



**Linnæus University**

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C-Thesis

# A Viable Kurdistan

*A study of the media debate of Kurdish independence*



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## Abstract

For very long time the Kurdish population have aspired to create their own independent, sovereign and viable state. In 2017, a referendum was held in the Kurdish regions of Iraq, voting for that the Kurdish Regional Government was to become an independent state. This referendum created an extensive debate, particularly on the viability of a Kurdish State. Would an independent Kurdish State be able to become viable, and would a new democratic state in the Middle East bring peace and stability to the region, or only result in yet another devastating conflict in the area?

This research will examine this particular debate through a qualitative meta analysis of newspaper articles published in different parts of the world using a state-building perspective. The findings of this research will identify the main arguments supporting and opposing the referendum. Those arguments will be analysed and discussed, as well as potential tendencies within the articles, analysing possible correlations between arguments expressed in the articles and official reactions by the respective states.

## Key words

Kurdistan, Iraq, State-building, Middle East.



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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Problem

For a long time, conflicts and oppression have dominated the political situation in the Middle East. Colonialism, civil wars, dictators and terror have resulted in misery amongst the population in large parts of the region, and most recently a violent civil war in Syria. The Kurdish population, who lives in the midst of this conflicting area has been oppressed for generations, and several times been denied the right of self determination. This has sparked nationalistic sentiments among the Kurdish minorities, and recently resulted in a referendum deciding the fate of the Kurdish regions in Iraq, begging the question, would such a state be viable?

The subject of this research is not to examine whether Kurdistan could one day become a nation, but rather to analyse the debate on the matter. For many years now, what happens in the Middle East has been one of my personal favourite political topics. Why some parts of the Middle East has seen huge economic success during the past three decades, while other parts have seen nothing but violent armed conflicts. Crude Oil is of course one major reason for both the economic prosperity as well as the conflicts, but there are, also, other reasons as well. Political difficulties dating back for decades, border issues dating back hundreds of years, and religious tensions dating back thousands of years (Schwarz, 2011). One of these many struggles in the Middle East is the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. In September 2017 the Kurdish population in Iraq voted in a referendum for independence from Iraq. The election resulted in a 92,7% majority voting in favour of the referendum. However, the Kurdish regions of Iraq have yet to become independent (Summer, 2018).



The situation in Kurdistan is not an isolated occurrence. Similar issues with ethnic groups struggling for sovereignty have often been the reason for conflict. Andorra, Kashmir, South Sudan, and Catalonia are other examples of conflicts originating from ethnic groups claiming land owned by another state. The situation in Catalonia is similar to the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan, where an election was held voting for independence from the core state, and where the core state refused to comply (Meseguer, 2017). Yet another similar situation is the Brexit referendum, aiming to make the United Kingdom independent from the European Union.

The Kurdistan election did however ignite a debate on if Kurdistan could become a viable state. Different actors from all over the world, both in media and policy-making actors, gives arguments of why or why not Kurdistan could or should become a sovereign state. At this point, a choice had to be made. Should this study focus on expertise from well educated scholars, important political actors, or the popular opinion. After a brief research on opinions from different people, organisations and countries, it became clear to me that the view from the public was the most interesting, and had the widest range of opinions. The best way of analysing the public opinion is probably through media. Thus, debate-articles from all over the world will be used as the main source of information in this research.

This research will analyse the debate displayed in newspapers and what tendencies the newspaper-articles have. The study will not only summarise the opinions but also attempt to analyse why newspapers from different countries and regions have the displayed opinion, through identifying strategic reasons for a certain newspaper to have the expressed opinion. One example could be that an American-based newspaper would be critical to an independent Kurdistan, if it would result in increased oil competition, and thus decreasing the American share of Middle Eastern oil. The potential



prospects of a sovereign Kurdistan will also be analysed through the eyes of the media, and thus determining what has been done, as well as what has to be done, to ensure a Kurdish state that is financially, politically and geographically viable.

## 1.2 Research Objective

The overall aim of this research is to analyse the debate in newspapers from all over the world regarding whether Kurdistan could become a viable state. Factors such as political, economic, geographical, cultural and security variables, as well as strategic reasons for certain biases will be identified and analysed through a state-building and development oriented perspective. The objective is not only to analyse the opinion of different media actors, but also what reasons they have for supporting, or not supporting, a sovereign Kurdish State and to use the articles in relation to the state-building process, to analyse the viability of a Kurdish State.

## 1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the main arguments used by the authors of different newspaper articles for and against the independence of the Kurdish regions of Iraq?
2. What tendencies do different media actors display, and is there a correlation between the expressed opinion of the state and the presented arguments of the articles?

## 1.4 Methodology

When planning for this research, it quickly became clear that, in order to at the best possible way, carry out the research through a methodological framework that enabled a generalisation and a comparison between several sources and the theoretical framework of this study. After some time of research, a qualitative desk study using meta-analysis appeared to be most



suitable to fulfil the research objective. Meta-analysis will be used as a means of analysing the articles and the debate over the viability of a sovereign Kurdistan. A more precise description of the methodological proceedings and evaluations of this study will be presented in chapter 2.

This study will primarily use newspaper articles, published in several different countries with varying ideological views. Since these articles are not peer-reviewed, the factuality of the presented arguments is not ensured, and neither will this study attempt to fact-check the presented facts. Rather, it is the public perception towards an independent Kurdistan that will be of value to this research. As a secondary source, peer-reviewed books and articles will be used to present the background of Kurdistan and the 2017 referendum, and, in some cases, important notes on the articles regarding historical events.

## 1.5 Theoretical framework

When analysing the relevant articles, it is necessary to use an analytical framework that can be used as a support for the viability of the articles and help in determining the viability of a sovereign Kurdish State. Therefore, a framework that could provide indications to necessary factors regarding state-building had to be found. Since the research objective aims to analyse a set of articles in relation to the state-building process, it is necessary for the framework to be able to be applied on the articles, and together provide an answer to the research questions

Alan Whaites model of responsive state-building suited the research objective, and will thus be used as a theoretical framework in this study. This framework includes important factors in terms of state-building, such as political and functional factors, that is essential for a successfully operative new state to appear. The model of responsive state-building is based upon





three key areas, political settlements, survival functions and expected functions. These attributes are being used to alongside each other ensure the viability of an emerging state.

In order to analyse the result of the findings Alan Whaites model of responsive and unresponsive state-building will be used. These models focuses not on the progress of state-building, which would be undesired since Kurdistan is not a state at this moment, but on a variety of policy factors that can be used to determine the development of a state. Since unresponsive state-building mainly regards fallen or corrupt states, this research will focus on responsive state-building. Responsive state-building focuses mainly on three aspects of a state, the political settlement, survival functions and expected functions (Whaites, 2008).

Political settlement refers to the states ability to negotiate power between actors to form a state and a government. According to Whaites, the essence of political settlement is that "wherever those with the power to threaten state-structures forego that option either for reward (which may simply be personal security), for the sake of belief, or to wait an opportunity to become the government overseeing the existing structures." (Whaites, 2008). It is of importance to know that there is a difference between state-building and peace-building, they are complementary but not identical.

Survival functions refers to essential functions of a state to secure the strength of the institutional framework. After a successful creation of the political settlements, these settlements need to be able to secure the rule of law, revenue and to monopolise the use of violence and thus creating security. There are also other challenges that might be necessary to deal with, such as humanitarian issues. It is, however, these three factors that are essential for all state-building processes. Thus, the relationship between



political settlements and these expected functions are vital for the process. By fulfilling these functions, the state can move on to develop competence over other important functions. Should, however, the state fail to live up to the expectations regarding law, revenue and security, it will become complicated to achieve other functions (Whaites, 2008). It is important to note that the revenue should come at least partly from taxes. This is due to the problems that may occur if the government of the state is not dependent on tax income. Should the state gain its revenue only on, for example, oil revenue, the government does not owe the population anything and therefore may result in extensive government corruption. The connection between the government and the population through tax-income is vital for the accountability of the government (Collier, 2007).

The last area of progress regards the expected functions of a state. How the state performs and the expected level of functionality. The government of the country needs to meet the expectations of both internal expectations, such as the demands on infrastructure and a functioning police force, as well as external expectations, such as donations from organisations. These expectations are necessary for maintained stability throughout the state, but may vary due to the capacity of the state, and in some cases the commitment of the state. Since the public demands vary between states, regions and societies the expected functions of the state vary as well. The negotiation regarding the expected functions is important, and is not limited to the government and its institutions, but need to cooperate with the private sectors, which voices the demands and provides the state with resources and revenue (Whaites, 2008).

There is a clear connection between the political settlements, survival functions and expected functions of a state. The political settlements use survival functions to meet public demands and create the expected functions.



In the same time, survival functions and expected functions is necessary to create the political settlements (Whaites, 2008).

## 1.6 Literature Review

On the subject of media and the state quite a lot has been written. Below are a few examples of articles and papers that write about the use of mainstream media in order to reach the states political interests. However, I have failed to find any article that attempts to see the bigger picture. The articles below rather focuses on specific event (a bioterrorism plot, where Ricin would be used to attack the London underground (BBC, 2003)). One example is Jared Ahmads article; *Serving the same interests: The Wood Green ricin plot, media–state–terror relations and the ‘terrorism’ dispositif*. This article focuses on the use of media to justify Great Britains war against Al-Qaeda in 2003, through a series of BBCs coverage of the Wood Green ricin plot (Ahmad, 2018). The article demonstrates how media is being used to form an opinion to support the national interests. This article is quite similar to this research, however, its focus on one state-controlled news-agency fails to provide an answer to if media in general, and not only state-controlled media, displays tendencies to support the states agenda. There are also well-established theoretical frameworks for the relationship between the state and the media. One such theory is the manufacturing consent theory, developed in 1988 by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. In this book, the authors write about mass-media in USA and its proposed role as a propaganda function for the state. The media can, without reporting false news reports, create a system-supportive opinion through ”reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). This theory has been widely used by scholars to analyse medias role in different situations, such as Pierce Robinsons article *Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics: Models of Media*



Influence on Foreign Policy (Robinson, 2001). One main problem with the application of this theory on contemporary research is that quite a lot has happened to mass media since 1988. The internet has greatly changed how the media operates and enhanced the possibility to gather news from alternative sources.

## 1.7 Limitations and delimitations and Ethical Considerations

There are a few limitations to this thesis. Since this thesis will work with newspaper articles from eight different countries in four continents, a language barrier has to be dealt with. Therefore, this thesis will only have articles that were originally written in English or have been translated to English by the publisher. This decision could possibly have an impact on the result of this paper.

Another limitation is the choice of continents, countries and newspapers. In the early stages of this research, it was made clear that some countries have a larger amount of suitable articles than others. Neither South America nor Australia seemed to have any relevant articles to this thesis, and thus were excluded from the research. Some of the countries elected to have their newspaper-articles analysed had only one relevant article. In those cases that one article will be part of this research. This is the case of Nigeria and India. Should a certain newspaper only have one relevant article, an article from another newspaper will be randomly selected for the second article. This is the case of USA, where one article is from Market Watch, and the second one from the New York Times.

There has also been delimitations to this research. Since the situation in the Middle East is rapidly changing, only articles published between 2017-09-01 and 2017-12-31 will be used in this research. Articles published before this period are irrelevant since the referendum had not yet occurred. In order to



achieve a somewhat similarity between the articles, a delimitation on the time period was necessary.

Since this desk-based study only deals with published articles, books and websites, this research will not be limited by any ethical considerations. The opinions presented in chapter 4.1 through 4.8 are strictly the opinions of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the author of this study. The research will not evaluate the opinions presented in the articles, and will not treat articles different from each other based on the presented opinion of the article.

## 1.8 Thesis structure

The first chapter of this study will contain all necessary information, regarding why and how this research will be conducted. In the second chapter, the methodology will be elaborated on and an in depth description of the methodological framework will be presented. Chapter three will consist of all the necessary background material needed in order to fully understand the complexity of the situation in the Middle East in general and in Kurdistan in particular. In chapter four, the findings and result of the research will be presented as a summary of all articles. In the end of this chapter, official reactions to the 2017 Kurdish referendum will be presented. Chapter five will analyse the findings and answer the research questions and objective. The articles will be analysed and, using the theoretical framework, be used to answer the research questions. The last chapter will conclude the research in relation to the research objective, as well as pointing out things that could be done better with this research, and provide recommendations for future research on the area.



## 2 Methodology

This research will use qualitative meta-analysis as a tool to analyse the debate on a sovereign Kurdistan and identify arguments and strategic reasons for the arguments. A meta-analysis is a study that builds on the combined results of several studies, or in the case of this paper, articles in newspapers. This information is used to determine if a specific variable has any effect. This method is suitable for this research, since it enables a generalisation of the findings. According to Bryman, the dangers of meta-analysis is that articles that are deemed irrelevant are excluded, which might make the result biased towards the authors theory (Bryman, 2012).

In order to avoid biases, this research will follow a preset procedure for choosing the relevant articles. First of all, two countries each from North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia will be selected. This research excludes countries with large Kurdish minorities, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, since these countries may have an agenda and biases that are not desired or relevant for this research. South America and Australia will be excluded as well, due to a lack of relevant articles found. When the countries have been selected, a Google search built on pre-determined search phrases will be used to find relevant newspapers. Thereafter, the newspapers website will be used to find suitable articles, through a pre-determined search phrase. In order to avoid biases, the first and second suitable article found will be selected. When all articles have been selected, the articles will be examined and analysed in chapter four. Should the selected newspaper not display a relevant opinion on the question of Kurdish sovereignty, the newspaper will be excluded from the study. The pre determined search phrase that will be used to find relevant articles is Viable Kurdistan. This phrase will be used to find relevant newspapers and articles. This Phrase may casue a bias regarding articles that show up, since the phrase could indicate that Kurdistan



is in fact viable. However, a few different phrases were evaluated, and this phrase was found to be the least biased.

Two countries per continent and two articles per country will be used to analyse the debate. This is in order to achieve a greater variety than for example an analysis only consisting of Asian countries and newspaper. Should a certain newspaper only have one relevant article, an article from another newspaper from the same country will be chosen, and should there only be one relevant article in the country then only that article will be subject for analysis. Since different parts of the world have different strategic reasons for supporting or not supporting a Kurdish State, a wide variety of countries will be of great importance. In order to find similar articles from the different countries the pre-determined search phrases will be used.

When the newspapers search is completed, a manual search for political documents such as governmental protocols will be conducted to find strategic reasons for the country to support or oppose an independent Kurdish State. The result of the newspapers search and the political documents search will be cross referenced to determine if and to what degree the newspapers display tendencies. In order to ensure similarities between the randomly selected articles, only articles published between 2017-09-01 and 2017-12-31 will be used. This is done because the situation in the relevant area changed drastically during the fall of 2017.

Since published articles in newspapers are rarely peer-reviewed, the reliability of the information published in the articles can be questioned. However, since it is not the objective of this paper to analyse the factuality of the articles, but rather to analyse their reasoning, the lack of reliability will not become a problem.



Finally it should be emphasized that this research is based on a limited number of articles, and to draw extensive conclusions from the findings could prove difficult. To create a more valid generalization of the data, a larger amount of articles would be preferable.

### 3 Background

The Kurdish population refers to an ethnic group of Mesopotamian indigenous people, who share a common history and culture. The area in which these Kurdish people mainly reside is called Kurdistan, and is located in north-western Iran, northern Iraq, north-eastern Syria and south-eastern Turkey. Since Kurdistan is split between these four states, the situation of the Kurds differ depending on where in Kurdistan they reside. The independence referendum of 2017, which this thesis will focus on, only deals with the situation of the Kurds living in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan (BBC, 2017).

The history of the Kurdish people is long and complicated ranging back to the earliest Muslim conquests during the sixth century AD. Despite periods of nationalistic sentiments Kurdistan never managed to create their own state. The state-building process was disrupted due to conflicts in the 10th century AD. Large portions of the Kurdish population was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire and this continued until the end of the first world war (Cleveland, 2016). After the end of the war and the signing of the Sevres peace treaty in 1920, the western participants promised the Kurdish people a homeland (Treaty of Peace Between The Allied & Associated Powers and Turkey, 1920). This did however, not become a reality. Three years later a new peace treaty was signed in Lausanne and determined the borders of Turkey. This treaty did not give the Kurds their own land as they were previously promised, but instead made the Kurdish population a minority in





Turkey and the other respective countries (Treaty of Peace With Turkey, 1923).

During the following years Kurdish uprisings were frequently suppressed around the Kurdish territories, and it would take until after the second world war until the situation changed again. With support from the USSR, the Kurdish population managed to finally create their own state in January of 1946, called the Mahabad Republic located in northwestern Iran. This republic did however cease to exist the following year when Iran invaded the republic (Cleveland, 2016).

Once again the Kurds found themselves a minority spread through four different countries. Violent conflicts throughout Kurdistan between Kurdish nationalists with the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party Mustafa Barzani, and the core states, mainly Iraq, erupted. These conflicts culminated in the 1960s and resulted in a peace treaty between Iraq and the Kurds granting them self-rule in 1970. The complicated situation between Iraq and the Kurds did however continue due to a conflict of interests regarding certain oil-rich parts of Iraq that the Kurds claimed as their territory, resulting in further revolts suppressed by the Iraqi forces (Cleveland, 2016)

In 1991 the Kurds were supported by the USA as the Kurds rose up against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. This did however result in a huge defeat for the Kurds, leading the UN to establish Operation Provide Comfort, later renamed to Operation Northern Watch, a no-fly zone over parts of Iraq to stop Iraqi bombings of Kurdistan (UNSCR, 1991).

Despite a violent conflict between Iraqi Kurds and Turkish forces (Cleveland, 2016), the Kurds fought together with NATO against Saddam Hussein following the 9/11 attacks leading to strengthened relations between



USA and the Kurds. In 2007 Iran and Turkey continued their war against Kurds in Iraq (Karlsson, 2017).

In September of 2017 a referendum in Iraq was held to determine whether the Iraqi part of Kurdistan would gain independence from Iraq. Despite several attempts from both Iraqi ministers and other international actors, such as Turkey and Iran, to delay the election, an overwhelming number of over 90% voted in favour of independence. Immediately after the referendum the governments of Iraq, Iran and turkey called the referendum unlawful. Iraq isolated Kurdistan by forbidding all flights heading for Kurdish airports. In October of 2017 Iraqi forces invaded Kurdish territories in Kirkuk (Eppel, 2018)

## 4 Findings

As stated above, the independence referendum in the autumn of 2017 in the Kurdish regions of Iraq sparked a debate regarding if a sovereign state of Kurdistan could become a reality and if it would be a viable state. Arguments were raised from scholars, professors and other people involved in the situation, expressing their opinions, and putting them in writing in newspapers articles all over the world.

In this research, fourteen different newspaper articles has been analysed and cross referenced to possible tendencies. The newspapers will be selected as described in the method chapter of this paper, and reviewed below. This chapter will focus on areas that are relevant to the research objective, and the theoretical framework. Therefore, some parts of the articles will be left out, and areas concerning political settlements, survival functions and expected



functions, or otherwise is of importance and relevance to this study, will be prioritised.

## 4.1 The National Post, Canada

### 4.1.1 The West should support Kurds' desire for independence from Iraq

The first article is from the Canadian newspaper The National Post, and written by Shuvaloy Majumdar, with long experience of Iraq, following a career leading the US democracy assistance initiatives in the region. The title of the article clearly displays the overall opinion: The West should support the Kurds' desire for independence from Iraq. The article mentions a number of reasons for why Kurdistan should be granted full independence from Iraq. The article starts off with the basic concept of democracy. As the referendum of 2017 gives evidence about, over 90% of the voters supported independence, with 75% of the population participating in the elections. The article suggests that the western countries should respect the democratic referendum and thus support the Kurdish independence from Iraq. The author also means that the Kurds 80 years old struggle from independence from Iraq is not only a way of achieving power or an "ill-considered fancy" but a logical solution to an unstable situation (Majumdar, 2017).

Another reason for the Kurds to be granted independence is Iraq's inability to support Kurdistan. According to the author, this was made evident when Iraq failed to deliver weapons and other materials needed for the Kurdish forces to fight against ISIS. According to the article, Kurdistan has a number of factors that would be beneficial for a sovereign Kurdish state. Amongst other factors, the Kurdish government has strong diplomatic relations with other countries such as Israel, The United Kingdom and USA. Furthermore, the Kurdish region of Iraq has seen financial prosperity during the latest years, amongst other things due to the pipeline between the oil-rich fields in Kirkuk



to neighbouring Turkey (Majumdar, 2017). This have however since the article was released changed. Shortly after the independence elections Iraqi forces invaded Kirkuk and the surrounding area, making it harder for the Kurdish government to extract and export oil (Knights, 2017).

Despite the conflicts between Kurds and Iraq, the article suggests that both Iraq and Kurdistan would benefit from Kurdistan gaining independence. The author argues that an independent Kurdistan would strengthen Iraqs own sovereignty, and support Iraqs quest towards democracy (Majumdar, 2017)

The article also writes about the possible negative impacts of a Sovereign Kurdistan, although very briefly. One key reason for the general dislike of independence of Kurdistan are fears amongst people and governments, deeply rooted in historical tragedies such as the conflicts in Balkan, Sudan and India resulting from countries seeking independence. Other negative factors are economic factors, mainly regarding oil-rich territories such as the Kirkuk region. These territories might spark violent conflicts and a prolonged war between Kurds and Iraq resulting in further tragedies for all involved parties (Majumdar, 2017).

#### **4.1.2 Canada quietly opposes Kurd independence, notwithstanding history of oppression**

Terry Galvin writes in the National Post about the relationship between the Kurds and their quest for independence, and Canada. In the article Galvin starts off with noting that the Kurds, Israel and European left-wing oriented individuals has through the referendum been pitted against Donald Trump, Bashar Assad, Recep Erdogan, the Khomeinist regime in Iran, and Canada. The author proceeds with claiming that Canada supports the Iraqi status quo despite "Trudeau's 'world stage' declarations of solidarity with the marginalised, the voiceless and the dispossessed" (Galvin, 2017)



The reason for the governments support for a status quo is, according to Trudeau, due to the sensitivity in the matter, and Canadas own history of separatism. However, the author argues that this argument does not hold up, since there is a clear difference between the case of Quebec and Kurdistan. The people in Quebec did not suffer from genocide and repression in the same way that the Kurds have been since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, should Quebec wish to leave Canada, there is a democratic process for this supported by President Trudeau (Galvin, 2017).

Furthermore, Galvin claims that Canada joined in on the American-European opposition towards the referendum just days before the vote, and thus it is hypocritical of Trudeau to claim that Canada will remain neutral on the question of independence.

## 4.2 Market Watch and New York Times, USA

### 4.2.1 **The Kurds meet all the criteria to have their own country (Market Watch)**

Richard N. Haass writes in Market Watch about the complex situation in Iraqi Kurdistan. Haass has a long record of working with the American Government, where he amongst other position served as director of policy planning for the State Department between 2001 through 2003, and Coordinator for the Future of Afghanistan. Haass starts off with explaining the overwhelming results of the 2017 referendum where over 90% voted for independence. However, he also acknowledges that statehood is not only built by a national election, but on international recognition, and thus emphasises the importance of a debate regarding Kurdistans independence worldwide. Haass then asks the question "under what circumstances should leaders and populations seeking to leave one country and establish their own be supported?" (Haass, 2017). As there are currently no set frameworks for



such a decision, Haass proposes a few key points and criteria for when this should be supported (Haass, 2017). These are:

- A history that indicates a clear collective identity for the people in question.
- A compelling rationale, in the sense that the population must be able to demonstrate that the status quo is imposing a large political, physical, and economic price.
- The population makes clear that it strongly favors a new and separate political status.
- The new state is viable (the last thing the world needs are more failed states).
- Secession does not jeopardize the viability of the rump state or the security of neighboring states. (Haass, 2017)

Haass argues that Kurdistan meets all of these criteria, and thus should be granted independence. He also highlights that an independent Kurdistan would be economically viable, without resulting in a negative impact for Iraq or other nearby states. However, he also writes that one of the main reasons for Syria's, Iran's and Turkey's dislike of Kurdish independence from Iraq is due to a fear that a similar referendum will be demanded in the respective Kurdish-populated areas. These states, are however not the only states who opposes the idea of an independent Kurdish State. According to Haass, USA does not support Kurdistan, mainly due to the last of the above mentioned criteria. Haass argues that USA fears that such a drastic change to an already unstable Middle-East would not only jeopardise the possibility of peace in the region, but also negatively affect the oil exports from Middle-East to America (Haass, 2017).



Haas disagrees with the US government on this point. He argues that a democratic opponent to "an illiberal Turkey, an imperial Iran, an Iraq heavily influenced by Iran, and a Syrian regime that owes its survival to Iranian and Russian military intervention" would be necessary to secure the region and make a sustainable development possible (Haass, 2017).

As a solution, Haas proposes that the US and the European Union should participate in the dialogue between the Kurdish regional Government in Iraq and Iraq's government in Baghdad to ensure a peaceful and secure transition. Meanwhile, similar talks should be held with Turkey to ensure that no further conflicts will erupt due to the new situation (Haass, 2017).

#### **4.2.2 After the Vote, Does the Kurdish Dream of Independence Have a Chance? New York Times**

David Zucchino writes in the New York Times about Kurdistan's prospects, as a "landlocked proto-state dependent on hostile neighbours" can build a viable state without Iraqi retaliation. Zucchino argues that The Kurdish Regional Government has a troubled economy without democratic institutions, and, since the Kurds refused to postpone the referendum, are without American support. Therefore, the author argues that the referendum has set back the Kurds' aspirations for independence. Mainly because the Kurds underestimated the value of international support, and the consequences of international opposition. Therefore, the first days after the referendum the Kurds failed to begin a state-building process, since they instead had to focus on the reprisals from their neighbors, who immediately started to isolate the Kurdish region both by air and land (Zucchino, 2017).

Zucchino continues with an analysis of the Kurdish Regional Government and states that the Kurds lack fundamental factors of democracy, such as the rule of law, a functional legislative assembly, and free and fair elections. One example of this is the president of the Kurdish Regional Government,



Masoud Barzani, who has remained in power long after the end of his term. Furthermore, Zucchini claims that the Kurdish Regional Government is ruled more as a dictatorial monarchy than a democracy, using the long history of the Barzani family as an important political actor in Kurdistan. Masoud Barzani is the son of Mustafa Barzani, who is a former president of the Kurdish Regional Government, and the son of Masoud Barzani, Masrour Barzani, is in charge of the security council in the Barzani government. Zucchini refers to a member of the opposition to the referendum, Rabbon Marof, who states that “we do not have rule of law, we have a monarchy” (Zucchini, 2017).

Another important aspect is the economy. It has already been established that oil is the main source of income for the Kurds, and therefore the relationship with Turkey is important. However, the Kurdish region in Iraq has a large debt of 20 billion dollars, and an unstable economy since the price of oil has dropped during the recent years (Zucchini, 2017).

## 4.3 Egyptian Streets, Egypt

### 4.3.1 Why Did the Kurds Vote for Independence and What are the Effects for the Region?

The author of this article is a Kurd himself, named Mohamed Gailan. Just as in the previously mentioned articles Gailan claims that this referendum will not lead to conflicts with the regional powers. He claims that since Kurdistan has not yet declared their independence from Iraq, no conflict will erupt. However, in retrospect this opinion may seem a bit premature, since Iraq invaded certain parts of the Kurdish regions shortly after the referendum and this article was published. The second reason for why the referendum will not lead to destabilisation is the fact that Kurdistan has managed to create strong economic relations with powerful neighbors such as with Ankara, Damascus and Teheran. Furthermore, the safety of Kurdistan is protected by





an inability of its neighbors to act against Kurdistan. Syria is in a complicated civil war, and Turkey is, despite its offensive verbal communication, one of the closest allies to Kurdistan. Turkey and Kurdistan is deeply involved in trade, and the trade from Erbil is the third largest trading partner to Turkey. Another factor that will contribute to the security of Kurdistan is the Iranian-Kurdish Pashmerga forces, that are currently supported by Iraqi-Kurds. Should Iran show any kind of hostilities against Kurdistan, a civil war in Iran is therefore highly likely (Gailan, 2017).

However, one main reason for why a transition towards independence will turn out in the favour of the Kurds are the tensions between the US and EU with Russia. Kurdistan has for a long time supported western countries in their war against terrorism, and has become a strong ally to the West. Should the US or any other western country interfere with this, Kurdistan could instead look towards Russia and their allies. This could prove a great difficulty, and pose a direct threat, economically and in a worst-case scenario a military threat, towards all western countries (Gailan, 2017).

Gailan has identified some arguments often used to describe why Kurdistan wants independence from Iraq. Oil, nationalism, the threat of the Islamic State and the turbulens after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq are all reasons for independence. However, Gailan argues, one reason that is seldom debated is the genocide (Gailan, 2017) which killed up to 182.000 Kurds between the years 1986 through 1989 (Human Rights Watch, 1993).

Based upon these arguments, Gailan concludes the article with:

The principles of brotherhood, human rights, justice and equality would lose their meaning if the Kurds, once again, after a century of atrocities, ethnic cleansing, genocide and oppression, are denied their right to a homeland (Gailan, 2017).



### **4.3.2 How Oil Wealth and Terrorism Can Lead to Kurdistan's Secession**

Mirna Khaled Abdulaal starts with the background of the referendum, drawing from the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, stating that the invasion resulted in internal conflicts that greatly weakened the state and its central government. As the government started to lose its control over Iraq, Kurdish nationalism arose and a dream of a Kurdish federal government was put on the table. When the new Iraqi government allowed the Kurdish region a higher degree of autonomy, the Kurds imposed their own economic laws which resulted in international investments in Iraqi-Kurdish oil. This economic independence, and the Kurdish oil revenue, made the dreams of national independence possible. The next important step for becoming a viable independent state came when the war against ISIS began. The result became an extension of Kurdish geographical borders, including the Kirkuk region. The Kirkuk region would serve as both a means of economic prosperity and a means for greater diplomatic relations with countries, such as Israel, Italy, Greece and France, who bought Kurdish oil (Abdulaal, 2017).

However, Abdulaal proceeds with pointing out similarities between Kurdistan and South Sudan, and thus stating that oil and diplomatic relations with the West is not sufficient to build a stable and viable state. South Sudan suffered from a civil war, and in the case of Kurdistan, the risk of a civil war is always present (Abdulaal, 2017).

## **4.4 AllAfrica, Nigeria**

### **4.4.1 Lessons From Spain's Catalonia, Iraq's Kurdistan and Nigeria's Biafra**

This article differs quite a bit from the others, since the author does not in the article deal with only the Kurdish question, but also with other similar cases as well. The author, Sam I. Oluabunwa, draws conclusions by identifying similarities between Catalonia in Spain, Kurdistan in the Middle East, and



Biafra in Nigeria as well as historical examples of the quest towards independence (Ohuabunwa, 2017).

Ohuabunwa claims that the quest for sovereignty over territories can be dated back centuries. Examples are the Belgian independence in 1830, Nicaraguas independence in 1838, Ireland in 1916 as well as a number of states declaring independence from Germany post world war 2. There are also modern examples, such as the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union in the post cold-war era (Ohuabunwa, 2017).

Catalonia has a history much like the Kurds. Their struggle for independence from Spain began in the 17th century, and just like Kurdistan, Catalonia has only enjoyed sporadic periods of independence. In October of 2017 a referendum was held, with 80% voting in favour of independence. However, the referendum was declared illegal by the Spanish government, resulting in an escalation of political turmoil. The Catalan government was dissolved which resulted in Catalonia falling under direct rule from Madrid (Ohuabunwa, 2017).

In Kurdistan, a similar escalation occurred, when after the referendum in September of 2017, Iraq declared the referendum illegal and occupied parts of Kurdistan, thus halting the quest for independence. At the same time a similar situation in Nigeria and the region of Biafra resulted in the dissolution of Biafras autonomy (Ohuabunwa, 2017).

Ohuabunwa draws three conclusions. The first is that these failed attempts at independence were not a coincidence, and that the only reasonable conclusion is that the quest for independence of ethnic groups will continue. He claims that the national boundaries should be determined by ethnicity, language and culture, but, as is the case of many former colonies, the borders are instead



based on administrative convenience for the former colonial powers. The second conclusion is that independence through the use of force will never result in a permanent solution, but will only escalate into further violence. The third conclusion is that those states that make it impossible for a peaceful transition to sovereignty will be met with violence (Oluabunwa, 2017).

## 4.5 Independent, England

### 4.5.1 This is why the West should support the Kurds in their quest for independence

This article, written by Matt Gillow, presents a handful of reasons for why the western countries should support Kurdish independence. Some of the reasons regard arguments such as that the Kurds are the largest ethnic group that do not have their own state, and that their long struggle for independence in combination with major contribution in the war against ISIS have made the Kurds deserve their own land (Gillow, 2017).

However, the main argument in this article is what the western states could gain if Kurdistan gained independence. An independent Kurdistan would, according to Gillow, reduce the western states reliance on Russia for the energy needs of the West. Furthermore, Kurdish independence will hopefully bring stability through the region by increased trade and interdependence between Kurdistan and both western states and the Middle Eastern neighbours. The author refers to the European Union as an example of a guarantee of peace through trade and interdependence. Kurdistan would, together with Israel, become a place of peace and democracy, as well as a liberal presence in the region (Gillow, 2017).



However, Gillow argues that in order for the increased trade and interdependence to function, Kurdistan will have to rely on Turkey for export, since Kurdistan would be a landlocked country (Gillow, 2017).

#### **4.5.2 Why referendums – like with Brexit, Kurdistan and Catalonia – are always doomed to fail**

The second article from The Independent offers a different approach to the referendum, and instead focuses on the flaws of referendums, such as the Independence referendums in Kurdistan and Catalonia, and the Brexit referendum in Britain. The author, Patrick Cockburn, argues that these referendums serve a populist agenda, by oversimplifying a complex matter to a yes or no question. The options are often made up of "wishful thinking and what they are opposing is a rag-bag of unrelated grievances" (Cockburn, 2017).

Cockburn argues that the referendum in Kurdistan is flawed in the same way that many other referendums are, while still carrying distinct features. The president of the Kurdish Regional Government Barzani monopolised Kurdish nationalism, and used this to carry out the referendum. Since most Kurds want independence, the yes-side won, despite not being feasible. However, for Barzani, the vote resulted in him gaining legitimacy to continue as president, despite the fact that his term ended in 2015. The referendum also resulted in a shift of focus from the economic instability in Kurdistan, and instead claiming that the economic collapse is entirely Iraq's fault (Cockburn, 2017).

As in the case of both Brexit and the Kurdistan referendum, power over the negotiation was promised. The leave-side in Britain promised that the negotiation with EU would be easy and Barzani promised that negotiations would be held directly with the government in Baghdad. In reality, this would not happen. Both EU and Iraq are far more powerful than Kurdistan



and Britain. Baghdad refused to negotiate at all, until the referendum was annulled, and EU made it clear that negotiations would not be as easy as promised by the leave-side (Cockburn, 2017).

## 4.6 Cyprus Mail, Cyprus

### 4.6.1 Cyprus in the light of Catalonia and Iraqi Kurdistan

Ozay Mehmet argues in the Cyprus Mail against the independence of Kurdistan. He draws parallels between the situation in Kurdistan, Catalonia and the similar situation in Cyprus, and concludes that legitimacy cannot come from violence or neo-nationalism. The author uses the term Unilateral Declarations of Independence (UDI) and argues that no country can gain legitimacy from such a declaration of independence. He states that:

”unilateral secession, however strongly backed by neo-national sentiment, is no remedy for settling ethnic conflict. Only an agreed settlement via dialogue offers a viable solution” (Mehmet, 2017).

Mehmet argues that in a democratic arena a legitimate succession cannot be forced by violence or UDIs, but must come from dialogue and compromises. Vital factors such as economic, legal and political consequences must be fair and just in order for a legitimate succession to work. The right of self determination is important and must be respected, but is not absolute.

According to Mehmet, the Kurdish quest for independence is grounded in opportunism and American support. The legitimacy of a Kurdish State was lost when Kurdish forces, together with American forces, occupied the Iraqi oil-rich Kirkuk areas and thus extended their geographical border in the war against ISIS. The following consequences made it clear that a peaceful transition to independence was impossible, when the governments of Iraq,



Iran and Turkey imposed heavy sanctions on Kurdistan and took back the Kirkuk area.

Mehmet concludes with a statement that no UDI will ever work:

What emerges from these cases of UDI? Fait accompli actions by politicians like Makarios in 1963, or Denktash in 1983, or the Catalan and Kurdish leadership in 2017 provide no legitimacy for popular neo-nationalist aspirations. Only agreed settlement can do that as result of good-faith negotiations (Mehmet, 2017)

#### **4.6.2 The first bit of Kurdistan**

Gwynne Dyer starts the article with describing the immediate sanctions imposed on Kurdistan by Iraq and other nearby states, such as Libanon and Egypt, following the referendum in 2017. These sanctions were mainly in form of a blockade, stopping all aircrafts traveling to or from Kurdish airports. Turkey responded to the referendum by claiming that the Kurdish government would be responsible for starting an ethnic and sectarian war in the region. The reason for Turkey and Erdogan to react hostile is the fear that if Southern Kurdistan, or the Kurdish regions in Iraq, would gain their independence, nationalistic movements in Iran, Syria and Turkey would escalate drastically, and, since around 20% of the Turkish population is Kurdish, this would be a devastating blow to Turkey (Dyer, 2017).

This complicated relationship between Kurdistan and their neighbours hurts their viability as an independent state, since Turkey has the power to close the oil pipeline, and thus reduce the Kurdish revenue. Furthermore, the likelihood of any state in the region recognising South Kurdistan as a state is quite low at the time (Dyer, 2017).



A strong ally to the Kurdish population, both in Iraq and in Syria, has been USA. The Kurds have fought alongside USA as allies for a long time, however, Dyer argues that the situation may change. He claims that the US plans to abandon their allies, since it is in the American interests that further border adjustments, that would bring further instability to the region, does not happen. USA seeks stability in the region, and creating further conflicts by igniting an ethnic conflict, would not ensure stability in the Middle East (Dyer, 2017).

Dyer argues that Barzani's motives are personal, and the referendum was an attempt to remain in control by being the symbol of independence. There are no doubts about why the Kurds seek independence. They were promised their own country after the first world when the Ottoman empire collapsed. They were denied independence, and since then the Kurdish population has seen one hundred years of oppression and division (Dyer, 2017).

## 4.7 Asia Times, China

### 4.7.1 'Free Kurdistan' inevitable, and war may be unavoidable

Bilal Khan writes in the Asia Times about the Kurdish conflict with the premise that the United States is the dominating actor. The author starts with stating that the referendum will "further fracture and bleed the Middle East region". Since the Kurds allied the US in 1990 during the Gulf-war they have become one of the most important ally in the middle east. Despite the importance of the Kurds, most western states were critical to the referendum, however, this was mainly due to the timing, not the referendum itself (Khan, 2017).

The Kurdish quest for independence has spread to the other states with large Kurdish populations as well, mainly Syria. Therefore, the central





governments of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria sees this question as a path towards a multi-dimensional war in the region, and not just as a question of territorial sovereignty. The governments, mainly Iraq and Turkey, have mobilised against Kurdistan, however, an attack on Kurdistan would be dangerous. Turkey, Syria, and Iraq fears that an attack against Kurdistan would result in a shift of focus by Kurdistan from the ISIS-conflict towards the aggressors, making it possible for ISIS to regain their strength. This would be devastating for especially the weak government in Iraq, where the military operations against ISIS have proven ineffective. Turkey, on the other hand, have the military capacity to act against Kurdistan, however, such an action would harm the relationship with Russia, who has an interest in the oil-rich Kurdistan. Since no government has the ability to harm Kurdistan, the author claims that an independent US-allied Kurdistan is unavoidable (Khan, 2017).

#### **4.7.2 The who, where, and when of secession**

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. writes in Asian Times a week after the referendum in 2017, discussing the possible secession of Iraqi Kurdistan. The author starts by comparing the Kurdish referendum with the referendum in Catalonia, and states that there are two main differences. The first is that in Catalonia, the population was closely divided on the issue, while the Kurds voted almost unanimous. The second difference is that there is a high probability of retaliation by force if the Kurdish regions in Iraq claim independence (Nye, 2017).

The author proceeds to discuss the structure of the voting polls, using Ireland as an example. He states that Catholics and Protestants for many years had a conflict regarding if the voting was to take place in the political area of Ireland or the geographical area. If the vote was in the political area the Protestants would win, while if the vote occurred in the geographical area the



Catholics would win. The question of when a voting is being held is also important. The author uses Somalia as an example, claiming that in the 1960s Somalia wanted an immediate referendum while the Kenyans wanted to wait until a Kenyan identity had been forged. The third consideration of a referendum regards what happens to the state that is being left behind. In the case of Kurdistan, large parts of Iraq's oil reserves are located within Kurdish territory, and Catalonia accounts for around 20% of the GDP in Spain. Therefore, the referendums have been declared illegal by both the Spanish and Iraqi government. An example of a secession where the state being left behind suffered greatly was the secession of the Sudetenland after the fall of Austria-Hungary. Sudetenland seceded to Germany, and thus stripping Czechoslovakia of all their military and geographical defences, making it possible for Germany to invade Czechoslovakia only six months after the secession (Nye, 2017).

One important factor regarding secession and the right to self-determination is the value of international support. One example is the NATO peacekeeping intervention in Kosovo in 1999, where Russia backed Serbia's objection to the independence of a sovereign Kosovo. The result has been that Kosovo has not gained international recognition, and is not a member of the UN. On the other hand, Russia used the right to self-determination in 2008 and in 2014, when Abkhazia claimed independence from Georgia, and during the invasion and annexation of Crimea (Nye, 2017).

The author concludes with stating that absolute demands of independence rarely works, and a peaceful transition, such as the case when Czechoslovakia divided itself into two sovereign states (Nye, 2017).



## 4.8 Outlook India, India

### 4.8.1 Kurdistan Votes For Freedom, And Takes West Asia Towards Ethnic Conflict

Talmiz Ahmad writes in Outlook India about the 2017 referendum and its consequences. The author starts by stating that there is "well-documented evidence of sustained neglect of their political, economic and cultural interests and aspirations in all the states where they live as minorities", something that would justify the referendum. However, Ahmad continues claiming that the rule of the Kurdish regional president Barzani is authoritarian in its nature and non-transparent with corruption related to oil trade and revenue. Thus, the referendum was not seen by the population, especially the youth, as a vote for freedom, but rather a vote for further autocratic and predatory governance (Ahmad, 2017).

The author also writes about the issue of the contested areas, such as Kirkuk, calling it "the most coveted jewel for the Kurdish crown". Kirkuk contains 40% of the entire Iraqi oil reserve as well as the richest agricultural land. Therefore, Kirkuk would be of vital importance, should Kurdistan become economically viable (Ahmad, 2017).

Yet another issue for an independent Kurdistan is the lack of support by other countries in the region. The only country in the region to support an independent Kurdistan is Israel. The author claims that this is a reflection of the historically good relationship between Iraqi Kurds and Israel, as well as Israel's interest to "back any initiative that would promote instability and uncertainty for Iraq and Iran." However, Ahmad states that the support from Israel has little value (Ahmad, 2017).

On the other hand, powerful countries with a hostile opinion towards the Kurdish Regional Government and the 2017 referendum, such as Turkey and



Iran, have reacted harshly. The president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has stated that the move towards Kurdish independence could be the beginning of an ethnic war in the Middle East, and has therefore threatened to close the pipeline used by the Kurdish territories to export oil to Europe, and thus limiting the Kurds financial growth. Erdogan has also stated that all options, including military actions, is open for consideration (Ahmad, 2017).

This complicated relationship with neighbouring states has a negative impact on the prospects for Kurdish independence, since 92 percent of the regions needs comes from neighbouring states, and is financially dependent on contributions from the Iraqi government, who provides Kurdistan with 17 percent of the Kurdish revenue (Ahmad, 2017).

#### 4.9 Official Reactions

The 2017 referendum sparked reactions worldwide, and while some states, such as Israel and Sweden, supported this referendum, the general reaction was negative. Important international actors such as USA, China and the UK opposed the referendum on the basis of bad timing, and the risk of an escalated conflict.

The prime minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, remains neutral on the question and refers to the sensitivity of the issue and Canadas own history of referendums with the Quebec sovereignty issue. He argues that issues of this kind are a matter between the involved parties, and other states should not interfere (Canadian Press, 2017). This reasoning is also shared by other states, such as Russia (Goran, 2017). However, politicians from Quebec has expressed their support for Kurdish independence (Bergeron Vercheres, 2017), while Terry Galvin claims that Canada has opposed the referendum in a communique to the state department in USA (Galvin, 2017).



The British government has stated that they value the right for the Kurds to choose their own government, however, due to the unstable situation in the region, the UK opposes the referendum. The European Union have stated that their strategy for Iraq is that Iraq should remain united and strong, something that both Cyprus and the UK supports. USA has also expressed their opposition to the referendum, and stated that they support a unified Iraq. China also supports a unified Iraq, with peaceful dialogue resulting in stability within Iraq (European Parliament, 2019).



## 5 Analysis

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study to answer the research objective and questions. First of all, the opinions presented by the various authors will be analysed, before implementing the theoretical framework on the arguments. Then, possible tendencies within the articles will be discussed, where the findings of chapter 4.9 will be put in relation to the arguments. Finally, the future prospects for an independent Kurdish State will be discussed, using the result from the previous analysis in this chapter.

### 5.1 Argument analysis

The main arguments on the future of Kurdistan presented by the authors of the different articles vary quite a bit, from arguments regarding economy and state-building processes to arguments concerning the impact a sovereign Kurdistan would have on regional and global politics. In this chapter, the main arguments supporting and opposing the referendum will be analysed. These arguments will then be used together with the theoretical framework to determine the viability of a sovereign Kurdistan according to the authors.

#### 5.1.1 Arguments supporting the Kurdish referendum

Out of the articles analysed in the findings chapter, quite a few of them were positive towards the referendum and an independent Kurdistan. One of the most common reasons presented for the independence of Kurdistan, is the history of the Kurds and the principle that a state should be built by a common history, culture, language and ethnicity, rather than for the convenience of former colonial powers. The Kurds have fought for independence for a long time, and should thus be granted their own state (Oluabunwa, 2017). Another main topic that supports Kurdish viability is the economy. Since the Kurdish regions in Iraq have large numbers of natural resources, the Kurds have the possibility to become an economically strong state, which could bring more trade to the region (Haass, 2017).



Other arguments supporting the Kurds are related to the situation in the region. Iraq cannot support the Kurds efficiently enough (Majumdar, 2017), and a new democratic state in the region could bring stability (Gillow, 2017). The Kurds have good relationships with powerful democratic states, such as the United States and Israel, something that strengthens Kurdish viability as a state (Majumdar, 2017). Furthermore, since neither of the other countries in the region is powerful enough to act against Kurdistan, the independence would not bring further conflict to the area (Khan, 2017). Moreover, a democratic state in the region would increase trade in the entire region, and thus make Middle Eastern states rely more on each other, and thus help bringing peace to the region (Gillow, 2017).

Another reason arguing for the independence turning out in favour of the Kurds, is the tensions that exists globally, mainly between the Western countries and Russia. Since the Kurds are a strong ally to western countries in their struggle against terrorism, the western states would not risk losing an important ally. Should the west interfere with the Kurds quest towards independence, the Kurds could instead look for support from Russia (Gailan, 2017). One final reason for why the Kurds should gain their long awaited independence is, as Shuvaloy Majumdar states, the world should respect the democratic referendum (Majumdar, 2017)

### **5.1.2 Arguments opposing the Kurdish Referendum**

Some authors were not as optimistic towards the 2017 referendum as others. The main arguments concerned the regional situation in the Middle East, not as convinced about the positive effects a new democratic state could have on the region, and even questioning the democracy within the Kurdish Regional Government. Some authors fear that if the Kurds in Iraq gains independence, Kurdish minorities in Iran, Turkey and Syria would escalate their own



nationalistic agendas, leading to an ethnic conflict in the region (Khan, 2017).

According to David Zucchino in the New York Times, the Kurdish Regional Government lacks fundamental democratic values, something that hurts the viability of an independent Kurdistan. The president of the Kurdish Government, Barzani, has remained in office longer than his term allowed for, and the region lacks a functional assembly who can create rule of law. He also claims that Kurdistan lacks free and fair elections and that the powerful position of the Barzani family, where both Masoud Barzani, the father Mustafa Barzani, and the brother Masrour Barzani have or have had important political positions within the Kurdish Regional Government, is an indication that Kurdistan is ruled more as a dictatorship than a democracy (Zucchino, 2017).

Another reason for why Kurdistan is currently not viable regards access to resources and trade. As a landlocked country, the Kurds are highly dependent on neighbouring states to import and export goods. The oil pipeline going through Turkey is necessary for the Kurds in order to export their main source of income, oil. Therefore, the Kurds would be dependent on hostile neighbouring states to become economically viable (Dyer, 2017).

Furthermore, the price of oil has drastically dropped in the recent years, making the main source of income unreliable in more than one aspect (Zucchino, 2017).

The last aspect that many of the authors are critical towards, concerns the legitimacy of a sovereign Kurdistan. Ozay Mehmet states that legitimacy can never come from violence or neo-nationalism (Mehmet, 2017). Since the Kurds went ahead with the referendum despite many countries recommended that they did not, they have lost international support from, amongst others





the United States (Zucchini, 2017). Without international support, the Kurds will not succeed in the negotiations with Iraq, similar to Britain's lack of power over the Brexit negotiations with the European Union (Cockburn, 2017). Mirna Khaled Abdulaal states that oil and international support is far from sufficient to build a new and viable state (Khaled Abdulaal, 2017).

## 5.2 Framework Analysis

Here, relevant arguments from all articles will be analysed using the theoretical framework. The articles will be examined and, using the theoretical framework, be discussed to answer the research objective of this study. The analysis will be divided into three parts, discussing political settlements, survival functions and expected functions of an independent Kurdistan in accordance with the arguments presented in each article.

### 5.2.1 Political Settlement

Political settlement, as explained in section 1.5, regards the state's ability to negotiate power with relevant actors. An example of what happens if a state fails to establish sufficient political settlement is the Brexit referendum. The different parties in the referendum made a promise to the voters that the UK had the power to negotiate on equal terms with the European Union. However, the reality turned out to be different and thus the referendum resulted in major political instability in the UK (Cockburn, 2017).

The ability to negotiate power is an issue that has been dealt with in several of the articles. For instance in *The Independent*, where Patrick Cockburn argues that neither the Kurds nor the Brexit-Supporters has the ability to negotiate power in a way that was promised prior to the referendum, since both the European Union and the Iraqi government are far more powerful than Iraq and the UK (Cockburn, 2017).



On the other hand, Shuvaloy Majumdar argues in the National Post that Iraq's inability to support Kurdistan, alongside with the Kurds strong diplomatic relations, would be an indication of sufficient political settlement (Majumdar, 2017). This is expanded upon in Mohamed Gailans article in the Egyptian Streets, where he argues that neither Iraq nor any neighbouring state has the ability to act against Kurdish secession (Gailan, 2017). It is, however, important to note that Gailans article was published before Iraqi forces invaded Kirkuk (Eppel, 2018).

Another tool necessary to be able to negotiate power with the relevant actors is the viability of the economy. In the case of Kurdistan, the economy strongly depends on oil exports, and thus, one could argue that the economic viability of Kurdistan depends on two factors. For one, the disputed region of Kirkuk needs to become or stay Kurdish territory, since Kirkuk holds major oilfields. The second factor is the relationship with Turkey. In order to export oil, Kurdistan needs to be able to export the oil through the pipeline going through Turkey. Therefore, the power to negotiate relies on the Kurdish relationship with Turkey (Zucchini, 2017).

A sovereign Kurdish state, would, according to several of the articles, have a hard time establishing sufficient political settlement to become a strong and viable state. The political and diplomatic power of Iraq is far greater than that of Kurdistan. Kurdistan could, however, use the weaknesses and instabilities of Iraq and other neighbouring countries to their advantage. Iraq's inability to support Kurdistan and Iran's, Syria's and Turkey's inability to act against the Kurds could be used to negotiate power and the terms of secession, and thus establishing political settlement.



## 5.2.2 Survival Functions

Since the Kurdish region in Iraq already has a certain amount of autonomy, survival functions such as the rule of law, monopolised violence and a somewhat steady economy, has already been accomplished in many areas. The Kurdish Regional Government is, according to Haass article in Market Watch, a democratic institution, which would make a sovereign state more viable (Haass, 2017).

Several articles write about the financial aspect of the succession, such as The National Post article by Shuvaloy Majumdar, and argues that Kurdistan has seen major economic growth during the past years (Majumdar, 2017). Mirna Khaled Abdulaal writes in the Egyptian Streets about Kurdish economy and states that the Kurdish region already has independent financial laws that has resulted in international investments and trade with the Kurds (Abdulaal, 2017). However, Gwynne Dyer argues in the Cyprus Mail that the regional instability hurts Kurdish viability since Turkey has power over the oil-pipeline to Europe, and thus can control Kurdish revenue (Dyer, 2017).

When it comes to internal security and a monopolised use of violence, a sovereign Kurdish State would have the benefits of already established institutions and means to protect the citizens. Another important survival function is the rule of law. A just and fair legal system is an important factor for sustainable state-building. David Zucchino writes in New York Times about the severe lack of democracy and rule of law within the Kurdish Regional Government, something that strongly opposes Kurdish sovereignty (Zucchino, 2017).

## 5.2.3 Expected Functions

The expected function of the state, such as infrastructure and a functioning police as well as other relevant authorities is important, both for the citizens of the state and other international actor who wish to cooperate with the state.



Once again, the Kurdish Regional Government has the advantage of already established functions. Several articles, among them Zucchinos article in the New York Times, indicates that the Kurds have infrastructure that makes it possible to trade with other states using the oil-pipeline and airfields (Zucchino, 2017). However, as Matt Gillow states in The Independent, Kurdistan is landlocked and has no shorelines. Thus, the Kurds have to rely on neighbouring states, most likely Turkey, to export and import goods (Dyer, 2017). This supports Mirna Khaled Abdulaals statement in Egyptian Streets, that diplomatic relations with western countries and oil is not sufficient to build a viable state (Abdulaal, 2017).

When it comes to expected security functions, Zucchino argues that the Kurdish Regional Government has failed in creating a legislature with sufficient power to secure peace in the region. Without a functioning legislative assembly, the civil society will have a hard time challenging the executive leadership (Zucchino, 2017).

### 5.3 Tendencies

Here, displayed tendencies by the media actors will be discussed. Tendencies might be, for example, a correlation between the states expressed opinion and the media actors expressed opinion. In accordance with Jared Ahmads article; Serving the same interests: The Wood Green ricin plot, media–state–terror relations and the ‘terrorism’ dispositif, it would be reasonable to think that there are some kind of correlation. However, it should be noted that there are major differences in the methodology used in Ahmads article and this paper, since Ahmad analysed news articles, while this paper have analysed debate-articles published in newspapers.

Of the selected countries, China, England and the United States have expressed an official negative reaction towards the referendum, while



Canada has stated that they are neutral about the matter since it is strictly an issue between Iraq and the Kurds of Iraq.

While analysing the articles, it becomes obvious that such tendencies cannot be found in this instance. China, who is negative towards the referendum, had one article being negative and one positive. The same result was found in England and the United States as well. Canada had one positive article, and one article that only stated that Canada opposes Kurdish independence. The only country where both analysed articles agreed with each other was Cyprus, where both articles expressed negative opinions towards the referendum.

Therefore, it appears as there are no strategic reasons for the media actors to display a certain opinion, other than to express their view on the viability of a sovereign Kurdistan. Should, however, as an example, both American newspapers have expressed negative opinions on the referendum, it would support the theory of media actors supporting states interests. However, since there is no evidence that the media actors either supports nor opposes the states view, this theory is not supported by the findings in this study.

#### 5.4 A Sovereign Kurdish State

This chapter will discuss the future prospects of an independent Kurdish State, using the arguments presented in chapter four, with the theoretical framework as a basis. What factors, according to the different authors, need improvement for a new Kurdish State to emerge will be discussed.

When it comes to political settlements, one major issue is the possibility to negotiate power. Without this possibility, it is unlikely that the Iraqi government will allow independence for the Kurds. Therefore, Kurdistan needs to discuss the matter both with the government in Baghdad, as well as



with other states. International support is vital for the Kurds, if they are to negotiate with Iraq and other nearby states. This is an issue, since the Kurds negated the recommendations by a number of other countries to postpone the referendum. Furthermore, as the war against the Islamic State will end, and the unity through a conflict against a common enemy will decrease, international support might be hard to achieve. One possibility to become on good terms with other countries, would be a democratisation of the Kurdish Regional Government. Such a transformation would possibly increase international support, and powerful allies, such as USA, would likely want to support a democratic state.

However, Turkey, Iran and Syria will most likely not support the independence of Kurdistan, since that would risk an escalation of national movements within the Kurdish minorities in their respective countries. Because of these tensions, a good relationship with neighbouring states is necessary to avoid further conflicts in the region. Something that could prove problematic, since the conflicts in the Middle East have created instabilities which deteriorated the ability to trade and cooperate in a manner that would ensure peace in the region (Gailan, 2017).

Another factor that needs to be ensured if Kurdistan is to become capable to operate successfully, is certain important issues regarding the economy. Since the main revenue comes from oil, the economy might not be as stable as it should be. Oil prices have dropped in recent years, and the territorial dispute of the Kirkuk region has further put the economy of Kurdistan at risk. To improve the economy, increased trade of goods and services, other than oil, is one option. However, a good relationship with neighbouring states is key as well, since Kurdistan does not have access to harbours for export and import of traded goods.



In conclusion, there are three key areas that, according to the authors and the theoretical framework, need improvement if Kurdistan is to operate functionally. First of all, a democratisation of the Kurdish Regional Government. International support and a better relationship with neighbouring states is vital to ensure peace and economic prosperity. Finally, increased trade both regionally within the Middle East and with the rest of the world is important to become a functional member of the international arena.



## 6 Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to analyse the debate conducted in newspapers from all over the world, using a theoretical framework designed to evaluate and analyse the different author's arguments. The study aimed to analyse the main arguments supporting or opposing the 2017 referendum, and thus, with help of the state-building theoretical framework, determine the viability of an independent Kurdish State in what is now called the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. This objective was then formulated in the two research questions. This study would identify the main arguments, analyse tendencies and determine if there is a specific reason for why a newspaper had their specific opinion.

There was a large variety in opinions, both supporting and opposing the referendum and a sovereign Kurdistan independent from Iraq. One of the main arguments supporting the referendum was the Kurds long history of being oppressed in different ways throughout history. Therefore, the Kurdish minorities deserve their own country, in particular because they were promised a country after the first world war. This argument lacks opposition from other authors, making the argument one of the strongest arguments supporting the referendum. Other arguments in favour of the referendum regards the allegedly strong oil-based economy and the democracy within the Kurdish Regional Government. These arguments have, however been opposed by other authors, claiming that the economy in Kurdistan is weak and unreliable due to insecurities in the oil-market as well as territorial disputes regarding oil-rich regions. The claim that the Kurdish Regional Government is a democracy has also been questioned, instead claiming that the long history of the Barzani families rule, and the fact that Barzani have remained in power after the legal end of his term in office, the Kurdish Regional Government have more similarities with a dictatorial monarchy than a liberal democracy.





While identifying biases among the articles, it would be reasonable to assume that articles published in countries with expressed concerns regarding the 2017 referendum would also have a negative view on the matter. This is for example what happened in the article *Serving the same interests: The Wood Green ricin plot, media–state–terror relations and the ‘terrorism’ dispositif* by Jared Ahmads, where he concluded that media actors in the United Kingdom had been used to support the nations interests before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and thus legitimising the invasion by gaining public support. However, this study has proved that this is not the case of the 2017 referendum, since there was lack of correlation between the states expressed opinion and the opinion of the different articles from their respective country. Since very little correlation was to be found, no strategic reasons for newspapers to display a certain opinion could be identified. Only one newspaper had both articles expressing the same opinion, where both articles from the Cyprus Mail had a negative opinion on the 2017 referendum, corresponding to the official reaction of Cyprus who supports the European Unions agenda to support a strong Iraq.

The research has found that a sovereign Kurdish State lacks key attributes that would be necessary for a successful sovereign state. However, many authors argue that if the Kurds in Iraq gained their independence, Kurdistan would bring peace and stability throughout the Middle East. Initially, the independence of the Kurdish Regional Government would likely bring further instability to the region, where the risk of a violent conflict between ethnicities cannot be ruled out. However, post the initial instabilities, a democratic Kurdish State would likely provide better prospects for peace and stability to the region, begging the question: does the means justify the end?



This study has successfully managed to identify and analyse key arguments regarding the 2017 referendum, and, by using the theoretical framework, managed to achieve a further understanding of the troubled situation in Kurdistan. However, there are areas where much more could be done. A larger amount of articles from more countries would give a more valid result. By doing a quantitative research, a correlation between media and state actors would be easier to identify. However, such a study would not be able to analyse arguments, in the same extension as this study have done. Further research in state-media correlations in other cases would provide a better understanding how the state can control the public opinion as well as how media can be used to support national interests.

After successfully fulfilling the research objective of this study, the result can in spite of its limited generalization ability hopefully provide a better understanding of the complexity of the situation in the Middle East, the challenges that the Kurdish population in Iraq have faced throughout history, challenges that they face today, and what obstacles that need to be overcome for a viable Kurdish State to appear. Despite ideological, political, or religious differences, all involved parties desire the same goal. Peace in the region is essential for prosperity, and therefore future research on the tensions in the Middle East as well as possible solutions, must be of priority.



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