

Between Dreams and Reality: Understanding Perceptions Towards an Independent Kurdistan



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**Between Dreams and Reality:
Understanding Perceptions Towards an Independent Kurdistan**

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Frontpage picture:
Poster of an imagined Kurdistan.

ریگای ئازادی به گول نه پوشراوه

Regay azadi ba gul naposhrawa.

The path to freedom is not covered by flowers.

Executive Summary

Iraqi Kurdistan is often depicted as a state in the making, working its way towards independence. Most studies on the Iraqi Kurdish question tend to look at developments on a state political level, following the developments with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and their position in the international arena. Critics of the state building attempts generally voice the ineffectiveness of political agency, military, and economic influences of the Kurdistan region. In doing so, there is a risk of overlooking the reasons on the ground for statehood. In the wake of the independence referendum held in September 2017, this research attempts to understand the perceptions of the Kurdish people in Iraq towards statehood. In order to understand their relationship towards the idea of an independent Kurdistan, this work touches upon the imaginaries of the people towards facets that reveal the image of an aspiring sovereign state.

The question at the basis is aiming to grasp how statehood is perceived in Iraqi Kurdistan. With this question in mind this project raises various classical aspects of the state that are; culture, politics, economy, military, and international recognition. While conducting interviews in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and amongst the Kurdish diaspora in Jordan a sixth factor rose to the surface; social ecology. Highlighting the binary between ecological and social issues in society. The perceptions and imaginaries supporting and opposing an independent Kurdistan are analysed through these aspects.

This analysis shows in sum that most perceptions in favour are mainly constructed around cultural, political, military and ecological aspects of the state, while the voices opposing mainly address challenges related to economy, politics and the international arena. This thesis shows that the unique aspects of this demand of statehood derive from a strong feeling of shared historical suffering and a clear relationship to the environment and nature in which the Kurdish society lives. However, whether secession is the answer to the various issues expressed turns out to be a question of perception. The vast majority perceives secession as a solution while a smaller group sees the challenges as more pressing.

It is clear that sovereignty is a dream that is alive amongst the people of Iraqi Kurdistan and that independence is perceived as a way to freedom. It is argued here that people's perceptions and imaginaries towards statehood should be given more attention. It is through grasping these perceptions that modern state building attempts can be better understood. As for Iraqi Kurdistan it shows that social ecology is perceived as an important aspect for building a free society, which has no place in literature on state formation yet.

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Preface

This work is dedicated to the people of Kurdistan.

The more I heard and read about a move to independence, the more I wanted to grasp what really drives the will of Kurdish people to secede from Iraq. That's why the attempt here is to explain the underlying perceptions and imaginaries of the Iraqi Kurds towards potential statehood. Rather than focusing on external factors to Kurdish statehood, this thesis focuses on the image that Kurdish people have of their aspiring state while acknowledging historical legacies and lived experiences. The focus on the people comes in a time where a lot of attention is given to external challenges and elite politics.

I would like to thank Wageningen University & Research for being the place where I could develop myself both academically, personally, and professionally. In particular my gratitude goes to Joost Jongerden and Ewout Frankema, who offered invaluable insights and suggestions that improved the content of this work. But above all, I thank you for your patience and flexibility. With my sporadic changes of plans this project took way longer than anyone would have expected.

I am most appreciative to the people that were willing to talk to me and shared their stories during my time in Erbil, Sulaiymaniye, Dohuk, and Amman. Special thanks goes to Majed, who opened his house to me in Erbil and drove me all over Iraqi Kurdistan in order to get my interviews done. Heger, I thank you for allowing me to use your great network and supporting me to find a diverse range of people to interview.

Baba Ali gyan, bapirem, zor supas. My grandfather, with whom I stayed in Sulaiymaniye, is the soul of this work. I thank you for taking me by the hand through the bazaar of Sulaiymaniye, translating for me to Arabic when I got lost in Kurdish (because I came to a point that my Arabic was better than my Sorani), spending hours with me in Amna Suraka, and serving me every morning the best Kurdish breakfast consisting of fresh bread, yoghurt with honey and walnuts.

I thank Cinur for her continues support. You are the one that really got me through this. Offering your generous time to discuss and listen to all my ups and downs throughout this process has been invaluable.

My mother and my dad Joep, without your unconditional love I could not have done this. Thank you for being patient with me. It took longer then expected, but I think I am finally graduated!

Glossary

DAESH	The Arabic word to describe the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.
GORRAN	Also known as the Gorran Movement which stands for the Movement of Change. It is the largest opposition party operating in Iraqi Kurdistan
IS	The Islamic State.
KDP	The Kurdistan Democratic Party.
KIG	Kurdistan Islamic Group.
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government.
PKK	The Kurdistan Workers' Party.
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

1. Introduction

Demand for Kurdish statehood

THERE ARE COUNTLESS GROUPS in the world that claim greater autonomy in the state they inhabit. These claims can vary from simply a claim to be heard to a claim demanding an independent sovereign state. Between these two extremes, various claims to autonomy exist and are taking place in the world. This thesis focuses on demands of greater autonomy where the majority of the people vote for the construction of a sovereign independent state. In addition, this research has the ambition to understand the reasons behind people's choice to secede from the state they inhabit and subsequently their perceptions of independence in an ex ante state¹.

Claims to self-determination by territorially concentrated ethnic groups are at the core of political debates around the globe. Many ethnic minorities assert an ambition for greater political autonomy in the state they are organized in. In some instances, the desire goes further than autonomy only. The emergence of an independent state where sovereign authority can be exercised is sometimes the only way through which the demand of autonomy can be satisfied. Secessionist movements that tend to achieve independence from the state they inhabit, lay claims on the right to self-determination. Such movements can be found across space and time.

This work discusses societies that claim the right to self-determination in such a way that they express the desire for self-administration. Greater political autonomy in these particular cases is expressed through a majority vote in favour of the emergence of a state. To investigate this, it is of significance to understand what the pre-requisites are for independence and the construction of a sovereign state, both controlling and governing the territory the society in question lays claim to. To what extent is the process of independent state formation feasible? Is an independent state able to fulfil the underlying wishes of people voting to separate from the incumbent state? And what are their perceptions and imaginaries of an ex-ante state? These questions are at the basis of this research, examining the case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Altogether this thesis problematizes the various factors that play a role in the realization of a sovereign state and how people perceive an ex-ante state. This work is structured along two lines. First, understanding models of autonomy, focusing on the highest form of autonomy; full sovereignty and the construction of an independent state. A lot of scholars have theorized the question of state building initiatives, and in various ways. Interestingly, the literature has

¹ An ex ante state: a state that does not exist (yet).

primarily been driven by the fields of international relations and political sciences. From Tilly and a Weberian point of view to understandings of ‘good governance’ by Fukuyama and the position of cultural identity in state building and nation building by Ottaway. Five classical factors can be formalized that underlie most demands for statehood: culture, military, economy, politics and international recognition. In addition to these five factors, there is a sixth factor, namely social ecology. This factor addresses the important relationship between people and their environment. Second, an empirical approach focusing on the imaginaries of people to demand the highest form of autonomy. In this study the case of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan is investigated, where unique aspects are at stake. The empirical approach touches upon the wishes and the challenges that come together with demands of greater autonomy.

1.1 Problem Statement and Research Questions

Ethnic conflict has been, and still is, a popular subject of investigation in social and political sciences. The numerous ethnic and religious conflicts around the world justify this scientific field of work. These types of conflicts are nowadays so widespread, *that it seems superfluous to offer justifications for addressing them* (Hannum, 2011: 3). In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan we can evidently talk about an ‘ethnic’ conflict, since there are clear ethnic distinctions in terms of race, culture, linguistic, and religion with the incumbent state Iraq. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the complexity of such conflicts, which in many instances also include dimensions that can be described as *center-periphery, majority-minority, or powerful-powerless conflicts* (Hannum, 2011:4). Often, the right to secede is seen as a solution to the problems that arise from ethnic conflict and violence. However, Horowitz (2003) argues that secession by ethnic groups is in the vast majority of such problems not the solution, and even can make the problems worse. The relevance in studying minority or ethnic conflicts in the world is also influenced by the international and transnational component of such disputes. The escalation of ethnic conflict often results in geopolitical apprehension, resulting in an involvement of external actors. Autonomy then often comes in as a proposed resolution, like it is the case for Iraqi Kurdistan. While the Kurds in Iraq already enjoy a significant level of autonomy, the demand for statehood persists.

Within the Middle East, the Kurdish demand for statehood should not be underestimated. The Kurds are more prominent than ever before in Middle Eastern regional politics. While the promise of a state of their own has never been realized, their attempts have been ongoing. The referendum held in September 2017 shows that becoming independent is still a dream for the majority of the Kurdish population in Iraq. However, Kurdish independence is also a major source of conflict in the region, since it is on the one hand a demand for sovereignty on the side of the Kurds, and on the other hand directly challenging the sovereignty of the Iraqi state. Chapter three will give a historical overview of the quest for Kurdish independence in Iraq.

The focus of this thesis is the demand for statehood, with a particular focus on the Kurdish case in Iraq where a majority of the population expresses the desire for an independent sovereign state. At the core of this analysis is a problematization of various factors that affect the realization of a sovereign state. These factors are, like earlier said, *culture, military, economy, politics, international recognition* and *social ecology*. In turn, the perceptions and imaginaries of the Kurds towards independence and statehood are analysed on the basis of these six factors.

The aspect unique for the case of Kurdistan turned to be the sixth factor, namely social ecology. During this research and while talking to Kurdish people, the importance of the

relationship to the environment and surroundings became clear while talking about state-building initiatives. Which, in turn, is also historically anchored. While reading about secessionist movements in the world, this relationship is often limited to demarcation of territory. However, in the specific case of Iraqi Kurdistan it is found that this relation goes beyond territory. Therefore it is of relevance to introduce the significance of social ecology, which in this project is simply defined as the relationship between the Iraqi Kurdish people and their environment. Touching upon the binary between ecological and social issues in relation to perceptions of statehood.

The aim of this research is to contribute to the understanding of demands for statehood by ethnic minorities, and giving significance to perceptions and imaginaries at stake amongst the population on the ground.

The main research question is formulated as follows:

How do people in the ex-ante state Kurdistan perceive statehood?

To guide this project, several sub-questions are defined:

1. What are the factors underlying different forms of autonomy?
2. What are the motives and challenges perceived to Kurdish statehood?
3. What is the relationship between Iraqi Kurds and their environment?
4. How does the Kurdish diaspora perceive the question of independence?

1.2 Thesis structure

This thesis is divided into six chapters, excluding the conclusion. In the remaining of this first chapter I will delineate the methods and methodology of this research. Outlining the procedure and data collection. The second chapter dives into the theories and concepts that are at the core of this work, focusing on six factors that influence the realization of building an independent sovereign state. The third chapter is a historical background and the fourth encompasses the empirical analysis of the perceptions of Iraqi Kurds towards statehood. Including the voices in favour and against the construction of a state. The fourth chapter specifically investigates social ecology in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan. Examining the relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and their environment, while it also pays attention to the position of the Kurdish diaspora and their perceptions towards the state-building initiative in Iraq. The Kurdish diaspora in question is based in Jordan. In the last chapter understandings and findings are discussed and main points are recapitulated.

1.3 Proposed methodology and methods

By knowing the underlying driving factors for the Iraqi Kurdish people to vote for independence it can be determined what they are actually demanding and to what extent those demands fit into the different models of autonomy; cultural, territorial, functional and legislative autonomy. For example, when an underlying driving factor of a large group of the society is to be able to speak the Kurdish language and enjoy all aspects of Kurdish culture, cultural autonomy might be sufficient enough to fulfil this desire. Therefore, data is needed on exactly this feature; why are people voting for independence and what are the outcomes they wish to get from having an independent state?

1.3.1 Data collection

At the core of this analysis is the case of Iraqi-Kurdish attempts to state building. Central for this research are conversations with Iraqi Kurdish people to understand their perceptions towards independence. Hence, the logical idea was to do fieldwork in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. However, this region is classified as a risk area according to the travel policy of Wageningen University & Research, and the drafted risk-assessment in order to go there was denied by the university. As a result, the data collection process had to be adjusted. While I started with an internship in Jordan, I made the decision to keep my research proposal and adjust it to the circumstances. The idea came to mind to research the perceptions of the diaspora community instead. While working in a research institute, I met a NGO director of Kurdish decent. Slowly the idea took shape. While Newroz (the Kurdish new year) was approaching, a fellow researcher at the institute and I decided to go to Kurdistan for a couple of weeks. Newroz would give her some opportunities to write articles for news outlets, and with proper preparation quite some in-depth interviews could be done in three weeks for this research. In that case, the Kurds in Iraq would still be the basis of this research, and the Kurdish diaspora in Jordan could be an additional perception to the story, examining if place would affect the relationship to independence. However, the interviews held in Iraqi Kurdistan, and follow up calls with those interviewees are at the foundation of this research.

When examining case studies there are, according to Stake (1995) and Yin (1994) several sources of evidence that are legitimate to use. These are documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artifacts. The main sources of evidence at the foundation of this research are interviews and documents. Verily, the primary source of data has been the data derived from semi-structured interviews. In order to contribute to the understanding of demands for statehood by Iraqi Kurds and giving voice to the perceptions and imaginaries at stake on the ground this thesis heavily relied on interviews in the field. The examination of academic research reports, articles and journals as well as policy documents, newspaper articles and web pages as for the secondary data. This secondary data has been helpful in drawing up the background and theoretical framework for this research.

1.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are seen as a viable source to extract information from case studies (Tellis, 1997). In order to answer the research questions, 11 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted. In addition to these in-depth interviews conversations were held with countless people on the streets of Kurdistan on the subject matter. As for the semi-structured interviews, an interview guide was developed. While all the interviews had the same intention, the list of questions was just a guideline and not fixated. In addition, the interviews were often built around topics, based on the six factors that are defined in the theoretical framework.

In order to find interviewees chain-referral method was used, also known as snowball sampling. Before departure to Iraqi Kurdistan I got the contact of the director of a local NGO. He responded with a lot of enthusiasm and assisted me in my journey to find interviewees in the Kurdistan region. Besides this, I watched a Dutch documentary in which return migration to Kurdistan was touched upon. In this documentary it is shown how several (Dutch)-Kurds that came to the Netherlands as either refugees or migrants returned back to Kurdistan. I managed to find the contact details of one of them and scheduled an interview with her while in Kurdistan. Through this contact additional relevant interviewees could be found too. A very special interview was held during my stay in Beirut, Lebanon. At the Issam Fares

Institute of the American University of Beirut a public lecture was organized covering the challenges that the Kurdistan Region was facing in light of the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The deputy prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government Qubad Talabani was the guest speaker for this lecture. Qubad Talabani was extremely approachable, hence I got his contact details and was able to ask him some questions in a later meeting.

As for the interviewees in Jordan it was slightly more complicated. After a long search for entry into the Kurdish community, I found out about the existence of the Kurdish-Jordanian Cultural Society. A representative of this society was the entry-point to get in touch with people representing the Kurdish diaspora in Jordan. Again, contacts were derived through snowballing.

Semi-structured interviews offered a great tool that made sure to cover important topics of research that were of interest for my investigation, however they also left space for respondents to give personal input. The twelve respondents covered people from a wide spectrum of the society; representatives of political parties but also researchers, actors in the public sector and private sector, NGO workers, academics, and citizens that were encountered during the stay in the region. All the interviews were conducted in person. However, follow up with some interviewees was done through phone.

1.3.3 Literature

In respect to literature, mainly academic and so-called grey literature have been used to understand the research topic. In order to understand and analyse the driving factors for an independent Kurdistan, some theoretical pillars were necessary to address within this research. The analytical framework is mainly constructed around the six factors (culture, military, economy, politics, international recognition and social ecology) that define attempts to statehood. These factors set the foundation for analysing theories of autonomy and state-building initiatives. For this instance, academic literature was instrumental. In addition, both academic and grey literature have been used to add to the perceptions given by the interviewees, and hence to triangulate.

1.3.4 Data analysis

During the fieldtrip to Kurdistan and when returned in Jordan I started analyzing the data by classifying the notes and interviews. A notebook was used to write down statements and observations during the interviews and along the way. I classified my notes according to the six factors I formulated for this research. All the six factors got a separate color through which I could identify and distinguish them. As a result of this process, it was relatively soon that first findings could be seen. In fact, it allowed grasping the findings in light of the framework I created.

1.4 Limitations

It is of importance, particularly in qualitative research, to consider and review the limitations of one's research (Kumar, 2010). My research faced three specific limitations.

The first limitation has to do with the research design. The idea at the beginning of this research was to do fieldwork in Iraqi-Kurdistan. A proposal and risk assessment were drafted accordingly as is needed for countries that are marked 'orange' in terms of risks.

Unfortunately due to the regulations by Wageningen University with regards to such risk

areas, the assessment and hence fieldwork in Iraqi-Kurdistan got rejected. Since this topic is what I wanted to investigate, it was difficult switch plans. I decided to first start with an internship before starting the thesis and ended up in Jordan, where the idea came to mind to do the research based from Jordan. In the end, I managed to go to Iraqi-Kurdistan for a period of three weeks, where most interviews could be conducted. In additions, interviews were held in Jordan. I would say that it was not the ideal way of conducting research, since I was very much torn between two places. Also, due to the way this research is set up I believe the link between the diaspora and the Iraqi-Kurdish perceptions might feel rather unpremeditated.

The second limitation was time. Since it is a master thesis the time to research is limited. In addition, due to safety considerations and the rejection by my university to conduct three months fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan, the data in Iraqi Kurdistan is collected over a period of approximately three weeks. In these weeks, all interviews have been held. It is without a doubt that more data could have been collected if there would have been more time.

Which leads us to the third limitation, which is closely related to the second; a limited amount of interviews were held for this research. While being in the process of this the fieldwork, it was not clear for me how many interviews would be needed to be able to draw certain arguments or conclusions. However, already after a couple of interviews repetition in the answers of the interviewees could be seen. It was only a view times that I was caught by surprise by new comments. Therefore I believe that the generation of more data could have influenced the consistency positively. Also, it would have made it easier to generalise findings.

2. Conceptualizing Factors of State Building Initiatives

THE INCREASED RELEVANCE of a common and at the same time distinct culture in relation to others changed the nature of the state. Within the context of this research, the political unit of interest is specifically the nation-state. In the case of the Kurdistan region in Iraq the nation-state's identity politics has led to both marginalisation and violent conflict. While there are different views, the main characteristic of a nation-state overall include a shared history, common language and culture, a claim to a geographically bounded territory and common economic life. In this sense, the state is naturally in charge of a great social infrastructure (Anbarani 2013:64 & Gellner 1983: 63-64).

What is of specific interest for this thesis is the fact that a nation, and in turn a nation-state, can exist and be founded on the basis of imagined features. Common myths can create nations through *imagined communities*. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as *an imagined political community*, both inherently limited and sovereign (Anderson, 2006: 5). Taking the notion of imagination further than imagined features of a community, general imaginations are of interest to understand perceptions. In this sense, imaginations can play a significant role in the way states are perceived. Additionally, imaginaries can shape the perceptions of people striving for an independent state.

2.1 The state through people's perceptions and imaginaries

The state is multidimensional and thus allows complex thinking regarding it. Features of the state and hence of processes of state formation can be divided in sections of so called 'hardware' and 'software'. Hardware on the one hand can be defined as the physical aspects that are central to a state construction. Think about a military, a central political body, and an economic system. Software on the other hand encompasses aspects in relation to the state that are not tangible. The intangible aspects of the state that are central in this research are people's perceptions and imaginaries. This requires some further explanation.

Moving beyond formalistic approaches towards ethnic conflict, perceptions and imaginaries allow to understand what actually drives people to strive for higher forms of autonomy or even statehood. The other way around, it also creates an understanding on how imaginaries can drive state building initiatives.

In order to examine perceptions and imaginaries I propose to create a model that covers different domains of the state, in which the imaginaries can be placed. The goal of the empirical analyses is thus to understand which directions the imaginaries of people take, and how domains of the state play a role in these thoughts. If we take a closer look to existing domains that are of important in state-building processes, five classical domains came up naturally, that have to do with culture, economy, politics, military and international relations.

However, a relevant additional domain was found to add, which is not discussed upon in relation to state-building initiatives. This is the domain of social ecology, which discusses the relationship between nature and environment on the one hand and the people and state-building on the other hand.

All together, this model encompasses the following domains:

1. A *cultural* domain: embodying the customs, traditions, heritage and social behavior of a community or society.
2. An *economic* domain: relates to all the activities in terms of income generation, production and consumption of goods, and the use of resources.
3. A *political* domain: highlighting governance of a certain area, different ruling parties and the power relationship between them.
4. A *military* domain: affiliated to all the aspects of the armed forces of a country.
5. An *international* domain: addressing the diplomatic relations with the international arena and in particular the interactions between different states.
6. A *social ecological* domain: studying the relationship between people and their environment.

The idea is that through questioning the perceptions of people voting for independence, their wishes and hence their imaginaries of an independent Kurdistan can be analyzed. In this way you can get hold of the perceptions that drive a certain community, in this case the Iraqi Kurds. This model of the six domains helps to understand how these imaginaries of a Kurdish state are alive within the society and how the domains play a role in their wishes. These perceptions are empirically qualified throughout this research by in-depth interviews.

2.2 Defining processes of state formation

2.2.1 Elite driven perspective

The state has been conceptualized in multiple ways. Weber's definition is amongst others widely accepted, which centralizes the monopoly of legitimately using physical force within a specific territory (Vu 2010: 164-165). Another interesting view on the concept of the state comes from Charles Tilly, describing the state as *coercion-wielding organizations that are distinct from households and kinship groups and exercise clear priority in some respects over all other organizations within substantial territories* (Vu 2010: 165). Subsequently, the state is understood as a *protection racket*, competing external rivals to raise revenues to be able to fight wars. This notion underlines Tilly's famous phrase *war made the state and the state made war* (Tilly, 1985: 170-171).

In the case of pre-modern states, various conflicts have been fought. In order to increase revenues to wage wars, attention was given to fiscal innovations. The innovations made in the time of pre-modern states led to shape and change fiscal institutions eventually (Dincecco & Prado, 2012: 5). In order for these states to operate in this scene, it was necessary expand their fiscal capacities. A popular way to enhance the financial status of the state was taxing the population (Sundstøl Eriksen 2011: 232-233). However, in the landscape of pre-modern European states, the fiscal bodies often operated separately. Resulting in uneven tax pressure across the state. Local tax control came with political autonomy in these fragmented polities. State formation in this context proceeded with processes of fiscal centralization. While that process took centuries, it was when uniform tax rates were introduced by the national

government that fiscal centralization became a fact. With this development, also new state bureaucracies emerged (Dincecco 2009: 51-53).

This perspective on state formation can be defined as elite driven, since political voice was concentrated amongst the elite (Lindert 2004: 77). Taxation of the population has been a means for states to improve their financial basis, in turn the income from taxes has been a tool to invest in wars. Tilly provides a fairly grassroots perspective, presumably nothing was at stake before the emergence of modern states. However, this approach is rather Eurocentric and lacks the ability to explain the rise of nations, and underestimates the large extent of states that did not emerge as a result of military rivalry. Nevertheless, the functional aspects of the state, such as its military, economic system and political bodies, remain of importance in modern attempts to state building. They encompass three out of the six domains of the state that form the model for analysing perceptions towards state building. Where Tilly looked at processes of state formation in a time where modern states did not exist yet, this thesis is analysing a context where people are not content within the state they are organized in. This discontentment is partly affected by material dysfunction, but for a large part also by cultural differences. Both Weber and Tilly provide fundamental theories of the state, however they are incomplete in order to analyse the cultural aspects at stake.

2.2.2 Cultural approaches to the state

Significant conceptual changes took place in defining the state. Immaterial aspects, like culture and ideology, are increasingly having a place in the understanding of the state. Additionally, the role of human actors is being examined; moving beyond the idea that the state is acting as an autonomous organization (Vu 2010: 164-166). Common identity, shared history and grievances can strengthen a state. These features are part of what is defined under the cultural domain of the model to analyse perceptions towards state building. Hence it is important to acknowledge the role of culture in understanding state formation in order to understand how people on the one hand perceive the state they are living in and on the other hand imagine the state they want to live in.

To understand everyday practices of a state in the sense of cultural and social aspects it is important to understand the role of social capital in the state. Bourdieu (1986) argues that social capital is connected to the membership you have in a certain group:

Possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. These relationships can also be socially instituted by the construction of a common name and by the construction of instituting acts (Bourdieu 1986: 251).

Social capital can be measured by society through institutionalizing cultural capital. This in turn leads to institutional recognition (Bourdieu 1986: 247). In addition to this idea of social capital, Levi (1998) argues for the characteristics of social organization while looking at social capital. Trust, norms and networks can define these characteristics. In this understanding it is not only the existence of social relationships that define social capital, but also the characteristics of such relationships. Hence, values, norms and culture are part of the construction of social relationships.

By understanding social capital it is easier to grasp how social and cultural aspects influence state formation. Societies are influenced by historical and cultural traits, including their traditions, norms and values. In turn, this also has its institutional influence. Cultural factors

have a significant impact on the establishment and development of formal institutions. According to Fukuyama (2004) informal practices influence formal institutions. Addressing nonmaterial elements like ideas, beliefs, and rituals can enrich the imagination of the state. These elements help in legitimizing state power, since a society that is cohesive and feels represented has a higher chance of accountability. Ultimately, it is the people of a society that hold governments accountable. Therefore, legitimation can be argued to be at the centre of state making (Vu 2010:166).

Essential to state building, according to Bogdandy et al. (2005) is the establishment of *sovereign capacities*. It is not the aim of state building to use force but instead, it is the aim to establish a state as *a concentration and expression of collective power without the need to exercise coercion*. The only way this can be achieved is through legitimacy. The use of power and the governing bodies of a state need to be legitimate, and the way for societies to be legitimate is through *the people* (Bogdandy et al. 2005: 584).

2.2.3 International norms in state building processes

Globalization and growing interdependency between states caused a need to formulate functions of the state that are internationally agreed upon. The increased interdependency also led to increased influence of international norms on processes of state building. International norms used to cover just human rights, however nowadays it includes areas of international development, security, trade relations, and even state sovereignty (Lotz 2010: 221).

While state building is perceived to be merely a local process, it is more than ever also a process in which international actors play a significant role (Lotz 2010: 220). While these international norms are not universally formalized, the current state of order in the world makes successful state building nearly impossible without the support of the international arena.

The fifth domain in the earlier described model is the *international* domain. This domain addresses exactly these international dynamics that play a role in state formation, including the diplomatic relations and interactions amongst states. Increasing emphasis is put on the 'need' of international recognition for statehood. Richards & Smith (2015) argue that recognition is in most cases the ultimate goal and the final obstacle to statehood. If not granted recognition, the political entities operate in the international system as if they are states despite the legal status. These unrecognized states as they call it, enjoy relative autonomy. When statehood is not recognized or granted, the solution often offered is autonomy. However, there are differences in the forms of autonomy.

2.3 Understanding models of autonomy

The feeling that shared interests need to be protected against the more powerful society in place emerges as a result of diverse factors. However, the solution or desire in many cases is quite similar, namely greater political autonomy (Hannum, 2011: 4). In quite general terms, autonomy is understood as the *independence of action on the internal or domestic level*, while domains like foreign affairs and defense are for example still controlled by the national government of the parenting state (Hannum & Lillich, 1980: 860). Autonomy can therefore be seen as a means to diffuse powers; protecting state unity while at the same time respecting the population's diversity (Lapidoth, 1997: 3).

The desire for greater political autonomy, and in turn autonomous orders, comes in many different forms. Tkacik (2008) visualised these various forms of autonomy, ranging from personal autonomy to legislative autonomy or so-called full autonomy:

Figure 1: Forms of Autonomy

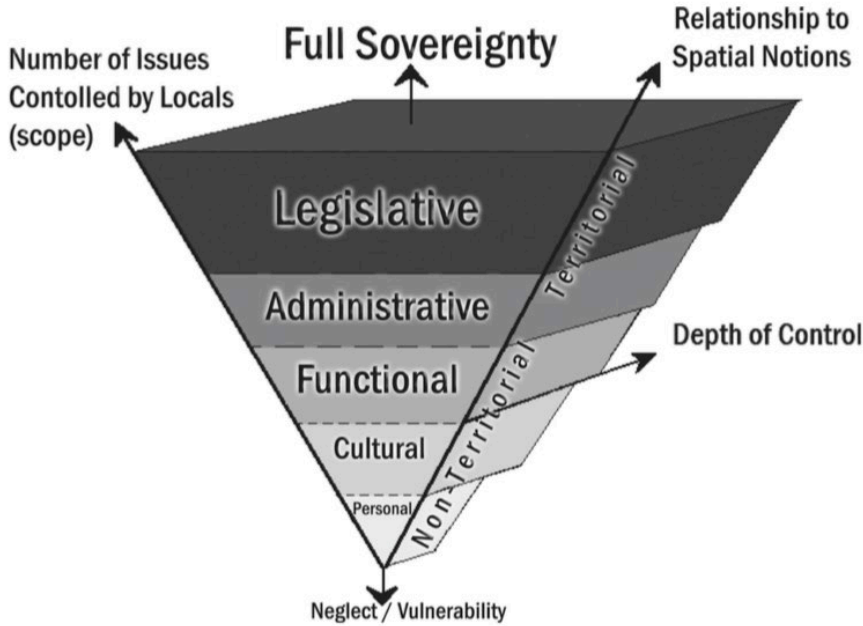


Figure 1. Forms of Autonomy.

This model illustrates how autonomy can be arranged; varying from personal, cultural, functional, administrative, and legislative autonomy. Next to that, the aggregate number of issues controlled, the depth of local control, and the territorial distinctiveness are variables that are used to measure the volume of autonomy. As such, this model shows how to label autonomous systems *on the amount of autonomy granted*. Hence, it says nothing about the normative value of autonomies (Tkacik, 2008: 401). In relation to this visualisation by Tkacik, it is important to mention that autonomy should not be seen as static procedure. In contrast, autonomy is not something fixated, a status that you achieve and never lose, but rather in constant negotiation.

In addition to Tkacik’s model, Suksi’s (1998) understanding of different forms of autonomy adds a distinction between territorial and non-territorial forms of autonomy. Territorial autonomy constitutes a specific region that is given a status of self-government. This territorial self-government allows the people of a particular geographically defined region to control the territory in accordance to historical and regional circumstances, and address issues specifically important for the people subject to region. However, not all claims to greater autonomy come from territorial concentrated ethnic groups. Hence, it is of relevance to determine non-territorial forms of autonomy. Cultural, personal, and functional autonomy are such forms (Suksi, 1998: 18-20).

In the following table, four forms of autonomy are highlighted as conceptualized by several academics in this field, and further elaborate on the distinct features of these forms,. Examining the characteristics of autonomous arrangements is valuable in order to understand how the desire for autonomy can actually take form in the incumbent state.

2.3.1 Conceptualization of different forms of autonomy

Type of autonomy	Description	Characteristics
Cultural autonomy	Personal and cultural autonomy is in much literature used interchangeably. Both notions are developed in light of protecting minority rights in the society (Lapidoth, 1997: 37). However, cultural autonomy specifically focuses on matters of culture, such as extending rights to certain linguistic or religious groups (Tkacik, 2008: 371). Hence, it affects all members of the ethnic group in question, despite their geographical location (Lapidoth, 1997: 40).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>The maintenance and reproduction of culture</i> (Eide in Suksi, 1998: 252). - Non-territorial
Territorial autonomy	Applies to all inhabitants of a certain region, including those who are not a member of the particular group that is claiming greater autonomy. In addition to cultural matters, territorial autonomy can also add to social and economic affairs (Lapidoth, 1997: 39-40). As Ghai (2008) states: <i>a device to allow ethnic or other groups claiming a distinct identity to exercise direct control over affairs of special concern to them, while allowing the larger entity those powers which cover common interests</i> (Ghai in Barter, 2017: 299). This form of autonomy entails to some extent a form of self-government for a territorial concentrated ethnic group (Barter, 2017: 299).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Territorial claims - Broader than cultural matters only - Self-government over matters of direct concern to the territorial ethnic group
Functional autonomy	The decentralization of particular functions and control over a subject from the public administration to a body of control in the geographically distinct region. These functions could for example imply control over schools, public services, rule of law, and the military, focused on the selected group (Tkacik, 2008: 371 & Suksi, 1998: 24).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transfer of control and duties over particular functions of public administration

Legislative/ autonomy	full	<p>The internal government of a territory, including <i>common citizenship or nationality; delegation of competence in the area of foreign relations; delegation of competence in the area of defense, including the retention by other states of limited powers of intervention under specific circumstances</i>. In some instances it also means the establishment of a <i>common customs union or currency</i> (Hannum & Lillich, 1980: 886). This fiscal aspect of is crucial to determine whether full autonomy is at stake or not. The level of fiscal autonomy define also the level on which political agreements are made. Fiscal autonomy can shift the making of political agreements from the central government to the regional government.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local legislature - A level of independent authority
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If it comes to the majority of the Iraqi Kurds, it is the highest form of autonomy that they desire, namely legislative autonomy which is also associated with full sovereignty. This form of autonomy goes beyond the boundaries of the incumbent state; it is the most extreme demand of self-determination that voices the wish to secede from the current state structure.

The right to self-determination is a principle that is immediately associated with the concept of autonomy. Yet, I believe it is important to note that these concepts should not be used interchangeably, although there is a clear connection between the two. As Hilpod (2017) states: *autonomy is both an alternative to self-determination as well as an expression of it* (2017: 328). Autonomy can on the one hand be a means to further calls to statehood, but on the other hand it can also be approached as an element of state building that gives voice to the needs of subordinate communities. Hence, autonomy does not always raise drastic fights for self-determination and secession (Wolff & Weller, 2005: 3).

2.4 Self-determination and Secession

The principle of self-determination is highly contentious, sub-groups challenging the sovereignty of the dominant state by seeking self-determination and full secession is increasingly a source of conflict within states (Griffiths, 2003: 30).

The basic idea of national self-determination, as it is integrated in the Charter of the United States, is as follow; *All peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development*. The principle was, amongst others, espoused by President Woodrow Wilson, and became guiding for the reconstruction of Europe after the First World War (UNPO, 2017 & Anderson, 1997: chapter 2).

Today, many non-state populations assert the right to self-determine; from the Kurds, the Basques, the Palestinians to the Tamils. However, self-determination concerns a conflict

between *two competing selves*, and whether a population can actually achieve self-determination is mainly influenced by violence and political struggles (Griffiths, 2003: 30-31). In practice, self-determination can imply autonomy, self-governing federation, or full independence. The latter is also seen as secession (Vries, de & Schomerus, 2017: 29).

Secession is the utmost expression of the right to self-determination and the role of secession in constructing states is a significant one. Secession is widely understood as the resignation from the sovereign authority of the incumbent state (Vries, de & Schomerus, 2017: 30). Adding to that understanding, I like to approach secession as a process instead of a singular act. Linda Suzanne Bishai (1999) formulates that in a profound way:

Serious secessionist movements, as potential states themselves, affect relations between states by presenting all of the states in the system with the dilemma of whether or not to recognise them, and thus whether or not to bestow upon them the legal status of sovereignty and thereby establish international relations with them (1999: 11)

The decision to recognize the right to self-determination in terms of seceding from the state is a heavy one. Recognizing secession allows the secessionist movement to assert a status of sovereignty on the one hand, accompanied with a significant chance of damaging the relationships with the 'parenting state' on the other hand (1999:11)

2.5 Society and its people

As said earlier, the way for societies or states to be legitimate is through the people. It is therefore that the role of the society and its people deserve a more prominent place in theories of state building. Regardless if this society is stateless, autonomous or seeking statehood. Beyond the political elite, why do the people on the ground strive for statehood? What are their perceptions of the current state they are organized in? And how do they imagine statehood?

Social capital and its characteristics like culture, identity, values and norms form the foundation for people's experiences and their feeling of belonging and representation. When these features are common, they also form the heart of a nation. In addition, cohesion amongst the people of the society and institutional trust directly impact the legitimization of a state. For this, the people of the aspired state need to get involved. Their understandings need to be added to the already existing approaches to state building. This will show that these perceptions and imaginaries can for most part be understood within the existing theories, addressing economic, cultural, military factors. For another part it gives room to new understandings of state building and the desire of statehood, for instance the given importance to the relationship with nature and the environment.

The models of autonomy offer a rather formalistic approach towards ethnic conflict, creating a formal theory based on rights as a formal institution. Moving beyond formalistic approaches towards ethnic conflict, perceptions and imaginaries allows understanding around what actually drives people to strive for higher forms of autonomy or even statehood. The other way around, it also creates an understanding on how imaginaries can drive state building initiatives.

3. The quest for Kurdish independence in Iraq

A historical background

SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE IMPERIAL DYNASTIES, the Ottoman (1299) and Persian (550 BC) Empires have been amongst the major global powers. World War I brought about nation states that succeeded the empires. The newly emerged states did, however, not include a Kurdish state. This chapter grounds significant events and developments that are central to the emerged wish for Kurdish statehood in Iraq. The desire for sovereignty is for a large part embedded in this history.

Located in the Middle East, Kurdistan² covers an area that spans over parts of Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. The majority of inhabitants are ethnically Kurdish. However, the region is known to be both ethnically and religiously diverse, including national groups such as Turkmen, Assyrians, Syriacs, Arabs, Chaldeans and Armenians and religious groups amongst which are Sunni, Shia, Christians, Yezidis, Shabak, Jews and Zoroastrians (Smith & Shadarevian 2017: 8). The landscape of landlocked Kurdistan is characterised by mountains, which accordingly played a significant role in safeguarding the region in the outlived wars and conquests.

Kurdistan is home to an estimated thirty to forty million Kurds of which approximately five to eight million live in the Iraqi part. In addition, Kurds assemble a substantial diaspora community, with large parts of the community living in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Great Britain and the United States of America (Soderberg & Philips 2015: 1).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Kurdistan was fought over by the Safavid and Ottoman dynasties. As a consequence of territorial rivalry, the Persian Empire lost control over the western parts of Kurdistan (Ozoglu 1996: 15). Two years after the ratification of Sykes-Picot in 1916, the Iraqi Kurds officially came under British colonial rule. This development was followed by uprisings against both British and Iraqi authority by prominent Kurdish leaders such as Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji. These armed revolts led by Sheikh Mahmud called for a free and united Kurdistan, supported by many Kurdish tribal leaders, and the by then 16-year old Mustafa Barzani who later became a prominent leader for Kurdish independence. The Treaty of Lausanne after World War I in 1923 marks the fall of the Ottoman Empire and led to a reconfiguration of the Middle East by the creation of states, excluding a state for the Kurds. In the meantime Barzanji declared, as a result of his rebellion, a Kurdish Kingdom. This kingdom lasted two years, being suppressed by the British army in

² Kurdistan refers to the geographic region in the Middle East that is populated by a majority of Kurds. Accordingly, it does not imply the existence of a state.

1924. The dispersion of the Kurds across the newly emerged states generated new revolt (Carol 2015).

Since this dispersion, Kurdish history reveals oppression and resistance. With the formation of nation-states in the Middle East, Kurdish nationalism rose (Alinia 2004:49). This period is marked by revolts. Revolts by Sheikh Barzanji and insurrections led by Sheik Barzani were two out of the many that took place. There was an *insurrectionary spirit* among the Kurds (Jwaideh 2006: 157). The Barzani clan is known to be one of the larger tribes in Kurdistan and eminent to Kurdish nationalism and in the pursuit of a free Kurdistan. The uprisings led by Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan persist, demanding freedom. In the 1940s, Mustafa Barzani established the foundations for the Kurdish Democratic Party which endures to be one of the dominant Kurdish parties in Iraq. As a response to the unsatisfying ruling of the Prime Minister of Iraq at that time, Abd al-Karim Qasim, a Kurdish rebellion follows. Initiated by Barzani, the Iraqi Kurds rebel against the Iraqi regime. The Ba'ath party came into power and got assistance against the rebellion by their Syrian branch, without any success due to the support of Iran to the Kurds (Carol 2015 & CFR).

In 1966, the Kurds of Iraq agreed upon a peace plan that aimed at resolving the Kurdish question in Iraq. This plan never got executed by the government of Iraq. Instead, in 1970 the Iraqi government, led by Saddam Hussein, and the Kurdish rebels agreed upon a ceasefire. Amongst other points, this agreement included autonomy for Kurds. While it was agreed upon that this plan would be ratified within four years, years of non-implementation followed. On March 14 1974, the ceasefire ended and armed clashes between Kurdish rebels and the Baath regime resumed. These clashes and politics of Arabization by the Baath regime led to the displacement of a tremendous amount of Kurds. In the end, Barzani fled to the United States of America. Divisions within the KDP came to the fore and in 1975 a new party was established: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Carol 2015 & Hannum 2011: 193).

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, marking the beginning of an eight-year long war between Iraq and Iran. Hannum (2011) argues that this war, with all the instability that it created, could have been a great opportunity for Kurds to unify and push for larger autonomy. Instead, the Kurds on both sides were used by the two central governments to retaliate the other. The war resulted in one million deaths. On top of the great losses that the Kurds faced, Saddam Hussein started the Anfal campaign, intended to displace, kill and destruct Kurds and their villages. Chemical weapons were employed for the massacre of Halabja.

Despite the theoretical cultural autonomy which Iraq's Kurds enjoy, the massacres of Kurdish guerrillas (known as peshmergas) and civilians which followed the end of the Iran-Iraq war are perhaps a more significant indicator of Iraqi policies towards the Kurds (Hannum 2011: 194).

While many readers will be familiar with the attack on Halabja, in March 1988, in which up to 5,000 Kurdish civilians died – the incident caused a brief international furor – they may be surprised to learn that the first use of poison gas against the Kurds by the central government occurred eleven months earlier. All told, Middle East Watch has recorded forty separate attacks on Kurdish targets, some of them involving multiple sorties over several days, between April 1987 and August 1988. Each of these attacks were war crimes, involving the use of a banned weapon; the fact that noncombatants were often the victims added to the offence. By our estimate, in Anfal

at least 50,000 and possibly as many as 100,000 persons, many of them women and children, were killed out of hand between February and September 1988 (Middle East Watch 1993).

While the Kurds were granted some sort of autonomy, the situation in Iraq was far from justifiable. After the second Gulf War in 1991 and continues rebellion by Saddam Hussein, the United States enforced a no-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan. A safe zone was established which allowed the Kurds to return and take the majority of control back. This followed with the emerge of de facto autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds (Maenza 2019).

The lack of political unity amongst the Kurds of Iraq has been a continuous struggle. This division got amplified during a four-year long civil war fought between Barzani's KDP and the PUK, led by Talabani. This conflict ends in 1998, while the future teaches us that agreement between the two main parties is contingent.

The United States' invasion in Iraq marked the end of the era of Saddam Hussein. In 2005 a new constitution was adopted that formally recognized the Kurdistan Region of which Massoud Barzani became the president, while Jalal Talabani became the president of Iraq (Carol 2015). However, disputes between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government over Article 140 of the constitution arose. This article states that it should 'perform a census and conclude through referenda in Kirkuk and other disputed territories the will of their citizens' before the end of 2007. Non-implementation on the side of Iraq was not only seen as infringement of the agreed terms by the Kurdistan Regional Government, but also as a failure of the federal state of Iraq (Park et al 2017: 201). While the Kurdistan Region is till now part of the state of Iraq, it is the constitution of 2005 that formally endorsed Kurdish self-governance in Iraq.

The rise of Daesh, or in the west known as the Islamic State (IS), causes a reconfiguration of territory in Iraq. Daesh takes control over large parts of Iraq, including territory controlled by the KRG. Both Iraqi forces as the peshmerga take upon arms in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. In June 2014, the peshmerga manages to control and claim Kirkuk. The importance of Kurdish forces in the fight against IS has been irrefutable. Despite chaos in the region, the dream of an independent Kurdistan has not faded. In the midst of the on-going fights against IS, president of the KRG Massoud Barzani decided to hold a referendum for independence of Kurdistan. On the 25th of September 2017 an overwhelming majority of Iraqi Kurds voted for independence. While the vote should have led to negotiations with Iraq over the Kurdistan region and the Kurdistan areas and eventually separation, the central state's reaction was quite the contrary: sanctions, treats and reasserted control of Baghdad. Nevertheless, the referendum has showed the tremendous support amongst the Kurds in favour of secession from Iraq.

While the endeavour for a sovereign state is partly grounded in the past, it is also in this history that, due to various rationales, the establishment of an independent Kurdistan did not emerge. Today, there are still all kinds of motives to support or oppose that endeavour.

4. Perceptions of an independent Kurdistan

Classical factors

HISTORY HAS SHOWN THAT the creation of a Kurdish state was held off. However, the safe haven in 1991 and the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship ensued the formalization of autonomy and self-governance of the Kurdish region in Iraq. The referendum of 2017 clearly shows that the dream of Kurdish independence is still widely alive amongst the Kurds of Iraq. Establishing Kurdish statehood would mean the dissolution of Iraq. This chapter gives voice to the perceptions amongst Kurds towards this dissolution and the creation of an independent state of Kurdistan. Touching upon the opinions in favour of Kurdish statehood and those against.

4.1 The referendum; a clear vote in favour amidst dispute

‘‘Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?’’ This was the question asked in the governorates of Halabja, Duhok, Erbil, Sulaimaniyah, and the Kurdish controlled areas in the governorates of Kirkuk, Diyal, and Nineveh during the independence referendum on the 25th of September 2017. In addition, the Kurdish diaspora was eligible to vote. A vast majority of 92,3% said *yes* (Palani et al 2019:2). While this number being overwhelming, the support for this referendum was not ubiquitous.

Masoud Barzani, the former president of the Kurdistan Region, initiated the 2017 referendum amongst scattered opinions. Since the fall of former president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, the KRG agreed upon the formation of a federal Iraq with Kurdish autonomy. However, calling for an independence referendum within the KRI served as a statement of intention with the incumbent state. According to Masoud Barzani, Iraq failed as a federal state, and was rather acting as a sectarian state (Park et al 2017).

The support for this referendum was not ubiquitous. The referendum created an internal dispute within the Iraqi Kurdish political field. Gorran, a few small political groups amongst which is The Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), and some politicians of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) called voiced their doubts over the referendum. The main reason brought forward for opposition was said to be the *unconstitutional extension* of President Barzani's presidency (Park et al, 2017). Besides political opposition towards the referendum there was also a movement on the ground campaigning ‘No for Now’. Their message mainly entailed that it was not the right time for an independent Kurdish state, hence campaigning to vote against, at least for now. Internal disputes regarding political leadership caused opposition,

however also externally doubts were raised. The neighbouring countries saw the Kurdish aspiration for statehood as a treat on their borders. The international community expressed their concerns towards the independence referendum, mainly raising security concerns in light of the fight against Daesh at that time. This referendum made Kurdish statehood an international issue.

While the referendum was a vote for independence, the referendum negatively affected the autonomy of the KRI. Placing the KRI within the pyramid of Tkacik, we can say that prior to the referendum the KRI was enjoy administrative autonomy, leaning towards legislative autonomy. However, as a result of the referendum the region has lost autonomy. In retaliation to the referendum held, the central government issued measures against the KRG. Sanctions imposed on the Kurdistan region were amongst others a flight ban on the international airports of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and the restatement of federal authority in disputed areas.

Despite resistance against this referendum, a vast majority voted in favour for independence. The next part will dive into various factors that drive the imaginaries and aspirations of an independent Kurdistan, looking at classical factors that play a distinctive role in state building efforts.

4.2 Underlying factors driving the wish of Kurdish independence

Interesting questions related to the topic of independence is; why do people want to secede. What are the arguments put forward for creating a new state? And why is it necessary to create a new state? Can these wishes not be found in the current state structure? These questions will be examined based on data collected from in-depth interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan. While examining perceptions and imaginaries, the answers are naturally classified within five domains related to state building: the domain of culture, economy, politics, military, and international recognition.

4.2.1 Culture and identity

When talking about what it means to be Kurdish in relationship to independence, state building and self-governance, the eyes of most Kurdish people begin to sparkle when they start talking about the importance of being recognized. Recognition is one of the main driving factors that shape their imaginaries towards the state building process in Iraqi Kurdistan.

But what is it that needs to be recognized? This can be summed up in being recognized as Kurdish people, including the distinct history, language, and cultural traits that come with being Kurdish. Hence, recognition of the Kurdish identity features the common origin of a group and their shared characteristics such as social and historical traits, the language, religion, territory and culture (Weiner in Romano 2006:5).

First of all, while talking about the cultural domain of imaginaries towards an independent Kurdish state, history plays a significant role. A feature of early Kurdish identity lies in the history of the society. This history is defined by foreign powers trying to conquer the region and impose their ideology and control the Kurdish areas. Despite these invasions, subjections to powers and endeavors to oppress the Kurds, the Kurdish society has outlasted numerous.

Many interviewees voiced that, in principal, nobody is against a Kurdish state, since the will to secede comes directly from a history of oppression. An employee of an NGO in Erbil said the following;

Actually, nobody says NO to Kurdish independence, because it is something related to a very tragic history for Kurdish people. You deal directly with the emotions of the Kurdish people. You just look at what happened in Halabja in 1988, what happened during the Anfal, we have lots of traumatizing history and stories to tell. So whenever you say no, you feel guilty because of this past.

Identity is frequently described to differentiate one group from another. It hence includes both aspects of distinction and similarities. These differences and similarities are made by creating certain social categories that mark people based on rules of membership. These rules define the social identities at stake (Demmers 2012:24). Language is a clear trait that sets a rule and hence a social identity. Language is used by individuals carrying social histories that are shaped by their memberships of a social group (Hall 2013: 31). Language can therefore be argued to be the most notable sign of collective identity. In addition it is the prime way of constructing and reproducing that identity (Sheyholislami 2010: 290).

In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan this relationship between oneself and the other has been clearly a tactic to distinguish the Kurdistan region from Iraq. A propaganda campaign was set up by the banner 'The Other Iraq' in order to differentiate. Theotheriraq.com clearly shows the manner in which the distinction is made:

The people of Iraqi-Kurdistan invite you to discover their peaceful region, a place that has practiced democracy for over a decade, a place where the universities, markets, cafes and fair grounds buzz with progress and prosperity and where the people are already sowing the seeds of a brighter future.

Going back in time, the word 'Kurd' indicated 'nomad' and represented tribal people speaking the Kurdish language (McDowall 2004:13). The Kurdish language is Indo-European, derived from the Iranian branch, and is rather stratified. Amongst the many dialects the two dominant dialects are Sorani (spoken mainly in Iraq and Iran) and Kurmanji (spoken mainly in Turkey and Syria). The language is the most significant factor that distinguishes the Kurds from their neighbors, but uniting among themselves (Lewis, 2008:10). In the end, identity is formed and shaped in dialogue. Furthermore, the use of language and the construction of identity result from multiple social, historical, and political contexts of individual's lived experiences (Hall 2013: 31).

When I was a kid. I was dreaming of one-day watching cartoons in my language because I couldn't speak Arabic.

(Executive manager of a company in Erbil)

In the case of Iraq, the Kurds inhabited an Arab state where the Arabic language and culture dominated the country. However, under the British mandate and the monarchy, the Kurds, compared to the neighbouring states, were less repressed. When Britain in 1930 wanted to declare the facto independence to Iraq, linguistic minorities including Kurds refused, unless their linguistic rights were recognized. It was in 1931 that a new constitution named the Local Languages Law was implemented. That law gave linguistic minorities the rights to use their language. This meant that Kurdish, from that moment on, was recognized by the state and even became the official language of the Kurdish region in Iraq (Hassanpour 1996: 369,

Sheyholislami 2015: 38). More so, the independent monarchical Iraq (1932-1958) was not a strong state and the emergence of intra-Arab conflicts gave Kurdish leaders regular opportunities to advance demands for cultural, administrative, and territorial rights (O'Leary and Salih 2005:20). For instance, policies regarding the use of the Kurdish language became lenient and even developed to be the only country where Kurdish has been fully recognized as an official local language. As a result, Kurdish became the language of administration and education within newly established Kurdish schools. The Kurdish language was mushrooming as means of expressions in myriad ways. Kurdish literature blossomed as journalist, historians, linguists, engineers, biologist and chemists started to public their work in Kurdish. Although some restrictions and difficulties, the Kurdish language developed and integrated in Iraq (Edmonds 1971: 92). However, it is important to mention that the development of Kurdish does not mean that the importance of Arabic diminished. Rather, Arabic remains of utmost importance in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The division of the Middle East and consequently of Kurdistan after the World War I led to the expose the region to new regimes brought by the states that were constructed. As a result, Kurdish cultural unity was negatively impacted. The construction of new nation-states brought along the construction of national identity. After the fall of the Ottoman and Persian Empires, nationalism within these new states rose. Since the Kurdish identity was not recognized in these nationalist movements, the Kurds developed their culture and hence identity in resistance.

This feeling of denial, up until today, underlines the drive of Kurdish people to resist. It seemed that this was the number one driving factor for the Kurds to vote for Kurdish statehood. As one of the interviewees formulated:

There is no guarantee for Kurds in Iraq. Look at Kirkuk, a diversity of people. It was ruled by Kurdish people, and now by Iraq. What happened? Now the Kurdish flag is prohibited, it's a crime! Half of the population of Kirkuk is Kurdish, but they cannot practice their cultural rights. There is always a threat. This is another factor why Kurdish people always think about an independent state. Because they think that if they have an independent state they can be more protected; no genocide will happen. Because Kurdish people are still treated. Look in Syria a couple of months ago, genocide happened in Afrin, and nobody protected them. We are worried about our future to be honest. I don't need an independent state for our national identity, but I want to be protected. I want my child to be protected and to make sure that nobody will commit another genocide. Because since we do not have a state, we are a weak player in the region, hence we are also treated. Look in Turkey, Kurdish people cannot speak in their mother tongue, they cannot practice their cultural rights, in Iran it is the same. The idea of a Kurdish independent state is much more about resistance than desire. This is a national feeling, whenever you feel you are not safe you have to resist. To fight for your existence.

The perception that an independent state can provide safety comes from a place of grievances and suffering that are shared amongst the Kurdish people. A 60-year-old person expresses:

Yesterday, Turkey bombed the Kurds in Turkey to make them afraid so they would not go and celebrate Newroz. Look today, it is full of people, maybe even more people came. People are out there to celebrate Kurdistan, to be Kurdish. Even though it was in Turkey, it was an attack on the Kurds. We are Kurds, they are Kurds, we are all

Kurds and as long as this happens we will fight for our rights and freedom: our own state. These attacks make us stronger, it does not afraid us.

Ernest Renan (1996) explains how shared suffering relates to a shared identity by acknowledging the role that common suffering in the past has on unity. In fact, he argues how shared grievances have more effect on unity than shared joy has. ‘Having suffered together’ requires a common effort and sacrifices in the past, and outlines a desire for shared program or common life in the future.

Kurdish identity as a clear driver for the wish to statehood is something that can be questioned, since it is known that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is home to many more ethnic groups that distinguish themselves from the Kurds through their identity, cultural, social and historical traits. If statehood will be driven by identity politics, it is a legitimate question to ask how the multiple ethnic minorities within that Kurdish state have a place in that. However, these scattered identities within the region are not perceived as an issue amongst the people in favour of statehood. A CEO of a local organization says;

Iraqi Kurdistan is already home to many minority groups, and since the war against Daesh that has been only more. They are safe here and have their rights. Kurdistan is for all of those, that is the strength. Because in the end, we are a minority too.

Renan (1996) also argues that ‘having suffered together’ can be understood in spite of differences of race and language.

It is clear that Kurdish culture and identity are build amidst defining historical events. However, the presence of this distinguished identity and the constructed nation around it did not result in establishing statehood. Structural denial caused resistance, which is at the foundation of both Kurdish identity and the imaginary of being protected if a Kurdish state would be created.

4.2.2 Economy

When talking about the political economy of the KRI in relation to statehood, several dynamics come to the surface. These can be classified into three clusters; income generation, taxation, and production of goods.

Regarding income generation, and for most of its economy, Iraqi Kurdistan is dependent on oil revenues. Hence, the KRG is increasingly exporting their oil. However, being semi-autonomous, the relationship towards the central government plays a significant role. The relationship between the KRG and Baghdad is one that interviewees mentioned repeatedly. Accusations of violations by the incumbent state seem to trigger many Iraqi Kurds. The economic relationship between the two governments is a factor shaping the imaginaries of an independent state.

This dynamic between the central government and the KRG has been shaped by a sincere lack of political trust. The two governments have been to odds over oil sales, revenue sharing, and the salaries of the KRI’s public servants. The distribution of revenues relies on who of the two governments has the sovereignty over specific resources. A private sector worker explained that, as agreed upon, the Kurdish government should receive a share of 17 per cent of the federal budget. However, the lack of trust is also mirrored in this number since, like others, he does not believe that their government receives anything close to that percentage. According

to what officials say it is closer to 10 per cent. Besides the issues related to revenue sharing, many people in the KRI are public servants, hence relying on income by the central government. However, recently many salaries have been cut drastically. The perception is that the main reason for this is the shrinking of the federal budget by Baghdad, which directly impacts the salaries in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The lack of political trust is also portrayed in the distribution of income between the Kurdish region and the rest of Iraq:

And also, if we have our own state the money will stay within our community within the borders. Of all the money that we make in the Kurdistan region, most goes back to the central government. What are we working for then? (Female interviewee in Sulaiymaniyeh)

This comment directly touches upon the question of autonomy and exposes the aspiration of the KRG to maintain revenue streams independently from the central government. As Al-Nidawi (2019) explains, this distrust is a consideration that is in the way to settle the oil-dispute between Baghdad and Erbil.

The interdependency between the central government and the KRG has brought a lot of uncertainties. Worries are also expressed towards the production of goods, the second cluster related to the economy of Iraqi Kurdistan. These worries address the import of products from neighbouring countries, the quality of the products, and the level of self-sufficiency.

An important fact is that the majority of food that is consumed in the KRI is imported, most of it from Turkey some from Iran and before the war from Syria. Kurds see two important problems to the high import rate. The first issue has to do with the quality of those imported products that are being consumed in the KRI. Most products on the market in Iraqi Kurdistan are of poor quality and unregulated. Many people are worried about the products they consume. Expired food, low quality products, fake labels and a little to zero checks on imported goods creates fear. Stories go around of chemically injected watermelons from Iran, on purpose expired sugar exported from Turkey, incorrect labelled boxes of sweets and extremely cheap bottles of cooking oil. These stories are fuel for conspiracies. A master graduate said that he would not be surprised if neighbouring countries did this on purpose against the further developments of the KRI. These imported goods are part of the open market economy in Iraq. Which leads us to the second issue; dependency. With a fast majority of its products being imported, the KRI is heavily depending on the production of goods abroad. While the imported products are subject to little fees imposed by the KRG, the region is extremely far from reaching self-sufficiency. To protect and assist local producers, more focus should go to domestic production. According to the people in favour of Kurdish statehood, an independent Kurdish state could boost the domestic production, reduce import dependency and assure quality of goods. With land very rich in natural resources and perfect for agricultural cultivation they are sure that self-sufficiency can be reached.

The last economic dynamic raised is taxation. As a semi-autonomous region, the KRI differs from federal Iraq in terms of the tax authority. However, some taxation laws, like the income tax law, are in large similar. Income generation for the region is highly subject to taxation. Within the borders of the region, Iraqi Kurdistan is in terms of taxation largely acting as a sovereign entity; keeping the production of goods on its territory either controlled or taxed.

That the products are internally highly taxed is perceived as a certain grievance. This needs further explanation. While analysing conversations, it could be found that taxation is an issue that gets intermingled with a lot of other issues at stake. On the one hand there is the hope and the wish for an independent country while on the other hand there are clearly issues related to the economy as spoken about earlier. At the same time taxes are perceived to be high. The thinking of people shows that this immediately comes together with an issue and dependency relation towards Iraq. Therefore there is the perception that once there is independence, a holistic system can be created. However, this does not necessarily need to be a fact. It is a perceived issue not the reality. But exactly this needs to be acknowledged because on a living basis people perceive a dependency on Iraq and feel the effect of high taxes that they have to pay. While there might not necessary be a taxation issue coming from federal Iraq since the KRI is for most part controlling their own taxation having two parties running everything on a patronage basis. A strong feeling is expressed that benefits do not trickle down to the people. The dependency issue is put on a wider range of problems that are undoubtedly interlinked. What this shows is that there are two different types of issues; the real factual issues like revenues shares and the tax rates, and perceived issues; in this case the feeling that high taxation is caused by the interdependency between Iraqi Kurdistan and federal Iraq. Important to note is that a perceived grievance is not less valuable.

Recent developments, in the beginning of May 2020, revealed the news that the Iraqi federal government announced to cut the federal budget from the KRG. This has direct impact on the salaries of civil servants and the overall economy of the region. Kurdish politicians see the move as unconstitutional and illegal. This shows that economic disputes continue to prevail.

4.2.3 Politics

The relationship between semi-autonomous Kurdistan and Iraq has been characterized by dearth of political trust. Despite legal mechanisms for power sharing, the attempt to establish federalism failed. While the KRG is supporting the Iraqi constitution, Arab nationalism, continues efforts by Iraq to more centralization, disputes of border control, and the cut of federal budget to KRG that is seen as political pressure, make the political tensions between the KRG and the central government tangible.

In relationship to their wish to be independent, the Iraqi Kurdish people share two main political reasons that contribute to the debate. The first is the failure of Iraq to construct a federal and pluralistic democracy.

The KRG representative to the United States explains in an interview that failing policies of Baghdad have let to the pursuit of independence.

One and a half decades of genocide by Saddam Hussein with four and a half thousand villages destroyed, Kurdistan was crushed economically, politically, militarily. Yes there have been ups and downs. But after 2003 till 2014 Kurdistan really flourished; the economy boomed, an oil industry was created, all the oil and gas wealth in the region had been neglected over decades, for the first time the region could exploit their own resources. And yes it is important to also mention that there is corruption. We always can do better. But Kurdistan had shock after shock; first a budget that was cut off, second the region was engaged in a very costly war in terms of human lives and the finances.

2003 came along, it became clear that the US wanted to liberate Iraq, intervene in Iraq. The KRG decided that they wanted to be part of this new Iraq because this could be the Iraq we had hope for; federal, democratic, and pluralistic. That did not happen. The Kurdish people had to fight for the survival of their own people and the survival of Iraq by fighting Daesh, the Kurds have taken care of 1.8 million displaced people and Syrian refugees, the region had to deal with a crash in oil prices, and a budget being cut off.

People know who they are voting for. Yes it is tribal and there are family politics, but people know who they are voting for and many people are proud of their record and look up to them for leadership. In the end, the people vote (Al Jazeera 2018).

The issue of federalism is also touching upon different forms of autonomy. It is clear that building a state is a process that does not come from one day to another. Whether a solution can be found within the borders of an Iraqi state seems to be difficult. Iraqi Kurdistan is already part of Iraq for about 100 years, where several forms of autonomy have shaped that time, including positive developments in terms of autonomy. Agreements have come from both the Iraqi and Kurdish side, just like attacks. A clear form of this attack to be precise is genocide: the Anfal campaign and the genocide of Halabja. This did not only impact Kurds but also other minorities have been targets of these attacks. In 1991 the Kurds asked for federalism, not independence. But till now it appears that federalism does not work but rather more attempts of centralization take place. There is a fear expressed that if federalism is not showing its results, the step to co-federalism will not turn out positive either.

Second, there is the perception of being more progressive than the central government. Two women working for a local NGO voice explicitly that there are certain laws and regulations in place and accepted in Iraqi Kurdistan that are not by the central government in Baghdad. According to them the legislations of Iraqi Kurdistan cannot be compared to the Iraqi legislation. They explained this through several examples;

The first example they raised is the difference between the situation for women between Kurdistan and Iraq:

In legislation, you cannot compare it with Iraq. In Iraqi Kurdistan we have a law that protects women for domestic violence, we changed the personal status law and we changed some articles in the penal law that violate women. In terms of women participation, 30% of the seats in parliament are occupied by women, in Iraq this is still 25%. In politics you see women in leading positions in high committees and in political parties, in Iraq this is very few and they have no opportunities to represent their political parties. Here that is for sure better. You see women everywhere here, look at the street, there is a variety of women; with hijab, those without, some wear modest clothes and others that expose more. There is a space for freedom, it is not perfect, but there is a space for freedom. If we have an independent country, our situation will be better because look at our legislation issues, we still have to relate to Baghdad and the constitution of Iraq.

Another example raised regards polygyny, the practice of multiple wives at the same time. In 2008, amendments made in the Personal Status Law of the KRI led to further restrictions of the practice of polygamy in the region. Due to these restrictions, it is almost impossible for

men to marry more than one woman (Keli 2011, 3). However, the practice of polygyny is allowed according Iraqi law. Which leads to a situation that there is a possibility for Kurdish men to go to Iraqi cities, that are under the legislation of Iraq like Kirkuk or Mosul, to make a marriage contract there. Since that is signed under the Iraqi constitution, the Kurdish court should accept it. For these women this is one example of why independence would push for more positive developments. Kurdish statehood would in this instance end the practice of polygamy in the region.

She adds that there are way more reasons why independence would lead to positive developments for the Kurdish region;

There will be more freedom than under Iraq, because we are also not perfect, but our developments are not comparable at all with Iraq or neighbouring countries. We are way more progressive. Because of the vision of the people, the people force the government that is ruling to be better in order to be good. Also in terms of human rights, okay we are not 100% good there are cases of violations of human rights, but we cannot compare ourselves with the federal government. One word against the Shia source Sistani, you will be killed. For all that, why should we not strive for independency, and beside that, we will feel safe, we do not feel safe with Iraq, as part of Iraq. Any time Iraq may promise something, but anytime they can break the promise again. What is the guarantee of the constitution if they violate 55 articles of the Iraqi constitution that they voted for themselves? So what can guarantee us? If they violate their own constitution against their own people, what can guarantee then the Kurdish people? Nothing. There are no guarantees within the state of Iraq. If my life is guaranteed, I have a salary, my safety is guaranteed, my freedom, there is no problem. But they cannot guarantee that. Being part of Iraq apparently does not work. We tried all different forms of living together with Iraq.

4.2.4 Military

According to the military divide that is often mentioned within the peshmerga, there is a clear trust in the idea that independence will push the peshmerga to be united.

A feeling that is expressed is that the reason for the peshmerga to not be unified does not only come from the political division between the PUK and the KDP, but it involves several countries. Very important is the role of Iran and Iraq. These two countries tend to want to have their influence in both the region as in Kurdistan. Also the division goes further than the party divide within the army; Erbil and Dohuk are ruled by one side of the coin while Sulaymaniyeh and Halabja by the other. This influence reflects in the several political parties at place. The two army fractions therefore also embody the underlying ties, which do not have a solid basis of trust. The region however shows efforts that are being made to unite the peshmerga.

Important not to forget, the army, the peshmerga does its job very well. They are a real army, defending its people and assuring security in the region. And they have proved that extremely well during the fight against Daesh. (Executive manager of a company in Erbil)

There are two ways to move forward in terms of the unification. The first way is to unify first and then to attempt to become independent. However the way that seems to have the preference is independence as a push to unite. The idea behind this is that becoming a state

would leave no choice but to be united. There is the believe that this would lead to true efforts to combine forces and to create one way forward. Without a doubt military development is needed in order to serve the independent state of Kurdistan. Developing is an on going process, whether independent or not, but there is a strong perception that independence would lead to the necessary push.

4.2.5 International recognition

A lack of international recognition is often mentioned as one of the main struggles in the pursuit to independence in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan. However, Iraqi Kurds do not perceive this lack of recognition by international actors as a struggle. Instead, Kurds expected most countries to be against their referendum. But what they did not expect is the way it was expressed. The allies in the west, the US and the UK stood with the Kurds for a long time, yet the US government said the vote and result lacks legitimacy, the UK said that the Kurdish leaders behaved in a regrettable fashion. The EU said it was a counter productive move. With every statement against the referendum it was perceived as if they were emboldening the neighbouring countries and Baghdad. Making them think that the Kurds could be punished. The only country openly expressing its support towards the referendum was Israel.

I don't care about the international community, in history you see that the decision to separate always came from the nation itself that wants to secede and this almost always comes with disputes and struggles. Except of Israel and South Sudan, most of the attempts of secession have been long processes of negotiations if not violent attempts to stop the separation. To gain international support will not come easy. But the first step is within the nation. And with this referendum the Kurds have clearly showed their will. We have to be realistic; we cannot have everything very easy. In Kurdish we say: The road to be free is not covered by flowers. It takes some time eventually the future will be very nice. (Employer of a local NGO in Erbil)

Most of the Kurds feel that there is no right time or specific time to become independent. And that, in the process of becoming independent, there is nobody to rely on.

4.3 Counter voices towards Kurdish statehood

Self-determination implies the legal right of people to decide their destiny. It is a core principle, preserved in international treaties as in Article I of the Charter of the United Nations.

Iraq signed the Charter of the United Nations that embodies the right to self-determination. I believe that this right has the purpose to create a better life for everyone. In principle you cannot be against this, but if the outcome is a dictatorship or mistreating of minorities, then separating will be no improvement. The focus should lie on the rights of the people. In the end, the right thing will win. (Employer of a non-profit humanitarian organization)

While a majority of the people in Iraqi Kurdistan were in favour of Kurdish statehood, some people were sceptic. They believe that there are challenges that need to be overcome before thinking of statehood, or that statehood is not the real solution.

4.3.1 Equal rights for all

One of the critics expressed towards the project of Iraqi-Kurdish state building is that we in the world we are living in today new models of life are at stake. Societies should be building on important pillars of liberty and democracy, rather than ethnicity and culture. Important steps to take are the focus on equal rights and protection of all. Questions are raised about the ideology underlying a potential Kurdish state.

The purpose of this new state should be to create a better life according to a master graduate in sociology. This means a better life for all living within the territory of Kurdistan, which are not only Kurds. This issue also concerns the countless minority groups that are living in the region. In essence he explains that no one can be against the right to self-determination, but a fear he has is that power will be used in a wrong way. Another interviewee working for a humanitarian organization adds the fear that the outcome of this new state would be a ruling power treating minorities wrong, even though the minority would not be the Kurds anymore, there would be no improvement. He specifically addresses that the motives of an independent Kurdistan should be about the rights of all people.

4.3.2 Economic costs

Fears are voiced regarding the economic situation of the Kurdistan region. While the people in favour see independence as a potential to secure income generation and to exploit the potential of agriculture in order to produce foods, most critics are pessimistic about the economic effects of independence.

The main issue raised here is the question of trade. This issue is two-folded. Besides the import of basic goods, there is the export of petrol and oil in a region that is in turmoil. First of all, with an almost disappeared productive agricultural sector, Iraqi Kurdistan has been near complete dependent on the import of products from neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey and Iran, but also Syria. While Turkey has clearly condemned the move to independence, Iran is strongly opposed too. In addition, the Kurdistan region is landlocked. The fear is that these countries close their border for the Kurdistan regional government. This is a legitimate fear, since the neighbouring countries have threatened to do so if a move to Kurdish statehood would be made. If this would be the case, critics say that there is a big chance that the internal market would die. Second, The Kurdistan region of Iraq relies for a majority of its revenues on the sales of petrol and crude oil, of which largest parts go via Turkey where the oil is piped. Export of oil is what the KRG's economy relies on, which in turn lead to revenues that assure salaries. Without the support of the direct border countries, independence may lead to a devastating financial crisis.

4.3.3 Political and military disputes

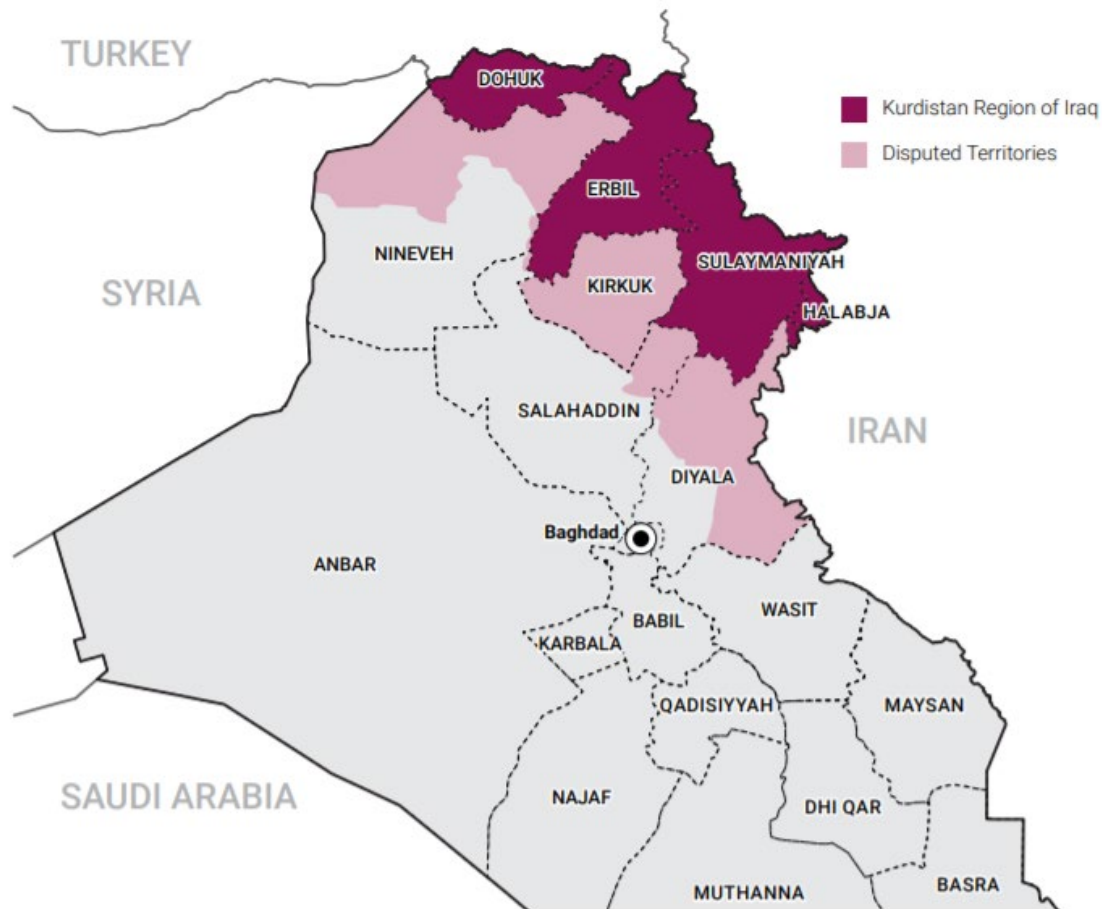
In addition to the economic costs of independence, political dysfunction of the region is also raising question marks. The political dysfunction is expressed in three main concerns.

The first concern has to do with corruption and clientelism. Due to a lack of financial transparency, the Kurdistan region of Iraq has easy ways for corruption. It is well known and unfortunate that corruption and patronage relations are deeply embedded into the structures of politics and governance. An example that is given repeatedly is, like earlier explained, that most economic activities are based around oil sales. The revenue of this is often partly redistributed amongst patronage lines, serving private interests.

Some Kurdish people are weary about independence because they look at what is at stake at this very moment and are faced with two main political parties ruling: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). What leads us to the second concern raised. According to the counter voices, these two political parties failed to lay the groundwork for stable governance, a stable political system, a stable economy, rule of law and independent judiciary. Instead they have given the people and the region a system based on corruption, nepotism and tribalism. In addition, internal fractures, political disputes and rivalry between the parties are problematizing the KRI as an independent political space. These fractions are also reflected in the region's army, who even make sure that the region's space is organized along these political lines. Driving between Erbil and Sulaymaniyeh for example, you see the space first being controlled by the KDP fraction of the peshmerga while later on the way by PUK fraction. These dynamics are not seen as a healthy ground to build an independent state on. Therefore the critics of Kurdish statehood often argue that there should first be signs of political unification amongst the tribal parties before a move towards independence is being made.

The third, but without a doubt a very pressing concern, is the demarcation of the political space of what would be the state of Kurdistan. Political power struggles over the demarcation of the political space clearly came to the fore by including the disputed areas in the independence referendum. The power struggles were not only between Baghdad and the KRG, but also between the Barzani-led KDP and the Talabani-led PUK. Accusations of betrayal went back and forth, first over putting Kurdish control of the disputed areas at risk, after over losing Kurdish control of Kirkuk.

Figure 2: Map of the KRI and disputed areas



Source: 'Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries', Crisis Group Report, 14 December 2018

After the fall of the regime in Baghdad in 2003, the Kurdish army has worked on expanding control outside of the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Halabja. At the time of the independence referendum in 2017, they gained full control over the strategically important governorate of Kirkuk. The KRG, or more specifically, Massoud Barzani, decided to hold the referendum across Kurdistan and the disputed territories. Provoking the sovereignty of the government of Iraq. Within a blink of an eye after the referendum, the Iraqi army together with the 'Hashd al-Shaabi' or also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)³, took control back over the disputed territories (Skelton & Ali Saleem, 2019: 9). This territorial loss for the Kurdish forces takes them back to the 2003 demarcation of borders.

³ The PMF is an Iraqi state umbrella organization that is in practice aligned to Iran and consisting of a majority Shia militia groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and the Badr Brigade. The leader is Hadi al-Amiri of the Badr Brigade, and his deputy, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis of Kataib Hezbollah). The last ten years they have operated autonomously with support from Irani sponsors (Alaaldin 2017) https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/shiite_militias_iraq_english.pdf

The fear in this third concern lays in the fact that conflict over territorial lines between the government of Iraq and the Kurdish regional Government has been one of the main factors of destabilisation.

4.3.4 A lack of international recognition

As defined at the beginning of this thesis, five natural domains are important in state-building processes. One of these factors is external recognition of the separatist regions as future legitimate states. In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, this recognition has not been forthcoming.

The lack of this recognition by international actors mainly comes out of two factors. The first argument that repeatedly was mentioned against Kurdish independence is the fear that separation would impact the international stability negatively. Secession by the Kurds might trigger violent responses. According to a private sector employee this fear is legitimate. As a response to the referendum, the central government has sanctioned the KRG for the decision to hold the referendum. It is a legitimate question to ask what would happen if the Kurds would make a real move towards independence.

With the international and regional actors not supporting this independence, it will be difficult to separate quietly, meaning that like we have seen after the referendum more sanctions might be imposed on the KRG and even a violent response in the unstable Middle East and mainly Iraq is not something that can be excluded.

While the Kurdish people that are not sceptic of Kurdish independence argued that the lack of international recognition would not be a severe treat to their statehood, the sceptics voice a true fear of arising conflicts. They argue that it is important to not see Kurdish independence as a case on its own:

Independency for Kurdistan does not stand by itself; it has an impact on countries and actors way beyond the Kurdish case. And because of that those actors can backlash us the moment we make the real move.

Second, not having support of the regional and actors directly impacted by Kurdish independence is one thing, but another thing is the uncertainty that is created for Kurdistan within the international system when it would become independent. Unrecognized states can cause uncertainty by working outside of the expected convention of the international community, which then can generate systemic instability (Zachary Mund, 2013: 56).

4.4 Perceived chances versus fears

This chapter has shown that many of the perceptions on the current state structure in which Iraqi Kurdistan is entangled and imaginaries of Kurdish statehood, fall within the cultural, political, military, economic, and international domain. This is the case for both perceptions and imaginaries in favour and against an independent Kurdish state. A compelling observation is that often the arguments used in favour are also amongst the critics against Kurdish statehood. For instance an economic argument used in favour of independence is that separation from Iraq will lead to more income generation. While on the other side there is a fear that independence will actually have a negative effect on economic prosperity of the Kurdistan Region, as trade is perceived to be extremely difficult amidst neighbours opposing Kurdish statehood.

This example depicts clearly what is at stake. While in general the perceptions on the side of pro statehood and the side against statehood are largely similar, between those two groups it is a matter of how the issues related to the domains are perceived. What one sees as a chance, can be a risk to the other. When you zoom into the micro, you see individual perceptions. The moment you zoom out to the macro level, certain patterns can be seen in these perceptions. This nuance is important to point out. In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, the majority of the Kurds perceive separation as a chance. And within this group the perceptions can be rather generalized into one voice. The same can be said for the less popular opinion against separation.

In this chapter, the perceptions towards Kurdish statehood have been placed into the classical domains that play an important role in processes of state building. These are the factors that have been broadly discussed in various theories regarding state formation. A sixth and new domain that has not been touched upon in these theories is the relationship between people and their environment in correlation to perceptions of statehood. The next chapter will address this binary by introducing social ecology and the perceptions of the Kurdish diaspora in Jordan.

5. The environment, space and place in relation to Kurdistan

Social Ecology

‘OUR LAND, ‘THE NATURE’, ‘THE MOUNTAINS’ are words that appeared in a majority of the interviews held in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The relationship with the environment the Kurds of Iraq are living in turned to be, without a doubt, of particular significance. This chapter studies the concept of social ecology; the relationships between the Iraqi Kurdish people and their environment. Touching upon the binary between ecological and social issues in relation to perceptions of statehood. In addition, this chapter focuses the diaspora community and their perceptions towards the creation of an independent Kurdish state. A characteristic distinction between the Kurds in Iraq and Jordan can be made through their geographic location; their space and place.

5.1 Agrarian in history

The Zagros range, and the mountains that characterize the Kurdish region, known to be the heart of Kurdistan and referred as ‘Kurdistan’ since the early thirteenth century, inhabit the majority of the Kurdish people that live in the mountain regions between the states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria (Alinia 2004: 41, McDowall 2004: 5). Sources of valuable livelihood for the people of Kurdistan has been its agriculture and stockbreeding wherein the latter accounts for the second most important economic activity in Kurdistan (McDowall 2004: 6). Thereafter, cotton, tobacco, and wheat production signify imperative cash crops. While peasants working in the plains – sharecroppers, would pay a share of their crop with their landlord. Oftentimes, the peasants in the mountains of Kurdistan would own the land they lived and worked on (Bruinessen 1992: 16). In the nineteenth century, Kurdistan provided a large part of the meat for Anatolia, Syria and Mesopotamia by driving their flocks of animals to cities like Istanbul, Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus. The flocks of sheep and goats of Kurdish stockbreeders mainly belonged tribal communities. Today, whilst fully nomadic tribes are disappearing, settled people in Kurdistan are still known for stockbreeding (McDowall 2002: 6).

5.2 The relation to mountains

Mountains are very prominent in the landscape of Kurdistan, also known as the characteristic of ‘landlocked Kurdistan’. In history the mountains have been crucial in the protection of the Kurds against further conquering of the area by Turks, Arabs and Iranians. This relationship to the mountains remains of importance. A famous saying still used amongst Kurds: ‘No

friend but the mountains'. While this saying expresses the feeling of betrayal or loneliness, the mountains form a beautiful metaphor for stability, trust and protection. A feeling of calmness and rest in a region where this is not a given.

5.3 Nature and independence

The nature of Kurdistan is indeed beautiful. But how is this to relate to the quest of Kurdish statehood? It is perceived that if the Kurdistan region of Iraq were to be independent, developments can appear that positively impact both ecological- as well as social-political issues. Developing the nature is related to state building and vice a versa, because humans are seen to be the major actors changing the nature for the good and the worse. As one of the interviewees mentioned;

The wars we wage affect the nature in a negative way. We never have been able to be friendly with the nature. The Kurdish land is located in an area with a lot of political disputes and wars that is destroying the beauty of the land. If these disputes would be settled, we could finally be supportive to the nature.

The underlying notion is that humans have the potential to play a role in the evolution of the nature. The idea is then to replace the ecologically destructive society with one that is ecological and socially aware. Social ecology, as described by Murray Bookchin, argues that ecological problems are inherently social problems. With this notion in the back of the head, it becomes clear that nature and the environment in Kurdistan are infused with a deep sense of purpose. In Bookchin's view, effects of hierarchy and domination need to be re-evaluated so our relationship to the environment can be addressed. Bookchin argued that 'the notion of dominating nature was preceded by, and stemmed from, the domination of human by human and that only by eliminating social hierarchies—of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, and status—could we begin to solve the environmental crisis' (Bookchin, 2018).

Independence is, according to interviewees, related to the possibility to become nature friendly and it is even seen as the possibility to be able to support all the communities within the borders of the land. In their words, nature conservation is equal to development.

5.4 Natural resources of Kurdistan

Another important aspect that is undoubtedly of importance in this question is natural resources. The Kurds are extremely aware of the fact that the land they live on is very rich in natural resources. Besides oil, gas and electricity that can be generated from the many dams, the land is fertile and taking Kurdistan as a whole, it is home to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The perceptions are that becoming independent is seen as a way forward, using the nature and its resources in a friendly way would lead not only to social developments but also economically. While social ecology seems to be an important underlying notion, the importance of the natural resources for Kurdistan's economic independence should not be underestimated. Being rich in its soil, agriculture works perfectly. The growing awareness in this is reflected in more agricultural developments that are coming off the ground in the region.

Till recently, farmers were mainly provided with very cheap seeds. The bad quality of these seeds negatively impacts the soil fertility. A Kurdish farmer explained that seed quality is interchangeably affecting the fertility of the soil. Being of good quality, seeds can have an important impact on enhanced crop production leading to improved or even ensure food security. Television and news outlets show that the regional government is paying more attention to agricultural developments. Kurdistan has the potential to secure the food for its people by cultivating agricultural land properly. As explained earlier, worries are expressed about the food that is imported from neighbouring countries into the Kurdistan region. Paying more attention to exploit the potentials of agriculture, the region can tackle this issue. Therefore, food security should be on the top of the agenda.

5.5 Tourism and freedom

Besides the possible potential to feed its people, the land of Kurdistan has a lot more to offer. A long history of wars and conflict in Iraq, Iraqi-Kurdistan and the region, is often what comes in mind first thinking of this part of the world. However, more and more Kurds want to change this image of especially their land, expressing that it is safe and free and that it has a purpose other than survival, namely recreation.

The landscape of Iraqi Kurdistan is characterised by mountains, hills, rivers and lots of greenery. Amidst stories of war and terrorism in the region, Iraqi Kurdistan offers an unexplored territory for travellers. As the 'Cradle of Civilization' it offers special archaeology and historical sites. In addition to the history and the nature, the region is also known for its hospitality and the various ethnic and religious groups. A growing focus on recreation and the use of nature is perceived as a way to bridge divisions within the society. Touching on a broad range of issues such as gender, social, political and urban and rural divides. The underlying idea is that being more connected to nature can lead to growing unification.

Furthermore, going out into nature also creates opportunities to educate the people of Kurdistan more about the natural resources, the land and its potential. According to a worker of the Public Aid Organization in Erbil, this is of great importance, because many Kurds do not treat the nature friendly. He believes that if Kurds want to lay claim on this land, they should learn to appreciate and protect the natural heritage. This also includes changes in the behaviour of the government and civil society organizations. Education, policies but also regulations on social, economic and environmental resources can lead towards a society that is sustainably conscious. The idea is that education leads to more than sustainable awareness: positive ecological developments are seen to set positive conditions of a free society.

Creating a more nature friendly and aware society, and having the basis of freedom, is seen as the perfect way to promote the Kurdistan region as a tourist destination. Moving away from the idea that it is just a region that has suffered from conflicts.

5.6 The Kurdish community in Jordan

Identity is closely linked to the territory that people live in, and both identity and territory are subject to changes. New formations happen all the time. With that, perceptions of people are also subject to change as socio-political and cultural context alters over time. Therefore it is interesting to see how living outside the Kurdish territory alters perceptions of independence within the Kurdish community in Jordan. In turn, space and place might affect the relationship to the environment.

To start with, the Kurdish diaspora community in Jordan is defined here as those who are of Kurdish decent and identify themselves as being Kurdish. These can be Kurds that are born in Iraqi Kurdistan and migrated, but also Kurds that are born and raised in Jordan. The most important aspect is that they identify as Kurd.

Through conversations with people from Kurdish decent in Jordan, it became clear that Kurds have inhabited the Levant region for a long time. This goes back to a time far before the First World War. An interesting observation is that in almost all conversations the name of the Kurdish leader Saladin was mentioned. Saladin Al-Ayubi, who was a Kurdish leader in the Ottoman Empire, is well known for his struggle against the crusaders in Jerusalem. Many Kurds therefore reached Palestine and later Jordan during this war and the war in Palestine in 1948. It is not clear how many Kurds are exactly living in Jordan at this time, but Qandil organization in Jordan estimates that the number is around 30,000.

Walking through Amman and talking to people, the name Al-Kurdi seems to be very prominent in the Jordanian society. Street names, companies, buildings and families are named Al-Kurdi. An interesting fact is that the city of As-Salt in Jordan has two main neighbourhoods of which one is called 'Al-Akrad'. Akrad is the word describing the plural of 'Kurd', meaning 'the Kurds'. It is known that a majority of people living in this neighbourhood are originally of Kurdish decent, however most of them do not define themselves as Kurds anymore since they have lived in Jordan for many generations.

Within Jordan, the people of Kurdish decent seem to be almost completely integrated in the society. While Jordan has a quota system in parliament, the Kurdish community do not have designated seats like other minority groups in the country have. According to Qandil organization in Amman, the main reason for this is the fact that most Kurds in Jordan are completely integrated and identify with being Jordanian.

However there is also a group that identify themselves as being Kurdish. Their connection to Kurdistan is expressed in different ways.

5.7 Recognition of the Kurdish Culture

One of the main ways the connection with the Kurdish background is expressed among the Kurds in Jordan is through cultural awareness.

The Qandil organization in Jordan puts a lot of effort in cultural awareness. Worth to note is that the name Qandil refers to the mountain range in Iraqi-Kurdistan. Again, the mountains are used as important geographical and symbolic characteristics of feeling Kurdish. The importance of the connection to the nature and its geography also shows in the decision for the name of the Kurdish organization in Jordan.

Cultural awareness is done by Qandil organization through the organization of several activities. Once a year during there is a big celebration of Newroz held in Jordan and a Kurdish day organized at the Jordan University. Besides this, films, lectures and even Kurdish fashion shows have been part of the cultural activities. A member of the organization explained how these activities embody more than exposing the Kurdish culture; they also serve in sharing and transferring ideas and understanding between the different communities in Jordan.

I am Kurdish, not Arab. But people tell me; so you are from Iraq but then I answer to them 'No, I am from Kurdistan', but this is not understood.

With a population where the vast majority defines itself as Arabs, the distinction between being Arab and Kurdish is often not clearly understood. There is the knowledge that Kurds are part of the Middle East and mainly known by the fact that they are living in Iraq. However, within the Arab community there is a strong lack of knowledge about the cultural differences between Arabs and Kurds. Therefore, Qandil organization finds it important to educate people about these differences.

5.8 Connection to the Kurdish land

The Kurds that live in Jordan, but still from time to time visit Iraqi Kurdistan, have a strong feeling towards the natural features of the land. Comparisons are being made between Kurdistan and Jordan, where Kurdistan is described as a place with beautiful mountains, access to many sources of water and a diverse nature. On the other hand Jordan is described as being a brown and dry country defined by sand tones. In a way, the descriptions about Kurdistan feels like a description of a fantasy. Despite the distance between Jordan and Iraqi Kurdistan, the relationship to the environmental characteristics is the most prominently voiced and observed. However, this relationship is limited to the positive feeling of the beauty of the place, rather than that it also serves a clear engagement in ecological and social issues that are in place in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In terms of feeling connected to the pursuit of independence, the observations stay relatively superficial. Perceptions of the Kurdistan regions by Kurds in Jordan portray an image of the place as being modern and in constant development while Iraq is seen as a place that is not moving forward. The analysis of Iraqi Kurdistan does not go more in depth.

As a reflection of the referendum held, being recognized as Kurds seems to be the main underlying motive to express support to the referendum. This recognition is envisioned in having the possibility to have a passport and really be seen as 'Kurdi/Kurdiyeh' (Kurdish) instead of having to explain that being Kurdish is not the same as Arab. Furthermore, the Kurdish community does point out that there is an issue of Kurdistan being part of Iraq and express the independence move as a pursuit for peace and freedom;

If there were real peace, why would they punish the Kurds for holding a referendum.
(Third generation Kurd in Jordan and active member of Qandil organization)

5.9 The Palestinian struggle in Jordan related to the Kurdish question

One interesting dynamic to point out is the fact that the only country that publicly recognized the 2017 referendum was Israel. While positioning the Kurdish question in Iraq in a wider picture of the region, this creates some sort of feeling of antagonism. Iraqi Kurdistan is part of the Middle East, in which Israel is an extremely contested case. Especially in Jordan, with a majority of the people being Palestinian this 'relation' between the KRG and Israel raises critical questions.

Iraq has in history been home to a large Jewish community, of which many lived safely in the Kurdish region. As heard in the Iraqi Kurdish region, the situation of the Jewish in Baghdad as it was back in the days can according to the Kurds not be compared to the situation of the Jewish that used to live in Kurdistan. The understanding is that when they were forced to leave Iraq and went to the newly establish state of Israel, it did not make them forget about their past or history living amongst the Kurds. In these terms, there are Jews that support the Kurdish cause and vice a versa. If we look on a state level, besides publicly voicing to support an independent Kurdistan there are no other practical steps made by Israel.

5.10 Disconnected community

There is clearly a Kurdish community in Jordan, however it seems that they are not strongly connected to all the aspects of Kurdistan. Of course there are exceptions, but these tend to be more individuals positioning themselves strongly as Kurds within Jordan. While most of the Kurds in Jordan are aware of their background and identify as Kurd, it shows that that does not mean they are involved in the Kurdish cause.

One dimension of connection to Kurdistan that was expressed is the relation to the natural features of the Kurdistan region. It can be argued that due to the distance the Kurdish diaspora in this specific case are part of an imagined community, perceived as part of the socially constructed community. The image or feature this community relates the most to is the geography and nature of Kurdistan. It seems that the beauty of the region is perceived as an aspect to be proud of while being positioned in Jordan.

For a mere part this has to do with what is called space and place; the geographic location of this diaspora community. For a larger part this has to do with the fact that the Kurdish diaspora in Jordan are not first, second or third generation Kurds living abroad, but in most cases their parents and grandparents and even great grand parents have not been living in the Kurdistan region of Iraq due to the dislocation of these Kurds in the time of the Ottoman Empire. Because of this, most of the Kurds have never visited or physically been connected to Iraqi Kurdistan in their lifetime. This has directly influenced the development of their identity and relationship to their origin.

6. Imagining Kurdistan

Discussion and conclusion

THE OVERALL AIM OF THIS research was to contribute to the understanding of demands for statehood by ethnic minorities, and specifically giving significance to perceptions and imaginaries at stake amongst the population on the ground. Respectively, this project investigated the case of Iraqi Kurdistan. This discussion will elaborate on the main findings and place them into a wider context of understanding demands of independent statehood, which is the case for the Kurdistan region.

6.1 Shifting perceptions

The main research question asked at the beginning of the project was *how do people in the ex-ante state Kurdistan perceive statehood?* This question was raised in order to move away from classic elite and politics driven theories to state building, and to give place to people's perception on the state and imaginaries of statehood, in order to understand processes of state building through a new lens. Shifting perceptions allows to really dive into a deeper understanding of the wish for independence.

In order to examine perceptions and imaginaries a model has been created that covers different domains of the state in which the imaginaries can be placed. These domains cover culture, economy, politics, military, international relations and social ecology. The goal of the empirical analyses was to understand which directions the imaginaries of people take, and how various domains of the state play a role in these thoughts.

The idea was that through questioning the perceptions of people voting for independence, their wishes and hence their imaginaries of Kurdish statehood could be analyzed. In this way you can get hold of the perceptions that drive a certain community, in this case the Iraqi Kurds. This model of the six domains shows how imaginaries are alive within the society and how the domains play a role in their wishes.

6.2 Imaginaries captured in words

The last question of every interview would be: 'If you dream about an independent Kurdistan, what words would you use to describe this imaginary country?' This question captures the perceptions but mainly the imaginaries that Kurdish people in Iraq carry. Visualising these perceptions can shed light to the imaginations and helps to understand what it is that really entails the dream of independence.

The following illustration covers the words that have been answered most:

Figure 3: Word map of imaginations



A first observation that can be made from this illustration is that from the thirty most answered words the vast majority have a positive connotation. There are only two words that would not directly classify as positive, which are the words ‘minorities’ and ‘war-victims’. The positive portrayal of an imagined country is not surprising, knowing that the majority of people in Iraqi Kurdistan are in favour of independence.

In addition, these thirty words span over all the domains that have been defined and discussed throughout this thesis. The following table places the perceptions expressed through the mentioned words into the six domains.

Cultural	Political	Military	Economical	International	Social Ecological
Culture	Democratic	Safe	Wealthy	War-victims	Mountains
Identity	Living-together	Strong			Nature
Belonging	Minorities	Protected			Flowers
Welcome	Citizenship	Peshmerga			Colourful
History	Gender-Equality				Beautiful
Languages	Decision-making				
	Health				

It is worthy to note that several words could be placed in multiple domains based on the interpretation. However, they are placed there where they would be most suitable based on the

interpretation of the conversations held with Kurdish people for this research. An example is for instance the word ‘gender-equality’. This word could be interpreted as related to the cultural domain, however in the context of the perceptions this is mostly in relation to the political sphere in the Kurdistan region.

There are five words that are not placed in the table. These are words that either do not fit within the six domains, or are applicable to several domains without any hierarchy between them. The latter goes for the word ‘progress’, which indicates positive development. However, this development can relate equally to political, military, economical as to social ecological progress. The remaining four words describe a more or less a certain feeling towards the imagined Kurdish state or life as imagined within an independent Kurdistan: ‘happy’, ‘wellbeing’, ‘proud’, and ‘open’.

While putting the words in the table, it becomes clear that first thoughts about a Kurdish states are the least about the economical and international domain. Which is interesting because in most literature on modern state building the economical and international prosperities are seen as necessary elements in order to reach the ultimate goal of statehood. Both elite driven perspectives to state formation and the existence of international norms show how finances and international actors play a significant role in the current literature on state building processes. While from a people’s perspectives these are the domains that are least expressed in the debate. It is fair to say that the interest of the majority of the Iraqi Kurdish people lies mainly in the perception that statehood would lead to cultural, political, military and social ecological developments. Culture, politics and military do have their significant position in the theories on state formation, and developments on these domains can be given space to through models of autonomy. Cultural autonomy for instance could fulfil all the demands within the cultural domain. On a political level, the demands would also fit within what is called legislative autonomy that in turn also includes a military aspect. Nevertheless, it is secession that the majority of the people demand in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan.

With regards of the domain of social ecology, the current literature does not provide a framework to work with environmental claims in relation to state building efforts. While the theories do give attention to a territorial aspect in claims to statehood, it does not go further than defining a bounded territory. The understanding that ecological problems are inherently social problems as argued by Bookchin allows for a new lens through which state building could be viewed. It also gives place for the many expressed perceptions of developments in terms of nature and environment for the region in case of an independent Kurdistan.

6.3 A visualisation of the Kurdish dream

The following illustration is made based on the words that have been answered most, capturing the feeling of an imagined Kurdistan.

Figure 4: A poster of an imagined Kurdistan



This visualisation clearly depicts a colourful and positive feeling, as is the overall imaginary the majority of the people have towards the idea of an independent Kurdistan. The visualisation gives attention to culture by portraying books, musical notes and Kurdish letters. The mountains, flowers, colours and animals embody the importance of the environment, the military man the embodiment of the military domain. The economy comes to the fore with the dollar-sign-bag, and the Kurdish flag, that would need to be formalized in case of independence, portrays the relation to the international arena. The feelings that are brought up such as happiness, proudness and good wellbeing are pictured with the two people in the middle of the poster.

While the two previous illustrations mainly draw a simplified and positive picture of imagined Kurdish statehood, this is how for the majority of Kurds a Kurdish independent state is perceived. However, there are certainly nuances to be discussed.

6.4 Economic and international instability

As analysed from the word table, imaginaries about an independent Kurdistan are the least about the economical and international domain from the perspectives of people in favour of statehood. However in most literature on modern state building, and amongst the critics of Kurdish statehood, the economical and international prosperities are seen as necessary elements for statehood to be successful.

The lack of international recognition is perceived as a herder to even reach negotiations towards potential statehood. The west, led by the United States, clearly opposed the 2017 referendum. Furthermore, the counter voices regarding Kurdish statehood mentioned beside the international actors also the relationship to regional actors that creates according to them a hostile environment to push for independence. Turkey, Syria and Iran heavily condemning a Kurdish state, possible further invasion of Turkey in Kurdistan, and suppression of the independence movements in their own countries, are a breathing ground for further instability in the Middle East.

There is one actor that openly voiced support for Kurdish statehood, which is Israel. The Kurdish diaspora in Jordan outlined the geopolitical connotations to this support. A Kurdish independent state supported by Israel with a potential pro-Israeli Kurdish government amongst clear enemies Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Palestinian populated countries and regions, might further complicate Kurdistan's strategic position in regional politics.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is far from reaching economic self-reliance. This is for a large part caused by the stability of petroleum revenues that have served the region. However, it is argued that continues efforts to focus on diversification of other sectors of income for the region is needed. While there has been an increasing focus on diversifying into other sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and tax revenues. With 90 per cent of its revenues still being derived from petroleum, the KRG still needs more efforts to build a stable ground for independence. The question whether the Kurdistan region is economically viable, is reasonable to ask. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the region does not need to rely simply on oil. The possibility for agriculture is increasingly explored due to the wide presence of fertile land. In addition, the KRI is centrally located within the region which creates potential for regional trade.

6.5 Space, place and the environment

Creating a more nature friendly and aware society, and having the basis of freedom, is increasingly seen as the perfect way to promote Kurdish statehood in the region. Kurdistan as a perceived model state in area is with this imaginary moving away from the idea that it is just a region that has suffered from conflicts.

In terms of social ecology, this research also has shown that the relationship to the environment is perceived differently regarding the space and place of the Kurdish people. Amongst the diaspora community in Jordan for example, social ecology is limited to a feeling of appreciation to the beauty of Kurdish nature. While amongst the Kurds in Iraq the relationship with the environment showed to be understood much broader: exposing a binary between ecological and social issues. The imagined ideal is that independence is a way forward, given special attention the environment, nature and its resources. A nature aware and friendly society is perceived to give lead to not only social-political developments, but also economical. Space and place hence plays an important role in the outcome of perceptions throughout the Kurdish community, however this was specifically the case for the diaspora in Jordan, which is a rather small community. Hence more research is needed to be able to draw better conclusions in terms of perceptions of a diaspora community.

However, the question remains whether independent statehood is needed to push for developments, regardless the type of development. Being independent does create an environment in which the government of that state can fully decide over its destiny. However, it would be wrong to think that only through the creation of statehood these developments can start.

6.6 Perceived grievances versus bad governance at the foundations

The binary between the grievances embodied in the Kurdish society in Iraq and the performance of the Kurdish Regional Government, is one that raises some difficulties.

One the one hand this research showed clearly how most perceptions and imaginaries come from a place of grief. Iraq is amongst the majority of Kurds not perceived as a comfortable home for the Kurds. Decisions that are being made today and tomorrow are shaped by the past. The acknowledgment of the past is essential, hence it is showed to be important to give grievances a place in understanding state building.

The lived past, grievances and suffering of the Kurds in Iraq had their effects on a shared identity as Ernest Renan argues. Unity among the Kurds is created through shared suffering and according to Renan it is not surprising that these shared experiences in the past also create a desire for a common program in the future. In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan this is expressed by the desire of sovereignty. Which was in essence an ethnic conflict, however also is indulged in a scene of power politics. The ethnic conflict at place is also added with a political conflict both within the KRG as with central Baghdad. Also this is not something new; most cases of ethnic conflict include complex dimensions that go beyond ethnicity. Discussing the challenges of Kurdish independence showed that the main obstacle to the KRG's viability is not to be found on the hardware side but rather on the governance side, hence the software. Corruption, tribalism and power politics get entwined with the grievance perceived on the ground.

In the world that we are living in, where the state might be perceived as the ultimate form of self-organization, the wish for sovereignty is not surprising. That the Kurds of Iraq did not have the capacity is rather clear, and in the landscape in which Iraqi Kurdistan is operating there might not be a right time for Kurdish independence. But with the issues faced in the state of Iraq the focus should lie on what could be a viable solution. In addition, examining the foundations on which an independent Kurdistan would be based at this point. Because this is where the 'soft spot' of the pursuit for independence lies. As discussed before, what in essence was an ethnic conflict is also added with a political conflict. These political disputes also influence the lack of pathway for an independent Kurdistan. It is unclear what the vision of the state of Kurdistan would be. While it is clear that there is a will for democracy, the current corruption, tribalism and power politics make a rather difficult scene.

6.7 The nation-state and inclusivity

The Middle East is made up of numerous ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. This diversity is also reflected in the society in Iraqi Kurdistan. While the argument often given for Kurdish statehood is the right to freedom, it is worthy to point out the importance to inclusivity of all ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities in the Middle East. Along with the Kurds, violence by the national governments of neighbouring countries has also impacted among others Armenian, Yazidi, Turkmen, and Assyrian communities. Some of the most problematic dynamics in the Middle East resulted from neglecting the existence of the diverse population in the region.

The right to self-determination in essence allows people to decide over their own destiny. This means also that people have the choice over their own economic, political, social and cultural development. Self-determination comes in different forms that we see throughout all societies. Essentially, there is nothing against the right of self-determination. However, if the outcome of the demand is a reproduction of the nation-state, creating different minorities in the newly emerged state and the potential to oppression, it is necessary to be critical to new state formation. The rights of all people belonging to the place should be the priority at start. By reproducing a model of the nation state there is the chance that the problem subjected to it will be copied, and victimhood will be moved.

Like the world is subject to constant change, identity and territory are subjected to changes. Deeper cracks in the foundations of the nation state are occurring. Future models of organizing societies should rather be based on peace and coexistence. As social-political and cultural context alters over time, so do perceptions.

6.8 Moving beyond the borders of a state

Like illustrated in the models of autonomy by Tkacik, and in a world that is organized along the lines of sovereign states, the demand for statehood is set as the ultimate goal. As Horowitz argues that secession is almost never the solution to the issues of ethnic conflict, it can be questioned here if an independent state of Kurdistan is really the solution to the perceived issues.

National politics of the central government are perceived as the issue in Iraq in relationship to the Kurds. There is a lack of fair representation of Kurds by the central government due problems that come along with centralizations. It seemed that the constitutional way was seen as the way forward, as was voted for in 2005. Federal, democratic and pluralistic Iraq is what the KRG decided that they wanted to be part of. Unfortunately Iraq held off from proper implementation of the agreed constitution. However, the federal way has until now not paid

off. The non-implementation of the 2005 constitution by Iraq did not make the relationship between the KRG and Baghdad friendlier, just like the referendum in 2017 did not.

Concepts as citizenship rights, self-governance and democratic confederalism are raised to provide alternatives. However, it would be for further research to examine these concepts in the case of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. Nevertheless, it starts with acknowledging and accepting the fact that the population is both multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

6.9 A dream of freedom

The main question at the foundation of this research was *how do people in the ex-ante state Kurdistan perceive statehood?*

This research has shown that many of the perceptions on the current state structure in which Iraqi Kurdistan is entangled and the imaginaries of an independent Kurdistan, fall within the cultural, political, military, economic, and international domain. This is the case for both perceptions and imaginaries in favour and against an independent Kurdish state. A compelling conclusion to draw is that often the arguments used in favour are also amongst the critics against an independent Kurdistan. While in general the perceptions on the side of pro statehood and the side against statehood are largely similar, between those two groups it is a matter of how the issues related to the domains are perceived. What on one side is seen as a chance is seen as a risk on the other side. In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, it became clear that most Kurds perceive separation as a chance.

It turns out that most of the underlying reasons for secession fit into the different models of autonomy; cultural, territorial, functional and legislative autonomy. The cultural, political, military, economical and international aspects of statehood are rather central in most cases of demands for greater autonomy in the world, as reflected in literature. The unique aspects for Iraqi Kurdistan have shown to be the relationship to the environment and nature and the strong grip on historical suffering. These perceptions are also reflected amongst the Kurdish diaspora in Jordan. Shaped by grievances of the past, there is a strong dream to be completely sovereign.

What should have been a push to initiate negotiations on statehood, in contrast resulted in loss of autonomy. The Kurdish referendum in Iraq was received with heavy heart. Not only in Iraq, but amongst neighbouring countries and internationally. A fear of spiralling security, a lack of economic viability and political antagonism both within the Kurdistan Regional government and from Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, are perceived as elements challenging the dream of an independent Kurdistan. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that it is a dream that will unlikely be extinguished. In fact, an overwhelming majority voted in favour of independence. Imagining Kurdistan as the solution to their grievances and the doorway to freedom. These imaginations are mainly based on prosperities perceived in cultural and political freedom, as well as the potential to cultivate agricultural land for the purpose of the economy and food security. More space is needed in the literature on state formations for people's understanding of the state. Uniquely, an independent Kurdistan is increasingly perceived to serve as the foundation for nature friendly and environment aware practices, constructing the foundations for a free society. There is need for additional research on social ecology in relation to state building attempts to allow for better positioning and understanding of this concept in literature.

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