rivalry might emerge because for Qatar not only more established and solid relations of the UAE but also a political discomfort of Saudi Arabia could be an issue in reaching out the KRG in a more powerful way.

3. Can They Adapt New Roles?

The role contestations might lead to changes in role conceptions in three ways: role adaptation, role learning and role transformation. As Harnisch (2011) delineates, “role adaptation refers to changes of strategies and instruments in performing a role” (Harnisch et al., 2011, p.10). In the role adaptation the underlying foreign policy goals remain, yet a constructive adjustment is the case for the agent’s pragmatic motivations without going beyond the systemic regulations. In the role adaptation, a state can carry it a step further and learn a new role with changing of foreign policy goals. The third stage is role transformation in which a state can completely change its identity and interests transforming its role (Harnisch et al., 2011, p.253).

For this research elaborating the role conceptions of the KRG in its affairs with the Gulf states, the central concept among these three forms of change after a role contestation is the role adaptation defining a potential articulation of a new role to Erbil’s policy. These role conflicts triggering an adaptation might occur

as a clash between domestically defined national role conceptions and externally defined role expectations (i.e., a disagreement between ego conceptions and alter expectations); as a clash between two role prescriptions for the same situation; or as a clash between elements of the same role (Cantir & Kaarbo, 2016, p.5).

In the case of the KRG and the Gulf states, their society is not involved in the foreign policy making unless a radical turn out occurs. I argue that it is more a role adaptation that triggered by “significant other” like the Iraqi state, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran etc. trying to navigate counter-role amid conflicted interests. With adopting new roles in this micro-regional paradiplomacy, the GCC monarchies (notably Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar but also the rest) can expand their diplomatic spaces and strategic power to contain common threats or to enhance their diplomatic strengths. The KRG is also in a critical position as proposing its role as an independent federal actor in Iraq.

The role adaptation process is not only a decision of the Kurdish elites, but also the Khaliji elites and regional politics need to furnish material and ideational opportunities to flourish the relations. Although the earlier works have structural and rather static interpretation for the role conceptions as Breuning (2011) (and others including Walker, 1987) discusses in detail, there are post-structural interpretations that scrutinize the unfixed nature of the role and identity surrounding it (Nabers, 2011). Nabers (2011) combines the literature on the role change and adaptation with Ernesto Laclau’s writings and argues that an account of roles relying on fixed expectations is not correct as the narrative, roles and hegemony are in a continuous cycle: “instead, it is interesting to see how roles change in times of crises” (p.74).

None of the Gulf states have the hegemonic role dominating a diplomatic complex towards the KRG. It is rather articulated to a broader micro-regional paradiplomacy that might turn into a regional-subsystem collaboration with certain levels of intra-GCC competition, mainly among Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. However, all the parties could learn the role of regional-subsystem collaborator with prioritizing a strategic gain in their political and economic ties with the KRG. For the KRG, its ongoing institutional issues with the central government and its Kurdish identity in its relations with several actors are determinant foreign policy roles. Therefore, this cooperation might come as a role adaptation with further Kurdish-Khaliji socialization articulating self-assertive behaviors to their conventional roles.

The most recent example of role adaptation in the micro-regional paradiplomacy emerged after US/Israel- Iran war of February 2026. Both the KRG and the Gulf states became the target of repeated Iranian missile and drone attacks since February 2026, re-emphasizing Iran’s role as “significant other” in micro-regional paradiplomacy. Throughout the conflict, the KRG sought to avoid becoming a direct participant in the war. President Nechirvan Barzani repeatedly emphasized that the Kurdistan Region would not become part of regional conflicts and instead advocated diplomacy, de-escalation, and peaceful dialogue (Anadolu Agency, 2026). No formal military alliance emerged, the conflict

fostered reciprocal diplomatic support based on shared concerns over Iranian missile and drone attacks, regional stability, and the protection of sovereignty.

Several Gulf states responded by expressing clear diplomatic support for the Kurdistan Region. Qatar strongly condemned Iran's attacks on the Kurdistan Region, describing them as violations of Iraqi sovereignty and international law while reaffirming its solidarity with both Iraq and the KRG (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, 2026). Similarly, the United Arab Emirates condemned the attacks and reiterated its support for Iraq's security, sovereignty, and stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates, 2026). Saudi Arabia also denounced attacks targeting Kurdish leaders and civilian areas, reaffirming its support for both the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi federal government while emphasizing the importance of Iraq's territorial integrity (Kurdistan24, 2026). Bahrain complemented these public statements through high-level diplomacy, as King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani discussed regional tensions and emphasized continued cooperation in support of regional peace and security (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2026).

The KRG, in turn, expressed solidarity with Gulf partners when they became targets of Iranian attacks. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani held telephone conversations with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, condemning the attacks against the UAE and reaffirming the Kurdistan Region's commitment to regional peace and stability (Kurdistan Chronicle, 2026). These exchanges illustrated that the KRG increasingly viewed Gulf security as closely linked to its own regional security environment.

Beyond official condemnations, the conflict generated a shared security narrative. Iranian officials increasingly portrayed both the Kurdistan Region and some Gulf states—particularly the UAE—as platforms for hostile foreign actors. Iranian officials explicitly compared their approach toward the UAE with their policy toward the Kurdistan Region, reinforcing the perception that both had become part of the same regional security equation (Rudaw, 2026). Consequently, the war strengthened political and diplomatic coordination between Erbil and the Gulf capitals despite the absence of formal security arrangements. Overall, as this article has argued, the evolution of KRG–Gulf relations reflects an emerging form of micro-regional paradiplomacy. The reciprocal official reactions to Iranian attacks against both the Gulf states and the Kurdistan Region demonstrate early signs of role adaptation, whereby both sides increasingly perceive one another not only as economic partners but also as relevant security stakeholders. While this cooperation has not evolved into a formal security alliance, the exchange of diplomatic support, suggest that their

partnership has a potential to gradually expand beyond economic cooperation toward a broader security partnership.

Conclusion

This paper has shed a light on a potential micro-regional paradiplomacy between the KRG and the Gulf states. In this purpose, Erbil's foreign relations and the engagement of the Gulf states in Kurdistan Region of Iraq have been discussed with a post-structural approach to role theory.

For the Gulf states, this cooperation offers opportunities for strategic gains in political and economic relations with the KRG, while for the KRG it constitutes a role adaptation shaped by its institutional tensions with Baghdad and its Kurdish identity. The study has argued that this cooperation does not denote homogeneity among Gulf actors, nor does it suggest unequivocal support for Kurdish independence. Rather, it points to pragmatic alignments shaped by material and ideational motivations, including economic opportunities, the containment of Iranian influence, and the pursuit of diplomatic recognition. For the Gulf monarchies, this engagement opens new spaces of influence in Iraq, while for the KRG it strengthens its legitimacy and international visibility as a semi-autonomous actor. This process thus reflects a potential Kurdish-Khaliji socialization that extends beyond conventional roles.

In this context, role contestations—whether between Baghdad and Erbil, or among competing Gulf states—have the potential to trigger processes of role adaptation. The KRG's articulation of itself as a regional-subsystem collaborator, together with the Gulf states' willingness to accommodate this role, suggests the emergence of a dynamic and fluid micro-regional paradiplomacy.

As a conclusion, I argued that these actors are part of an emerging micro-regional paradiplomacy with the KRG's role conception of regional-subsystem collaborator. The emerging role conceptions can bring further role adaptation for the KRG and the Gulf states to strengthen their actorness in the Middle East, despite potential role contestations. This reinforcing cooperation could provoke intra-Gulf rivalries. Or these micro-regional paradiplomacy could transform into an institutional regional-subsystem collaboration through adapting new roles in their foreign policy making.

Ultimately, this study contributes to both Middle East studies and role theory by illustrating how sub-state actors such as the KRG negotiate their foreign policy roles in ways that are shaped by, but not reducible to, state-level hegemonies.

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Plagiarism check: Completed.

Declaration of conflicting interests: The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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