2 Kurdish Conflict in a Regional Perspective
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the Kurdish factor within the broader context of regional politics in the Middle East. The focus here is on relations between Iran and Turkey, with a secondary emphasis on Iraq. Relations between these three countries have been influenced by a variety of factors in recent decades, but the Kurdish factor has been the least understood of the variables which have shaped the contours of the political relationship between Iran, Turkey and Iraq. Given the increasing importance of the role of the Kurds in current and future conflicts in the Middle East, it is worth examining this somewhat neglected topic to see how it affects continuity and change in regional relations.

The processes of change and patterns of continuity in the foreign policies of the regional states can be examined within the context of the Kurdish conflict. The continuity variable is reflected in the fact that Iran, Turkey and Iraq have used their own Kurdish population as well as those of the neighbouring states in pursuit of their foreign policy objectives. As a consequence, the Kurds have, to various degrees, become victims of regional and international politics. The Gulf War, the establishment of a 'no-fly' zone in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds from military attacks by Iraqi forces and the subsequent creation of a Kurdish administration have brought about changes in regional variables affecting the Kurds. As will be discussed later, post-Gulf War developments have forced the principal states in the region to modify their foreign policies, at least in the short term, and to adjust their Kurdish policies accordingly.

In 1501, with the advent of the Shi’a Safavid dynasty in Iran, the Sunni Ottoman Empire saw Iran as an ideological and political challenge to its leadership of the Muslim world. Consequently, the Ottoman sultans sought to confront their new adversaries with the force of arms and threatened to crush the Shi’a state. The Ottoman sultans generally viewed the Persians as ‘heathens’ who blasphemed against Islam through their
Map 2.1 Kurdish lands