

# Tracking Iranian Soft Power Influence in the KRI

by [Nawras Jaff \(/experts/nawras-jaff\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Nawras Jaff \(/experts/nawras-jaff\)](#)

Nawras Jaff is a political columnist in Iraq, and a graduate student studying for his Master's Degree in International Studies and Diplomacy at Old Dominion University.



Brief Analysis

**The Islamic Republic of Iran over several years has gained a significant foothold in Iraq, spreading its influence and agenda throughout Iraqi daily life.**

However, this foothold has adopted a particular character in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where Iran has developed different mechanisms through which to expand that influence both inside and outside KRI territory. Tehran utilizes numerous methods of soft power to this end, including coercion in Iraq's internal politics, proselytization, cultural expansion, and the shaping of educational opportunities.

### **Iranian Influence in the KRI's Internal Politics**

As with much of Iraq, the Islamic Republic is notorious for its financial, military, and logistical support of Iraqi Kurdish political parties, especially the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Over the years, this has given Iran a key foothold in the Iraqi political scene.

Starting at the beginning of the militant and revolutionary political movements of the parties in south Kurdistan in the 1960s until today, Iran's extensive role in supporting and insuring the financial, military, and logistical necessities of the parties has played a major role in internal Kurdish politics. Visits are one public aspect of this dynamic. An Iranian delegation [visited \(https://drawmedia.net/page\\_detail?smart-id=12611\)](#) Kurdish officials in April 2022 to discuss strengthening bilateral ties, during which the delegation met with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) president Masoud Barzani, KRI Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, and KRI President Nechirvan Barzani.

Iran's Deputy Minister of Intelligence (Ettela'at/VAJA), Agha Lutfi, and another Iranian delegation likewise met with several other KRI politicians in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in April 2023, including [Muhammad Haji Mahmood \(https://drawmedia.net/page\\_detail?smart-id=12611\)](#), an Iraqi Kurdish politician affiliated with the KRI's Social Democratic Party. During this visit, the Washington Kurdish Institute's [April 18 report \(https://dckurd.org/2023/04/18/kurdistans-weekly-brief-april-18-2023/\)](#) noted claims that the Iranian delegation had pressured the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to "expel and disarm Iranian Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan in an attempt to follow up on a recent security agreement between Baghdad and Tehran," an agreement focused on containing Iranian Kurdish dissidents in the KRI to protect Iran's security.

In a televised interview in April 2023, Haji Mahmood—secretary of a party splintered off from the KDP—seemingly acknowledged the deep entrenchment of Iranian forces in Kurdish politics, [claiming \(https://drawmedia.net/xarman\\_detail?id=17\)](#) that "in the 2014 elections, Qasem Soleimani, the former Iranian Quds Forces commander, gave one million U.S. dollars to the four Kurdish

opposition parties.”

Likewise, prior to his death, Soleimani would meet regularly with Iraqi Kurdish officials. In particular, he met with PUK figures in 2017, [advising \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kirkuk-fall-idUSKBN1CP2CW\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kirkuk-fall-idUSKBN1CP2CW) them and their Peshmerga forces not to attempt a firefight in the city of Kirkuk against the forces of then-Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, who were backed by Western and regional powers, including Iran. In exchange for a Peshmerga withdrawal from Kirkuk, Soleimani promised that Iran would “protect their interests.” His visit and advice were [lauded \(https://www.rferl.org/a/iranian-general-irgc-commander-soleimani-reportedly-played-key-role-swift-takeover-iraqs-kirkuk-kurdish-parties-puk-kdp/28807424.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/iranian-general-irgc-commander-soleimani-reportedly-played-key-role-swift-takeover-iraqs-kirkuk-kurdish-parties-puk-kdp/28807424.html) by Kurdish lawmakers as both “wise” and helpful in preventing “a fatal mistake.”

### Religion as a Tool of Influence

The KRI is primarily comprised of Sunni Muslims, especially those who follow the Shafi'i school of Sunni religious thought. For several years, Iran has organized the ‘Imam al-Shafi Congress’  [\(https://ku.mehrnews.com/news/1828/%DA%A9%DB%86%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%B1%DB%95%DB%8C-%D9%86%DB%8E%D9%88%D9%86%DB%95%D8%AA%DB%95%D9%88%DB%95%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A6%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AF-%D8%AE-%D9%84%DB%95-%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%DB%95%DA%95%DB%8E%D9%88%DB%95-%D8%AF%DB%95%DA%86%DB%8E%D8%AA\)](https://ku.mehrnews.com/news/1828/%DA%A9%DB%86%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%B1%DB%95%DB%8C-%D9%86%DB%8E%D9%88%D9%86%DB%95%D8%AA%DB%95%D9%88%DB%95%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A6%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AF-%D8%AE-%D9%84%DB%95-%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%DB%95%DA%95%DB%8E%D9%88%DB%95-%D8%AF%DB%95%DA%86%DB%8E%D8%AA) for KRI Mullahs and other religious figures as a means of influencing religious leaders in the KRI. Some religious figures have in fact converted to Shia Islam. Sheikh Issa Barznji, for instance, [pledged \(https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN\\_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=X4moGX&v=1277125372905440\)](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=X4moGX&v=1277125372905440) allegiance to Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the prophet Mohammad, saying, “I am the follower of Imam Ali and Muhammad Prophet. Everyone should be the followers of Imam Ali” to Rudaw Media Network during Eid al-Ghadir, a significant holiday for Shia Muslims. He then went on to claim that the events of Saddam Hussein’s regime would not have occurred if Iraqis had been Shia.

Among the many ethnic groups inhabiting the KRI, Iran has tried to curry religious favor with several of them, including those that were targeted during the years when ISIS was most active—the Shabak, Kaka’i, and Bektashis in particular. In each case, Iran has attempted to push these minorities towards its brand of Shia Islam. As one source put it, “Iran tried to alter the opinions and beliefs of the Shabak and Kaka’is... [and attempted to] convince the Kaka’is that if they do not convert to Shia, Sunni extremists will attack them.” Demonstrating the partial success of Iran’s message, there are now Shia militias operating in the Mosul Governorate and in neighboring areas which consist of members of the [Shabak \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-hashd-al-shabak-30th-pmf-brigade\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-hashd-al-shabak-30th-pmf-brigade) and Kaka’i ethnic groups. [Bartella \(https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/world/middleeast/iraq-christians-bartella-shabak.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/world/middleeast/iraq-christians-bartella-shabak.html), a previously Christian-dominant town in the heart of Christian Iraq, now hosts many Shia Iraqis.

### Tariqqat

There are multiple Tariqqat in the Kurdistan Region, almost all of which are affiliated with Sunni Islamic movements. Nevertheless, Iran’s influence is visible in one of the KRI’s largest Tariqa in terms of followers: Qadri-Kasnazani Tariqa, which is located in Sulaymaniyah. This Tariqa receives thousands of visitors monthly. Alongside Sunni visitors, Shia from southern and central Iraq and Iran visit and participate in its ceremonies and religious activities.

The history of this Tariqa is not extensive. It emerged from the burial place of [Sheikh Muhammad Kasnazani \(https://kasnazanway.com/shaikhs/muhammad-al-muhammad-al-kasnazan/biography-of-shaikh-muhammad-al-muhammad-al-kasnazan/\)](https://kasnazanway.com/shaikhs/muhammad-al-muhammad-al-kasnazan/biography-of-shaikh-muhammad-al-muhammad-al-kasnazan/) after his death in July 2020. Since then, it has become a place of pilgrimage for his followers, including Iranians along with domestic and other foreign visitors. The imagery around this Tariqa is decidedly reminiscent of other Shia holy sites, including major Shia figures such as Ammar al-Hakim, the Hikmah Route Leader who is one of the known Shia leaders in Iraq and has great support from Iran.

Iran has likewise devoted concerted efforts to trying to build a Hussainiya in the KRI city of Erbil. A Hussainiya (or Hosayniya) is a venue for Muharram ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, a primarily Shia practice. Though the building plan was eventually rejected by KRI authorities, Shias still perform their [annual religious ceremonies \(https://www.aa.com.tr/ks/%25D8%25B9%25DB%258E%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2582/%25D9%2584%25DB%2595-%25D9%2587%25DB%2595%25D9%2588%25D9%2584%25DB%258E%25D8%25B1-%25DB%258C%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25DB%258C-](https://www.aa.com.tr/ks/%25D8%25B9%25DB%258E%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2582/%25D9%2584%25DB%2595-%25D9%2587%25DB%2595%25D9%2588%25D9%2584%25DB%258E%25D8%25B1-%25DB%258C%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25DB%258C-)

[%25D8%25B9%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B4%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7-](#)

[%25DA%25A9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25DB%258C%25DB%2595%25D9%2588%25DB%2595/2656350\)](#) and activities at the city's Altoon Mosque.

Some indirect influence through Iranian visitors is also evident, and may have an impact on Kurdish receptiveness to these efforts. The KRI's position along the route that some Iranians take in pilgrimage to the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in southern Iraq has left its mark on Iraqi Kurds' familiarity with Iranian Shia Islam. Iranian nationals, along with Afghani nationals—despite Iraq's lack of diplomatic relations with Afghanistan's Taliban government—are allowed to enter Iraq without a visa as of 2021, including the KRI-controlled Bashmaq border crossing. In September 2022, especially during the annual anniversary of Ashura, more than 100,000 Shia followers from Iran used the KRI as a through point, arriving from the Haji Omaran border crossing. Pilgrims stayed a few nights in Erbil before and after the pilgrimage.

## Education

Beyond religion, students hailing from the KRI are increasingly traveling to Iran to study in the Islamic Republic's universities, a low-cost option compared to Iraqi universities for those pursuing bachelors, masters, and PhD degrees. Annually, an Iraqi student can expect to pay \$5,000 (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/10/iraqs-postgraduate-students-go-abroad.html>) in tuition at an Iraqi private university, while a master's or doctoral degree will only cost a student \$1,000 and \$1,500, respectively, at the University of Tabriz in Iran. Making an Iranian education even more appealing, [admission \(https://ifpnews.com/iranian-university-ready-admit-students-iraqi-kurdistan/\)](#) to an Iranian University has been greatly expanded to students with just "average scores." Additionally, Iraq recognizes certificates from Iranian universities, further facilitating study there.

The Islamic Republic has used the attendance of Iraqi Kurdish students in its universities to its advantage, introducing them to Shia culture and religion and the Iranian Shia agenda. This has resulted in a legacy of Iraqi Kurdish converts to Shia Islam, such as [Umed Nanakali \(https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100015720303914&mibextid=ZbWKwL\)](#), an office manager for the renowned Shia cleric Ammar al-Hakim—who himself was exiled in Iran as a dissident of Saddam Hussein's regime.

More recently, Iran has taken to bringing its own universities and educational opportunities inside the borders of its neighbor. Islamic Azad University, a multi-branch Iranian university with campuses in the Islamic Republic and Syria, has reached the approval phase to build [five new campuses \(https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/420496/IAU-plans-to-establish-universities-in-Iraq-Syria\)](#) in the Middle East. Iraqis have noticed these Iranian moves and view this educational expansion as another attempt by the Islamic Republic to spread its influence across the region, including in the KRI.

With Iran wielding such effective influence campaigns on both the political and cultural levels, all signs point to Iranian soft power continuing to grow in the KRI. Though the impact of these soft power efforts only tends to become evident over time, the current signs of Iranian influence in the KRI's political, religious, and educational life suggest that this movement will remain effective in the future. ❖

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