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# Cross-border Unity or Fragmentation of the Kurds

A Qualitative Content Analysis on the KRG's and the PYD's  
Views on National Identity and Statehood

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Course Cod: MRSK62  
Semester: Autumn 2019  
Supervisor: Darcy Thompson  
Word Count: 12 629



# Abstract

With a population of around 30 million people, the Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East. Despite this, the Kurds do not have their own independent state which makes them a minority group in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Since the Kurds are scattered over four different states it is of interest to examine how they refer to each other in relation to the idea of having an independent state. The purpose of the study is to examine how the Kurds link their idea of national identity and statehood. In order to fulfil the purpose of the study, the views on national identity and statehood of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), are examined. The political organizations' written agendas and official statements from 2016-2019 are examined through an inductive qualitative content analysis. The theoretical framework for the study is David Miller's theory on national self-determination which highlights the importance of self-governing for people who share the same national identity. The study concludes that KRG include the Iraqi Kurds in their definition of national identity and seek an independent state for the Iraqi Kurds in the Kurdish region in Iraq. PYD, on the other hand, include all Kurds from different states in their definition of national identity, but opposes the idea of nation-states and therefore do not seek an independent state for the Kurds.

*Key words: Kurds, KRG, PYD, Statehood, Independence, National Identity, Kurdistan.*

# Abstract

Titel: Gränsöverskridande enighet eller fragmentering av kurderna. En kvalitativ innehållsanalys av KRG:s och PYD:s syn på nationell identitet och statsskap.

Med en befolkning på cirka 30 miljoner människor är kurderna den fjärde största etniska gruppen i Mellanöstern. Trots detta har kurderna inte sin egen självständiga stat vilket gör dem till en minoritetsgrupp i Turkiet, Irak, Iran och Syrien. Eftersom kurderna är utspridda över fyra olika stater är det av intresse att undersöka hur de hänvisar till varandra i förhållande till idén om att ha en suverän stat. Syftet med undersökningen är att ta reda på hur kurderna kopplar samman deras idé om nationell identitet och statsskap. För att uppfylla syftet med undersökningen har uttalanden som berör nationell identitet och statsskap från Kurdistans regionala regering (KRG) i Irak samt Demokratiska unionspartiet (PYD) i Syrien, undersökts. De politiska organisationernas skriftliga agendor och officiella uttalanden mellan 2016–2019 har granskats genom en induktiv kvalitativ innehållsanalys. Det teoretiska ramverket för studien är David Millers teori om nationell självbestämelse som belyser vikten av självstyrande för människor som innehar samma nationella identitet. Studien drar slutsatsen att KRG inkluderar de irakiska kurderna i sin definition av nationell identitet och strävar efter en självständig stat för de irakiska kurderna i den kurdiska regionen i Irak. PYD, å andra sidan, inkluderar alla kurder från olika stater i sin definition av nationell identitet, men motsätter sig idén om statsgränser vilket betyder att de inte strävar efter en suverän stat för kurderna.

Nyckelord: *kurder, KRG, PYD, statsskap, självständighet, nationell identitet, Kurdistan.*

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# 1 Introduction

The Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East after Turks, Persians and Arabs. Although differences in dialects, the Kurds shares the same Indo-European language, Kurdish. When it comes to religious affiliation, the Kurds are predominantly Sunni Muslims. Even though the Kurds consist of over 30 million people, Kurds do not have an independent state.<sup>1</sup> The areas where Kurds live, have for centuries been divided between the Persian and Ottoman Turkish empires.<sup>2</sup> After the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 was created in order to shape the remains of the Ottoman empire. According to the Treaty, the Kurds were granted complete independence with the creation of Kurdistan in the region. However, the treaty never got ratified due to re-negotiations with the new Turkish leadership, Kurdish lack of relations with the West and the absence of a strong Kurdish leadership that could speak on their behalf. This finally led to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 that divided the Kurds between Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria and remain stateless till this day.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1 Problem Statement, Purpose and Research Question

The right to self-determination for ethnic minorities has been a challenge in international practice since it constitutes a threat to state sovereignty. In this regard it is common that claims for secession is met with force and repression from the state where the ethnic minorities reside in. In Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria the states have historically practiced mono-nationalist ideologies which means that the people with a Kurdish identity in each of these states has been repressed by the state governments.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emel Elif, Tugdar and Serhun, Al (ed.), *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East Actors, Ideas, and Interests*, [E-Book], Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2018, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Graham E., Fuller, "The Fate of the Kurds", *Foreign Affairs*, 72:2, 1993, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Karen, Culcasi, "Cartographically constructing Kurdistan within geopolitical and orientalist discourses", *Political Geography*, 25:1, 2006, p. 684.

<sup>4</sup> David, Romano, and Mehmet, Gurses (ed.), *Conflict, democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East*, [E-Book], Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, p. 3.

Due to this, it is of interest from a human rights perspective to study how the Kurds themselves view the idea of statehood as, amongst other things, measure of security from the repression they have or are facing, in the states they live in. Since the Kurds are scattered as minorities in four different states, it is of further interest to study how the Kurds in those states refer to each other in connection to the idea of statehood.

The overall purpose of this study is to increase the understanding of how the Kurds themselves view their national identity and the idea of statehood. A more specific purpose of this study is to understand how two Kurdish political organizations link national identity and statehood. The definition of national identity in this case is about how the political organizations view national identity. By studying who the Kurdish groups include in their definition of national identity, it will hopefully provide a greater understanding of the cross-border unity between Kurds. The definition of statehood in this case is referring to the Kurdish political organizations' views on the possibility of an independent Kurdistan, which would become the state of Kurds. By studying how two Kurdish political organizations link their views on national identity and statehood, this will hopefully contribute to an understanding of how different Kurdish groups views these issues. The time period that will be the focus of this study is on the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The focus of the study will be about Kurds residing in Iraq and Syria and their views on national identity and statehood. In order to examine this, the two biggest Kurdish political organizations from Iraq and Syria will be the starting point for this study. In the case of the Iraqi Kurds, the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) views on national identity linked with statehood will be examined. In the case of the Syrian Kurds, the views of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) on the same issue will be examined, in order to understand how two different Kurdish groups relate to this. Since the KRG is a governing faction that consists of multiple Kurdish parties, both the KRG and the PYD will be referred to as political organizations in this thesis. The political organizations' written agendas and official statements will be studied through an inductive qualitative content analysis in order to understand the KRG's and the PYD's views on the chosen issues. The study will also have a perspective on national self-determination and self-governing with the aim to contribute to a broader understanding

of the topics that will be studied. In order to fulfil the purpose of this study the following research question has been formulated:

*How does the KRG and the PYD link their idea of national identity with statehood?*

## 2 Research Review

This research review aims to identify the main arguments that exist in academia within the field of Kurds in connection to national identity and statehood. The research field has been identified in relevance to the research question of the thesis and divided into three themes. The themes consist of the “Kurdish Issue” which seeks to give an overall introduction to how academics refer to the Kurdish presence in different states. It also consists of Kurdish nationalism which aims to introduce the discussion among scholars of the strength of the cross-border Kurdish unity. Lastly, the theme Ocalan vs. Barzani will present literature on the existing division in Kurdish cross-border politics. The research within each theme in this overview, has been chosen due to its relevance and contribution to various insights and perspectives on the topic of this thesis.

### 2.1 The ”Kurdish Issue”

As previously mentioned, Kurds are mainly spread between four different states Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria. This section seeks to acknowledge the various ways in which current literature distinguishes the “Kurdish issues” between these four mentioned states. Literature on the “Kurdish issue” in Iran is not as extensive as literature regarding Kurds in other states. In discussion among scholars, the understanding of Iranian Kurds is that they are feeling excluded and marginalized from the political system in Iran. Due to religious differences within the population of the Iranian Kurds, the Sunni Muslim Kurds are experiencing more political exclusion from the Islamic Republic than the Shiiet Muslim Kurds. This further cause the political mobilization of the Sunni Muslim Kurds to be violent.<sup>5</sup>

Literature on the Kurdish case in Turkey is extensive and the topic of the assimilation process implemented by the Turkish state, is usually brought up by scholars. Following

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<sup>5</sup> Shahram, Akbarzadeh, Zahid Shahab, Ahmed, Costas, Laoutides, and William, Gourlay, “The Kurds in Iran: balancing national and ethnic identity in a securitised environment”, *Third World Quarterly*, 40:6, 2019, pp. 1145-1150.

the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and the failure of the Sèvres agreement, which would have granted the establishment of Kurdistan, the Turkish Republic was established in 1923. Amongst other scholars, Nikos Christofis claims that due to the national building process in Turkey which was based on homogenizing its citizens, the Kurdish identity has since then been denied in various ways in Turkey.<sup>6</sup> What is also mentioned in literature regarding the “Kurdish issue” in Turkey, is the Kurdish political organization Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). From the 1960’s and onwards, Kurdish political activist started becoming active in Turkish socialist movements and later established their own political parties. Amongst other political organizations PKK was established. One of the reasons why the PKK is highly studied is due to its ongoing conflict with the Turkish government since its establishment.

Literature covering the “Kurdish issue” in Iraq is focused on the Kurdish region of the northern part of Iraq. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Iraqi Kurds formed a permanent government in 2005. One specific focus area in literature regarding this issue, is the disputed territory around the city of Kirkuk. Due to the oil discovery in the area in 1922, both the Kurdish region in Iraq and the Iraqi government have claimed ownership to the city. Another highly studied topic regarding the “Kurdish issue” in Iraq, is concerning the question of independence of the Kurdish region since it is the most self-governed of all the other Kurdish regions. In connection to this, the topic of the Kurdish region’s relation towards its neighboring countries, is relevant. Scholars that have studied this issue, such as Zeynep Kaya and Matthew Whiting, claims that the neighboring countries to the Kurdish region, is opposed to Kurdish independence in the region, due to fear of mobilization of its own Kurdish minority. Due to this, the KRG has prioritized building a relationship of trust with Turkey by making it clear they do not seek to affect Kurds outside of Iraq, according to Kaya and Whiting.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to the “Kurdish issue” in Syria the literature is, like the literature on Iranian Kurds, limited compared to the amount of studies that has been done on the Kurdish situation in Turkey and Iraq. What is being discussed among scholars, is the role of the

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<sup>6</sup> Nikos, Christofis, “The state of the Kurds in Erdoğan’s ‘new’ Turkey”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 21:3, 2019, p. 251.

<sup>7</sup> Zeynep, Kaya and Matthew, Whiting, “Sowing Division: Kurds in the Syrian War”, *Middle East Policy*, 24:1, 2017, p. 85-86.

PYD and its army the People's Protection Units (YPG) in the Syrian state. Scholars are claiming that the PYD and the YPG have cleared the northern region of Syria from the Islamic State which have given them some international recognition.<sup>8</sup> The topic of the Turkish government is also mentioned in literature regarding the "Kurdish issue" in Syria. Here scholars such as Michael Eppel, claim that since Turkey listed the PKK as a terrorist organization, the relationship between Turkey and the PYD is tense due to the shared ideological ties between the PKK and the PYD.<sup>9</sup>

To sum up, this section has briefly mapped out literature covering the "Kurdish Issue" in Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The section has contributed to a better understanding on what are the most relevant topics in each state regarding the issue on Kurds, according to scholars. What has been shown in this section is that there exist different "Kurdish issues" in each of the four states that can also overlap, for example, when it comes to the states fear of a Kurdish mobilization.

## 2.2 Kurdish Nationalism

In order to understand Kurdish relations to national identity and statehood, literature on Kurdish nationalism is relevant to get a grasp of the context that Kurds operate in. According to William Gourlay the nature and cohesiveness of Kurdish identity has been examined broadly by scholars since the 1930s. Gourlay has in one of his studies examined the phenomenon *Kurdayetî* which is a form of Kurdish nationalism that includes a desire for an independent Kurdish homeland. Gourlay focus on the shared political identity that comes from Kurdish nationalism which seeks to protect Kurdish interest. In his study Gourlay argues that Kurdish nationalism extends across borders and does not necessarily include any territorial claims. Gourlay further argues that in times of trauma this phenomenon becomes more noticeable. Kendal Nezan shares together with Gourlay a consensus about the assumption that Kurds share the same basic cultural identity despite the lack of contact and the present distance between them.

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<sup>8</sup> Tugdar and Al (ed.), 2018, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Michael, Eppel, "Kurdish Nationalism's Moment of Truth?", *Current History*, 113:767, 2014, p. 365.

In line with Nezan's argumentation Gourlay argues that a sense of solidarity has hardened among Kurds because the states in which they live fails to protect them.<sup>10</sup>

There is, however, not a consensus among all scholars when it comes to the strength of the cross-border unity of Kurds. Hakan Yavus argues that regional, religious and linguistic differences among Kurds, prevents the existence of a developed Kurdish identity.<sup>11</sup> Graham A. Fuller agrees with Yavus and argues in his study that nearly all Kurdish rebellions and movements have sought autonomy only for Kurds living within one state. Fuller argues that there is a weak sense of nationhood among Kurds due to the physical scattering of Kurds between different states for over thousands of years. This has deprived the Kurds of the opportunity to develop a single political culture and structure with a common vision.<sup>12</sup> Fuller further argues that Kurds are mostly residing in areas far from the capitals and centers of political activity, which separates them from each other even further.<sup>13</sup> Robert Lowe's study include a comparison of different Kurds loyalty to "Kurdishness". The author argues that most Kurds in Syria have a broader sense of identity that includes a Syrian nationality whereas the Kurds in Iraq shares a stronger sense of a Kurdish identity.<sup>14</sup>

From a political standpoint Dylan O'Driscoll and Bahar Baser discusses how Kurdish nationalism is used as a political tool by the biggest party in KRG, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), to maintain their position. O'Driscoll and Baser focus in their article on the KRG's independence referendum in 2017 where the turnout was 92,73% votes for the Kurdish region of Iraq to become independent. The authors argue that even though there is a strong Kurdish unity within the Kurdish region of Iraq, the referendum was held by the KDP due to internal political competition rather than it being the right time for an independence referendum.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> William, Gourlay, "Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma", *Middle East Critique*, 27:1, 2018, pp. 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> Gourlay, 2018, pp. 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Fuller, 1993, p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, 1993, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Robert, Lowe, "The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria" in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (ed.), *Conflict, democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East*, [E-Book], Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> Dylan, O'Driscoll and Bahar, Baser, "Independence referendums and nationalist rhetoric: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq", *Third World Quarterly*, 40:11, 2019, p. 2016-1017.

To summarize, the current literature with regard to Kurdish transboundary nationalism shows that there is a disagreement on the strength of the Kurdish unity. Some scholars highlight the similarities between the Kurds within the four different states whereas other scholars focus on the differences between them. Depending on which perspective the literature has regarding this issue, the results will give different descriptions on the shape of Kurdish national movements. For example, when scholars claim that all ethnic Kurds share the same nationality, the Kurds national movement will therefore include all ethnic Kurds. On the other hand, when scholars focus on the differences between Kurds from different states, the Kurdish national movement is only directed towards a specific Kurdish group resided in one state. This thesis aims to contribute with more perspectives on the issue of Kurdish nationalism by examining what two different Kurdish political organization's views are on Kurdish national identity.

### 2.3 Ocalan vs. Barzani

Scholars within the research field of Kurds and their relation to national identity and statehood, makes a clear distinction between the Kurdish cross-border politics within the region. According to literature discussing this issue, the Kurdish politics is overall divided in Kurdish political organizations that is either related to the founder of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan or to the family of the founder of the KDP, Mustafa Barzani. There is further consensus among scholars that the division in the Kurdish cross-border politics is due to the different ideologies advocated by Ocalan and Barzani. Generally speaking, KDP is a conservative party while PKK is a leftist party.<sup>16</sup>

According to Till F. Paasche, Ocalan's ideology shifted from a Marxist-Leninist ideology that contributed to the goal of a Kurdish sovereign state, to an ideology based on the idea of "democratic confederalism".<sup>17</sup> The idea of "democratic confederalism" rejects the nation-state and identifies it to be the cause of many of societies' problems. Instead, it advocates a system that provides self-rule without creating new state borders. KDP, on the other hand, seeks a more conventional nation-state formation with

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<sup>16</sup> Tugdar and Al (ed.), 2018, p. 93.

<sup>17</sup> Till F., Paasche, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation", *Middle East Policy*, 22:1, 2015, p. 77.

emphasis on ethnic self-determination, according to Kaya and Whiting.<sup>18</sup> Cenap Çakmak has studied this issue by comparing how the notion of self-determination has been framed by KRG's and the Turkish leftist-party, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), in their political discourses. The study concludes that the pro-Barzani KRG is pushing for full independence whereas the leftist party HDP, find local autonomy and recognition of their cultural rights in the national legal system sufficient. Furthermore, Çakmak presents an explanation of this issue by stating that it is easier for a national group to present a will of independence, when they have stronger territorial control. In other words, a political organization's approach and idea of self-determination can be changed over time depending on the political circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

According to Güneş Murat Tezcür the achievement of Kurdish self-rule in Iraq in 2004 by Masoud Barzani, created a challenge to Ocalan's self-portrayal as the leader of the Kurdish people all over the region.<sup>20</sup> As described in Paasche's study, there also existed a rivalry between PKK and KDP for leadership over the northern Iraqi region.<sup>21</sup> One further example of the division between Ocalan's vs Barzani's ideologies can be found in the current Kurdish political organizations in Syria. The biggest party in the Kurdish part of Syria, Rojava, is the PYD that advocates Ocalan's ideology and their biggest opponents are pro-Barzani parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS).<sup>22</sup> F. Michael Wuthrich reaffirms these assumptions by claiming in his study, that cross-border interactions between organizations becomes cooperative to the extent that they share similar or the same ideology.<sup>23</sup> Gourlay further support this claim by arguing that there is a stronger sense of unity among Kurds who share the same ideology, which means that political affiliation can also divide the Kurds.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kaya and Whiting, 2017, p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> Cenap, Çakmak, "Statehood, Autonomy, or Unitary Coexistence? A Comparative Analysis of How Kurdish Groups Approach the Idea of Self-Determination", in Elif Tugdar and Serhun Al (ed.), *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East Actors, Ideas, and Interests*, [E-Book], Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2018, p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> Güneş Murat, Tezcür, "The Ebb and Flow of Armed Conflict in Turkey: An Elusive Peace" in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (ed.), *Conflict, democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East*, [E-Book], Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> Paasche, 2015, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Paasche, 2015, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> F. Michael, Wuthrich, "Kurdish Nationalist Organizations, Neighboring States, and "Ideological Distance" in in Elif Tugdar and Serhun Al (ed.), *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East Actors, Ideas, and Interests*, [E-Book], Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2018, p. 100.

<sup>24</sup> Gourlay, 2018, p. 29.

Idris Ahmedi makes the point in his study, that the fragmented character of Kurdish identity and politics should be viewed in the light of external conditions. Ahmedi further claims that the four states that govern over the Kurds have consciously attempted to increase the division of Kurds living in different states. This division of Kurds also gets bigger when Kurdish groups seek support from the states they reside in. Ahmedi argues that the different Kurdish organizations would be more inclined to demand for independence for all Kurds rather than settle for local autonomy, if it was not for the oppression from Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria.<sup>25</sup> One example is when Massoud Barzani promoted himself as the cross-border Kurdish leader but at the same time put the interest of KRG and the Iraqi Kurds, first.<sup>26</sup> Wuthrich agrees with Ahmedi's argumentation and states that the leaders of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria use these ideological differences between Kurdish organizations to their advantage by turning Kurds against each other.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, clearly there is a consensus among scholars with regard to the division of Kurdish cross-border politics. This section has contributed to an understanding of the two main ideologies that exist within Kurdish cross-border politics and has also provided some explanations as to why this division between Kurds exists. Since this thesis will examine a pro-Ocalan and a pro-Barzani organization, it is of relevance to review the existing discussion among scholars regarding these two ideologies.

In this research review the common topics within the research field of Kurdish relation to national identity and statehood have been presented. This was done by looking at what the overall common topics are in literature regarding the Kurdish question in the four main states they reside in. It was also done by reviewing the academic discussion on Kurdish cross-border nationalism and politics. After reviewing the current research field related to the purpose of this thesis, I find that there is a lack of studies on Kurdish organizations own interpretation on national identity and statehood, specifically on Kurdish political organizations in Syria. The aim of this thesis is to fill that gap by

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<sup>25</sup> Idris, Ahmedi, "The Stateless and Why Some Gain and Others not: The Case of Iranian Kurdistan", in Elif Tugdar and Serhun Al (ed.), *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East Actors, Ideas, and Interests*, [E-Book], Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2018, p. 218.

<sup>26</sup> Lowe, 2014, p. 233.

<sup>27</sup> Wuthrich, 2018, p. 100.

examining how KRG and PYD link national identity with statehood by examining their own interpretations through their written agendas and official statements.

### 3 Theory

The theoretical framework for this thesis is about a theory of national self-determination and secession. This theoretical framework has been chosen in relevance to the research question. The field of normative theories of secession is usually divided into three fields: the just-cause theories, the choice theories and lastly the national self-determination theories. In regard to the purpose of this thesis a theory of national self-determination by David Miller has been chosen. The chosen theory will contribute to an understanding of how the PYD's and the KRG's link national identity and statehood. The other two fields within the theoretical framework will be discussed below in order to motivate the choice of theory. Lastly, the chosen theory in relation to the purpose of this thesis will be presented.

The just-cause theories, or remedial rights theories as they are also called, has generally a negative presumption against secession. Prominent scholars within this theoretical framework are Allen Buchanan and Wayne Norman. These scholars emphasize the importance of the secession to fulfil certain criteria and often draws a parallel to John Locke's theory of revolution. According to just-cause theories the right to secede from a state is only legitimately if the seceding group is a victim of systematic discrimination, exploration or mass violation of their human rights. Another legitimate reason for secession is when the group within a concentrated territory has been invaded or illegally incorporated into a state.<sup>28</sup> Although the Kurds fulfill these requirements, the just-cause theory fails to address the question of nationalism and the importance of national identity as an important factor in regard to the issue of secession. Therefore, the just-cause theories only emphasize international recognition of a secession and not on national groups, which is the focus of this thesis. Due to this, a just-cause theory will not be suitable for the purpose of this study.

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph, Costa, "On theories of secession: minorities, majorities and the multinational state", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 6:2, 2003, pp. 65-66.

The choice theories only require, unlike the previous field within the theoretical framework, that a majority in a territory express their will to secede in order to justify it. Furthermore, theories of this kind do not require a group to belong to a different national group from the state they reside in or to have endured oppression or any other human rights abuse in order to secede from a nation. Since the choice theories focus on the individual's choice, it ignores the ethnic and national character among national groups.<sup>29</sup> This thesis will focus on the view of two Kurdish political organizations on national identity and statehood and not on any Kurdish claim for secession *per se*. Therefore, a choice theory won't be suitable to fulfill the purpose of this thesis.

The chosen theory within the theoretical framework for this thesis is a national self-determination theory by David Miller. The right to secession and self-governing according to Miller is phrased in terms of the importance of national identity. Miller further argues that all groups of people that shares the same national identity should be self-governing. When Miller highlights the importance of nations and their self-determination, his principal of nationality is not necessarily based on an ethnic homogeneous group of people.<sup>30</sup> The focus is instead on the importance of national membership to the individuals. In other words, would a state include a group of people who recognize one another as belonging to the same community, which typically shares a common history, culture and attachment to a geographical place that differentiates them from others.<sup>31</sup> The people of a nation are therefore according to Miller, more willing to cooperate with each other since they have committed to live together and are more likely to compromise. Miller further implies that when a nation is politically autonomous it is able to protect a common culture and determine its own destiny. This claim will only be fulfilled when the people of a state shares the same national identity, because if a state is exerting its authority over multiple nationalities, there is a risk that the dominant group use their dominance to assimilate the smaller national groups.<sup>32</sup>

To summarize, Miller's theory on national self-determination highlight the importance of letting groups that shares the same national identity, have the right to create their own

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<sup>29</sup> Costa, 2003, p. 65.

<sup>30</sup> David, Miller, "Secession and the Principle of Nationality" in Margaret Moore (ed.), *National Self-Determination and Secession*, [E-Book], Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, 1998, p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Přemysl, Rosůlek, "On the Moral Justification of Secession", *Europolis*, 5:2, 2011, p. 124.

state in order to let them shape their own future and protect their common interests. Miller also points out that even though a sovereign state is not the only possible option for self-determination and self-governing, he argues that it is and has always been the main and most effective option for nations in order for them to reach their goals.<sup>33</sup>

National self-determination theories do not, unlike choice theories, focus on individuals but focus instead on groups. Since Miller's theory has a local and group perspective compared to the other fields within the theoretical framework, his theory will be the best suited option for this study since it will examine two local organizations. Miller's theory on national self-determination will more specifically contribute to an increased understanding of how KRG and PYD link national identity and statehood. The theory will contribute with the perspective of national identity in the analysis when the two political organizations' definitions of national identity, will be studied. Since Miller link national identity with the right to statehood, the findings of the political organizations statements on statehood will be analyzed in regard to how and if they are in line with this perspective.

The researcher should be aware of certain risks that comes with using only one theory in a study. It is therefore of relevance to bring up the existing critique of Miller's national self-determination theory. Joseph Costa examines in his study the three different fields that have been presented of the theoretical framework of secession. Costa means that Miller's theory only operates within a liberal-democratic context which the author means is problematic since most secessionist movement occurs in non-democratic states.<sup>34</sup> Simon Caney criticize Miller's theory in his article when he states that neither democratic institutions nor overcoming collective action problems require nationality. Caney further questions Miller's assumption that individuals possess special obligations towards each other just because they belong to the same nation. Miller's theory would also mean in practice that there would be more states and more actors which in turn would make it harder to overcome collective action problems such as environmental pollution, according to Caney.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Miller, 1998, p. 65.

<sup>34</sup> Costa, 2003, p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Simon, Caney, "Self-Government and Secession: The Case of Nations", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 5:4, 1997, pp. 356-358.

The criticism of Miller's theory has here been taken into account. However, the parts of the theory that will be used in this study has been assessed to still be of relevance for the purpose of this study. Miller's perspective on national self-determination will be used in the study and its connection to self-determination will further be analyzed in the study.

## 4 Method

The thesis seeks to understand how PYD and KRG link national identity and statehood. This will be done by examining the statements of the political organizations on these issues in their respective written agendas and official statements made from the organizations. In relation to the purpose of this study an inductive qualitative content method has been chosen for the study. This approach has contributed to a deeper understanding of the political organizations' views on national identity and statehood by examining underlying implications in the data. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the chosen material and its delamination, trustworthiness as well as how the data that was later analyzed in regard to Miller's theory, was collected. Thereafter, the chosen method with regard to the purpose of the thesis will be presented. Lastly, the course of action used in this study will be described.

### 4.1 Material and Data Collection

Since the study seeks to understand how different Kurdish groups from different states link national identity and statehood, several prominent Kurdish groups in the region were identified. The chosen groups for this study were KRG in Iraq and PYD in Syria. The reason for this choice of political organizations was because they are the biggest active Kurdish organizations in the respective states. Furthermore, the material in relevance to the political organizations is up to date and available in English. It is also of importance to note that the chosen political organizations do not represent the same views of all the Kurds resided in the respective states. They do, however, represent views from a substantial part of the Kurds in each of the states they operate in.

The purpose of the thesis is to examine how the political organizations themselves link national identity and statehood. Due to this it is of relevance to examine data that has been produced from the respective political organization. Therefore, their written agendas were chosen as a part of the material for the analysis. Both written agendas were found on their respective websites. More specifically the KRG's written agenda

was found under the tab “Government” then under the title “Agenda” at its official website.<sup>36</sup> The agenda starts with a description of how it is developed in accordance with political agreements between all parties within the KRG. The agenda consist of seven headlines that describes the organizations principles and policies. The agenda consist of four pages in total. The PYD’s written agenda were found under the tab “Internal System” on their official website.<sup>37</sup> The program consists of ten headlines that describes the principles and rules of procedure of the political organization. The program consists of eight pages in total.

The material for this study also consists of official statements that have been given from each political organization. The statements together with the written agendas was assessed to be sufficient in order to answer the research question of the thesis. The PYD’s statements were found on their website under the tab “Statements”.<sup>38</sup> The statements consist of five pages with ten statements on each page. The PYD’s statements covers the period from January 2016 till October 2019. The KRG’s statements were found on their website under the tab “News” and then under “Press releases” which consists of six pages with either six or four statements on each page.<sup>39</sup> Since it is of relevance to study the KRG’s statements from 2016 in order to have the same timeline for both organizations, statements from their previous website that includes statements that were given before 2019 were used. On this website the statements could be found under the headline “News” and consists of 50 pages with ten statements on each page.<sup>40</sup> The KRG’s statements covers to period from May 2016 till December 2019.

When it comes to the trustworthiness of the chosen material the written agendas and statements have been assessed to be trusted since it comes directly from the political organizations’ official websites. Because of the comprehensive material that were found

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<sup>36</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Agenda*, <https://gov.krd/english/government/agenda/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>37</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Internal System*, <http://pydrojava.net/english/internal-system/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>38</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Statements*, <http://pydrojava.net/english/category/statements/>, Accessed 2020-01-01.

<sup>39</sup> Regional Government, *Press Releases*, <https://gov.krd/english/news-and-announcements/categories/press-releases/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>40</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *News*, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/i.aspx?l=12&s=040000>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

on the organizations' given statements, criteria were made in order to narrow the material down in relevance to the study's research question. The criteria that were introduced were that the statements had to be related to either national identity or statehood. The statements that fulfilled these criteria were copied from the websites to a separate document whereas statements that referred to other issues were not included.

## 4.2 Inductive Qualitative Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method used to systematically categorizes the informational content of textual data in order to provide knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon. It can further be used qualitatively or quantitatively which have different approaches when it comes to how they generate categories and how they are applied to the data. In a quantitative content analysis certain pre-decided words or contents are identified and quantified in the data, in order to understand the contextual use of words or content.<sup>41</sup> Since the focus of this thesis is not on examining a certain use of words or content in the chosen material, a quantitative method won't be relevant in this case.

This study has instead used a qualitative method in relevance to the chosen research question for this thesis. Whereas a quantitative method examines the occurrence of certain words in a context, a qualitative method gives an insight into how words are in fact used and contributes to an overall picture regarding an issue.<sup>42</sup> In this method the researcher's interpretation is an important element which suits well for this analysis since it seeks to interpret the PYD's and the KRG's statements concerning national identity and statehood. One challenge for inductive qualitative content analysis is that its reliability can be questioned because of the influence of the researcher's previous understandings of the subject. This will be prevented in the study through numerous examples and citations from the data to support the findings.<sup>43</sup> The qualitative method can either be done with an inductive or deductive approach. The deductive approach uses previous empirical and theoretical work as the basic framework for the analysis.

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<sup>41</sup> Jane, Forman and Laura, Damschroder, "Qualitative Content Analysis", *Advances in Bioethics*, 11:1, 2017, pp. 39-40.

<sup>42</sup> Hsiu-Fang, Hsieh and Sarah E., Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis", *Qualitative Health Research*, 15:9, 2005, p. 1283.

<sup>43</sup> Satu, Elo, Helvi, Kyngäs, "The qualitative content analysis process", *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62:1, 2008, p. 112.

The inductive approach identifies themes from the data.<sup>44</sup> Since this study aims to understand what the interpretation of PYD and KRG is with regard to national identity and statehood, it is of relevance to examine the common themes in their written agendas and statements. Therefore, an inductive approach will be the best option for this study.

According to Satu Elo and Helvi Kyngäs, the researcher needs to go through a preparation phase with the chosen material when a qualitative content analysis is being used.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, this was done by getting familiar with the data which was made by reading through the material several times. After getting a sense of the data the next step was to organize it. Through interpretation, different categories were created by highlighting recurrent themes within the statements of each political organization in relevance to national identity and statehood. Afterwards different themes could be created in accordance to the identified categories.

The themes that were created from the material from PYD were *encouragement of the liberation movement, association with Kurds residing in other states than Syria and operating within Syria's borders*. The themes that were created from the material from KRG were *oppression by the Iraqi government, claim for independence and relationship with Kurds in other states and neighboring countries*.

The purpose of this study is to understand how different Kurdish groups link national identity and statehood which is why an inductive qualitative content analysis was chosen as a suitable method for this study. The overall purpose of the thesis is therefore not on a comparison on how the KRG and the PYD link national identity and statehood. It is, however, still of interest to study in which ways the political organization link the issues similarly and differently in order to understand the cross-border Kurdish unity. Due to this, the analysis will include a comparison section where the findings from the inductive qualitative content analysis from both political organizations will be compared.

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<sup>44</sup> Forman and Damschroder, 2017, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> Elo, Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109.

## 5 Findings and Analysis

The analysis seeks to examine how KRG and PYD are linking national identity and statehood in relation to Miller's theory on national self-determination. The theory contributes to a perspective on national identity and the findings regarding the political organizations statements about statehood will be analyzed in respect to Miller's theory. In order to fulfil the purpose of this study, recurrent issues regarding national identity and statehood have been identified in the PYD's and the KRG's written agendas and their given statements from 2016 till 2019. Furthermore, themes have been created from the recurrent issues in the chosen data in order to answer the research question. The themes will be presented under each party and the findings will in turn be presented under each theme. Following the findings under each theme the findings will be analyzed in connection to Miller's theory on national self-determination. Lastly, there will be a comparison of the findings of the two different political organizations.

### 5.1 Democratic Union Party

Under this section the three chosen themes in relation to the findings in PYD's statements regarding national identity and statehood, will be presented. The chosen themes are *encouragement of the liberation movement*, *association with Kurds residing in other states than Syria* and *operating within Syria's border*. Under each theme the findings will first be presented followed by an analysis of the findings in relation to Miller's theory on national self-determination.

#### 5.1.1 Encouragement of the Liberation Movement

The subject of the liberation movement for Kurds is frequently mentioned in the PYD's statements. In one of the statements, PYD claims that the Kurds in Syria are oppressed by Turkey and their aggressive stand against Kurds. A consequence of this is that Turkey tries to undermine the Kurdish liberation movement by occupying regions in the Kurdish part of Syria.

The ruling fascism in Turkey stems from the thought of anti-Kurdish people and within the scheme to undermine the Kurdish liberation movement and the elimination of the Kurdish people. Based on this doctrine, the hostility of any democratic gain of the Kurdish people in Kurdistan or in any part of the world has become the basis for all Turkey's internal and external policies, as we witness its continued occupation and aggression against the Kurdish people in Rojava and southern Kurdistan.<sup>46</sup>

In line with these types of statements the importance of the continuation of the liberation movements amongst Kurds, is highlighted by the PYD:

We pledge our people once again that the new Ottoman plans are being thwarted by the resistance of our people and our resolve to restore the land and the looted Syrian territories occupied by the authoritarian regime of Ankara.<sup>47</sup>

Here the PYD highlights the importance of the Kurdish resistance to stop Turkey's (which the PYD refers as the Ottomans) occupation. Statements on the liberation movement, is often mentioned in connection to their ideological leader Ocalan. In one of the PYD's statements it is stated that Ocalan's theory on democracy and peace in the Middle East, is implemented in the minds of the Kurdish people. Therefore, the arrest of Ocalan makes the Kurdish struggle and fight for freedom, exponentially bigger. This was the opposite of the purpose of his arrest, which was to dampen to Kurdish resistance according to PYD. The political organization further states that there won't be any freedom for the Kurdish people or democracy in the Middle East, before Ocalan has been released, as seen in the statement down below.

We in the Democratic Union Party PYD we announce now and as we announced always to condemn and deplore with strongest terms and attitudes to international conspiracy and the isolation of the leader APO and we will stay struggled enlightened his thought and his philosophy , and emphasize that there is no freedom of the Kurdish people and the whole people in Middle East without freedom of leader Ocalan /.../<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Peoples' Will is Unbeatable*, 2019-08-20, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/08/20/peoples-will-is-unbeatable/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>47</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Statement to the Public Opinion*, 2019-06-18, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/06/18/statement-to-the-public-opinion/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>48</sup> Democratic Union Party, *A statement to the public: In the eighteenth anniversary of the International conspiracy that targeted the commander Abdullah Ocalan*, 2017-02-15, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2017/02/15/a-statement-to-the-public-in-the-eighteenth-anniversary-of-the-international-conspiracy-that-targeted-the-commander-abdullah-ocalan/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

Another example where the liberation movement is highlighted in the organization's statements is regarding martyrs that have died for this purpose. One example of this issue is the mentioning of martyr Haqi Qarar who according to PYD set a new course of resistance for the Kurds on their path to liberation.<sup>49</sup> In their statements regarding the anniversary of the establishment of the political organization, PYD claims that the establishment of the organization marked an important moment in the history of the Kurdistan liberation movement.<sup>50</sup>

Based on these findings it can be said that PYD advocates the Kurds liberation movement in order to reach the goal of a life in peace, according to their ideological leader Ocalan's philosophy. As they put it, the Kurdish liberation movement has existed before the existence of the party, but they connect the organization with the movement by celebrating its establishment. Since the organization advocates a liberation movement it means that they consider the current situation for the Kurds unsustainable. They further give examples of this by mentioning Turkey's occupation in the Kurdish regions of Syria. In connection to Miller's theory on national determination a liberation movement would be a claim for succession. However, the PYD never explicitly mention independence as a goal in connection to their liberation movement. Even though there is no claim of secession, the theory argues that there is a need for nations to self-govern if they want to fulfill their goals. Therefore, according to Miller, the Kurds in Syria need to be able to self-govern if they want to fulfil their goals with their liberation movement. The PYD puts the extra claim that they won't fulfil their goals until their ideological leader Ocalan has been released.

### 5.1.2 Association with Kurds Residing in Other States than Syria

In multiple cases PYD mention Kurds that are resided elsewhere than Syria. It is stated in their written agenda that the organization "[s]upport the democratic liberation struggle in all parts of Kurdistan in order to achieve and consolidate Kurdish national

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<sup>49</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Martyrs' blood is price of peoples' freedom*, 2019-05-17, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/05/17/martyrs-blood-is-price-of-peoples-freedom/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>50</sup> Democratic Union Party, *PYD congratulates Patriotic Union of Kurdistan on occasion of the 44th anniversary of its founding*, 2019-06-03, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/06/03/pyd-congratulates-patriotic-union-of-kurdistan-on-occasion-of-the-44th-anniversary-of-its-founding/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

unity /.../”.<sup>51</sup> It is further stated in the program that “[t]he PYD works to establish relations with Kurdistan parties in other parts of Kurdistan in order to consolidate national unity”.<sup>52</sup>

Another way PYD indicates a relation with Kurds in other regions, is shown in their statements portraying Turkey as the common enemy for all Kurds. In one of their statements regarding this issue, it is stated that the Turkish fascism is attacking everything related to Kurds.

Once again, we proved to the world public opinion that the Turkish government and the authority of Ardoghan is against the Kurdish people wherever they are. And that Turkey is still continuing its goal in political, cultural and physical extermination of all the opposes, led by the Kurdish people. It violets daily the rights and laws universally agreed, including its consist and intent of committing a new crime against our people.<sup>53</sup>

In the statement shown above, PYD state that the Turkish government is against all Kurds which the PYD refers to as “our people”. It is further stated that Turkey is engaged in a military war against every Kurd all the way from Afrin in Syria till Kirkuk in Iraq and the rest of Kurdistan.<sup>54</sup> With regard to these statements, that portraits Turkey as the common enemy of the Kurds, the organization asks for Kurds residing in other regions to act against this issue. For example, the PYD has called on the KRG in Iraq to take measures to stand up against Turkey’s aggression.<sup>55</sup> Another example is when PYD asked the Kurdish people in Turkey to overthrow the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his government.<sup>56</sup>

In summary, the PYD is conscious of including Kurds in different states into their definition of national identity. One example of this is when they encourage national unity by portraying that they have a common enemy which sees them as one national people. Furthermore, PYD advocates actions that seeks to strengthen the national unity

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<sup>51</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Internal System*.

<sup>52</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Internal System*.

<sup>53</sup> Democratic Union Party, *STATEMENTS*, 2016-12-10, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2016/12/10/statements/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>54</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Statement to Public Opinion*, 2019-06-29, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/06/29/statement-to-public-opinion-2/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>55</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Statement issued by political parties on Turkish violations*, 2019-06-08, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/06/08/statement-issued-by-political-parties-on-turkish-violations/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>56</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Statement to the Public Opinion*.

among Kurds. The PYD also refers to Kurds as “our people” and Kurdistan as the region beyond the Kurdish regions in Syria which further highlights the cross-border national unity. According to the national self-determination theory by Miller, PYD claims that Kurds share the same nationality by highlighting its significance in their written agenda and several statements. Since PYD claim they share the same nationality that also separates them from the majority of the state in which they currently live, they have a right for self-governing according to the theory.

### 5.1.3 Operating Within Syria’s Borders

What can be viewed as a contrast to the presented findings on PYD’s relation to Kurds outside of Syria, is their non existing statements on territorial claims. In other words, the PYD never mention a will to secede from Syria to create a unified Kurdistan together with Kurds from different regions. In fact, the organization is against the concept of nation-states in accordance with Ocalan’s philosophy. Therefore, it would be against their principles to create their own state with territorial claims. One clear example of this can be found under the first article in their written agenda where the PYD states that they:

[s]upport the democratic liberation struggle in all parts of Kurdistan in order to achieve and consolidate Kurdish national unity based upon the principle of democratic communal confederalism without compromising political borders.<sup>57</sup>

Contrary to a claim for a sovereign state, the organization has made several statements about how they wish to continue working within the Syrian state. This can be found in their written agenda where they claim that “the PYD works towards finding a democratic and just solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria and Rojava within a democratic Syrian constitutional framework”.<sup>58</sup> In one of their statements, they write that despite the siege and exclusion experienced by PYD, coexistence among the Syrian factions is the best model for the Syrian Kurds.<sup>59</sup> Instead of secession the organization offers a new democratic model based on a decentralized democratic Syria that is based

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<sup>57</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Internal System*.

<sup>58</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Internal System*.

<sup>59</sup> Democratic Union Party, *Statement on Occasion of July 19 Revolution*, 2019-07-18, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/07/18/statement-on-occasion-of-july-19-revolution/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

on a negotiating process and the will of all counterparts. This national project that the PYD advocates is against the division of the country that has been established by the central government in Syria, according to PYD. Instead this pluralistic democratic political system seeks to be the basis for the democratization in the country and the re-creation of a unified Syria.<sup>60</sup>

According to these findings PYD do not claim a sovereign state which they maintain is against their ideological ideas on nation-states. Instead, they argue for a decentralized Syria where all the factions live in coexistence. Since they do not wish to create a sovereign Kurdistan it is clear that the political organization highlights its Kurdish national significance over a shared territorial land. Miller's theory on national self-determination argues that national groups need to self-govern in a state for the groups to willingly cooperate. PYD presents a different idea which includes coexistence with other nationalities within the same state.

## 5.2 Kurdistan Regional Government

Under this section the three chosen themes in relation to the findings about KRG's statements on national identity and statehood will be presented. The chosen themes are *oppression by the Iraqi government, claim for independence and relationship with Kurds in other states and neighboring countries*. In line with the previous section regarding PYD, each theme in this section will first present the findings followed by an analysis of the findings in relation to Miller's theory on national self-determination.

### 5.2.1 Oppression by the Iraqi Government

In its written agenda and statements, KRG states their commitment to work together with the state of Iraq. The political organization claim that working together with the Iraqi government to identify resolutions to different issues within the framework of the

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<sup>60</sup> Democratic Union Party, *PYD's statement on World Labor Day*, 2019-05-01, <http://pydrojava.net/english/2019/05/01/pyds-statement-on-world-labor-day/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

constitution, remains as a priority of the KRG.<sup>61</sup> However, the KRG also expresses in their statements that:

[n]o federal government can be worthy of the name if it fails to protect all its citizens and territories equally. The federal Iraqi army miserably failed to protect Christian, Yazidi and Kurdish citizens from genocidal assaults by ISIS, and the Iraqi government followed this devastating failure of duty by refusing to facilitate the appropriate resourcing of the Peshmerga, who are the constitutionally established regional guards of Kurdistan /.../.<sup>62</sup>

Here the KRG refers to the Iraqi governments failure in securing and protecting the rights of all its citizens and territories equally. It is further stated that the Iraqi government has failed to protect its minority citizens from assaults by the Islamic State. This issue has worsened since the government refuses to facilitate resourcing of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces nor treat them as a part of the defense system in Iraq. Furthermore, the organization stresses that “[t]he people of Kurdistan have been fearing the repeat horrors of the past”.<sup>63</sup> By this, the KRG refers to the horrific experience faced by the Iraqi Kurds from the past government’s harsh treatment of them. The KRG further claims that:

[t]he Baghdad government has consistently, unconstitutionally, and unlawfully blocked the efforts of governorates elsewhere in Iraq to become regions: /.../ It has deliberately blocked the implementation of Article 140 that made provision for a referendum in Kirkuk and the disputed territories enabling these places to reunify with Kurdistan by democratic means.<sup>64</sup>

A further example of this that KRG mention is that “[t]he federal 2018 Draft Budget was prepared without the participation of the Kurdistan Regional Government”.<sup>65</sup>

Another example mentioned is that “[t]he draft budget ignores the Kurdistan Region as ‘an entity’ and replaced the term ‘Kurdistan Region – Iraq’ with ‘the Governorates of

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<sup>61</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *The Presidency of the KRG Council of Ministers meets Iraqi Parliament’s Kurdistan Region faction*, 2019-09-08, <https://gov.krd/english/news-and-announcements/posts/2019/september/the-presidency-of-the-kr-g-council-of-ministers-meets-iraqi-parliament-s-kurdistan-region-factions/>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>62</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Report: The Constitutional Case for Kurdistan’s Independence*, 2017-09-24, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=55856>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>63</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Prime Minister Barzani: We have lost hope with Iraq due to past experiences*, 2017-08-04, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=55771>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>64</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Report: The Constitutional Case for Kurdistan’s Independence*.

<sup>65</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *KRG Council of Ministers’ follow up statement on 2018 draft Federal Budget Bill*, 2017-11-05, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=55989>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

Northern Iraq”’.<sup>66</sup> According to KRG, these examples are in violation of the Iraqi constitution and an insult to the people of Kurdistan.<sup>67</sup> In addition, article four of the constitution in which Kurdish is supposed to be one of the two official languages of the state, is violated by the Iraqi government according to the KRG. The example mentioned by KRG on this matter, is that the currency is issued in Arabic and English but not in Kurdish.<sup>68</sup>

According to these findings the KRG claims that the Iraqi government fails to protect the Kurds and other minorities rights and therefore do not act in accordance with the constitution. KRG addresses direct examples on this issue, such as the government’s failure in protecting and helping the Kurds against assaults by the Islamic State. They also bring up examples where the government acts more subtly to undermine the legitimacy of the Kurdish region in Iraq, according to the KRG. In the findings it should be noted that the wording of “Kurdistan” by the KRG refers to the Kurdish region in Iraq and not to other Kurdish regions in other states. According to the findings KRG makes a distinction between Kurds and other minorities in Iraq and the majority of Iraqi citizens. This distinction is based on how they are treated differently by the government which, according to Miller, is why it is important for a national group to self-govern. In line with Miller’s theory there is a risk that the dominant group within a state use their dominance to assimilate the smaller groups, which we can see signs of in the case of the Iraqi government exercising its powers over the Kurdish region.

## 5.2.2 Claim for Independence

As previously mentioned, the KRG has stated a will to operate within the Iraqi constitution. In one of their statements the KRG claims that:

[i]n 2005 Kurdistan formed a voluntary union with Iraq, in which limited powers were granted to the federal government. The provisions of this voluntary union were ratified by referendum in

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<sup>66</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *KRG Council of Ministers’ follow up statement on 2018 draft Federal Budget Bill*.

<sup>67</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *KRG responds to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s threats and accusations*, 2017-10-12, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=55913>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>68</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Report: The Constitutional Case for Kurdistan’s Independence*.

October 2005. A voluntary union may be rightly voluntarily dissolved when one party has failed to fulfill its obligations.<sup>69</sup>

What has been demonstrated in the previous category by KRG is that the Iraqi government has failed to protect its Kurdish citizens. This is further highlighted by KRG when they state that “/.../ Iraq’s violations of the Constitution are extensive”.<sup>70</sup> The many ways the government violated the constitution contributed to the decision to hold a referendum on independence in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017. The deputy Prime Minister in KRG, Qubab Talabani, stated the following regarding the issue:

We have tried various agreements with Iraq in the past, but unfortunately, they ended in destruction and genocide. Recently, the Iraqi government neither armed our Peshmerga forces nor did it treat them as part of the Iraqi defense system. Now, I have to say that unfortunately we have become completely hopeless. We have tried all options with Iraq. Our past experiences have taken us to a point where no hope is left for securing our rights and protecting our people. For this reason, in order to preserve our security and coexistence, we all should demonstrate the future we long for to the world, through a referendum for self-determination. We should make our future and fate a legal and moral responsibility for the entire world and for the international community.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, Talibani also stated that “[t]he world must also stop fearing Kurdish independence aspirations. Kurdistan will become independent one day. Maybe not this year, or the next. But it will happen”.<sup>72</sup> The referendum was stated by KRG to be constitutional since the Iraqi government has no exclusive powers over referendums. These specific statements were giving after claims from the Iraqi government saying that the referendum is unconstitutional and unlawful. KRG also refers to international law and argues that the Kurdish region in Iraq which they refer to as Kurdistan, “/.../ has a right to self-determination under the UN Charter”.<sup>73</sup> The referendum ended in 92% votes for independence. According to KRG this “/.../ reflected the aspiration of all the people of Iraqi Kurdistan, with all their communities and political tendencies, and not just of one political party, as the Iraqi government alleges”.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Report: The Constitutional Case for Kurdistan’s Independence*.

<sup>70</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Report: The Constitutional Case for Kurdistan’s Independence*.

<sup>71</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Prime Minister Barzani: We have lost hope with Iraq due to past experiences*.

<sup>72</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Deputy Prime Minister: Kurdistan will become independent one day*, 2016-12-12, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=55206>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>73</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Report: The Constitutional Case for Kurdistan’s Independence*.

<sup>74</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *KRG responds to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s threats and accusations*.

In summary, KRG states their will to one day become an independent state by holding a referendum on independence. This decision was made since the Iraqi government has failed to fulfil the rights of the Kurdish minority in the state. The voting ended in favor of independence and was rejected by the Iraqi government. Although Miller's theory on national self-determination do not focus on the majorities will to secede it is however of relevance that KRG initiated a referendum in the first place, which suggest a will for independence. The big majority for independence also indicates a strong distinction between the national Kurds and the Iraqi citizens which is a reason to secede from Iraq in order to be able to self-govern, according to Miller.

### 5.2.3 Relationship with Kurds in Other States and Neighboring Countries

KRG's mentioning of Kurds residing in other states is very limited. However, in one of their statements the KRG "object the use of Kurdistan Region's territories and borders by some of the Iranian opposition groups and Kurdistan Workers Party to launch attacks against the neighboring countries".<sup>75</sup> Another example where the KRG mention other Kurdish groups is when Turkey launched airstrikes with the purpose of targeting the PKK which resulted in the death of five Peshmerga soldiers and several more injured. The KRG further blamed the PKK for Turkey's attack due to their presence in the Turkish region Sinjar. According to the KRG "PKK has been problematic for the people of the Kurdistan Region and, despite broad calls to withdraw, refuses to leave Sinjar".<sup>76</sup>

Regarding KRG's relationship towards its neighbor states, the political organization mention in one statement that they respect the stability, legal obligations and friendly relationship with these states. Furthermore, KRG claims in one statement that ".../ Kurdistan's peaceful aspiration in Iraq has never been, nor will ever be, a threat to any country. On the contrary, the success of Kurdistan in Iraq will bring them peace and

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<sup>75</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Kurdistan Regional Government urges an end to attacks on border areas*, 2016-06-27, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=54671>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>76</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Statement by KRG Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs on Turkish air strike*, 2017-04-26, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=55534>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

prosperity”.<sup>77</sup> KRG also states their support for the Turkish government when they congratulate Erdogan and his party on winning the presidential and parliamentary elections and also by condemning the military coup with the purpose to overthrow the Turkish government.<sup>78</sup>

These findings show that KRG highlights the importance of having control of their territory and also having peaceful relations with its neighboring countries. In line with this, KRG condemns actions within their territory that seeks to attack other countries, even if the actions are made by Kurdish parties. This choice of priority by the KRG can further be seen in the statements regarding KRG’s encouragement of the Turkish government and their stand against the Kurdish party PKK. Since KRG have no statements regarding Kurds in other regions but only other Kurdish parties, it can be interpreted as the KRG places its focus on Kurds living in their region over Kurds in other states. The national group in KRG’s case, can therefore be seen as “only” the Kurds that are resided in the Iraqi Kurdistan, according to the theory on national self-determination.

### 5.3 Comparison

By examining the findings from the two political organizations’ statements on the issue of national identity and statehood, differences and similarities can be found. One similarity between the KRG and the PYD is that they both see themselves as political organizations that advocates Kurdish nationality. The differences can be found on the approaches the organizations have on the topic of national identity. While PYD claims to support the national unity among Kurds all over the Middle East, KRG only refers to Kurds residing in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Another substantial difference between the two Kurdish political organizations is their approach to independence and statehood. PYD is very clear in their written agenda and statements that they wish to operate within Syria’s borders and do not express any wish

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<sup>77</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's Newroz Message*, 2018-03-20, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56542>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

<sup>78</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *Prime Minister Barzani's statement on the failed military coup in Turkey*, 2016-07-16, <http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=54735>, Accessed 2019-12-20.

to secede from the state in order to create an independent state. Instead of a sovereign state the PYD present the idea of a decentralized democratic Syria and coexistence with Syrian factions. KRG however, has stated a wish to become independent by giving the example on Iraq's failure in fulfilling the Kurds right in Iraq. What further supports KRG's will to secede is their choice of holding an independence referendum. The independent Kurdistan that KRG's mention is only referring to the Kurdish region in Iraq and not to other Kurdish regions in other states.

One similarity that can be found between the political organization is that both claims their rights are being violated by external actors. However, the actors who oppresses the Kurds differ according to the political organizations. According to PYD, Turkey is the common enemy for all Kurds while KRG blame the Iraqi government for not fulfilling the rights of the Kurds that lives in the Kurdish region in Iraq. Since PYD supports a unity among all Kurds they ask for the support of KRG to hinder Turkey's aggression. The KRG however, states their support for the Turkish government while at the same time problematizing the Kurdish party in Turkey, PKK.

## 6 Results and Discussion

The purpose of the analysis was to analyze how KRG and PYD linked national identity and statehood. This was done through an inductive qualitative content analysis in order to structure and examine the data, which were the political organizations' statements regarding national identity and statehood. Miller's theory on national self-determination was used as the theoretical perspective for the analysis in order to secure an understanding of how the political organizations defines national identity and statehood in relation to the theory. In this final chapter the results from the analysis will be presented. Afterwards, the results from the study will be discussed with regard to previous research and its contribution to the field of studies regarding the Kurdish issue and to the overall research field of human rights.

### 6.1 Summary of the Results

The conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis is that both political organizations presents different ideas on their views of national identity and statehood. KRG includes foremost the Iraqi Kurds in their definition of national identity. The term "Kurdistan" is referred to as the Kurdish region in Iraq, according to the political organization. Despite statements on a will to work together with the Iraqi government, it is clear that KRG seeks independence from Iraq. Since they focus on the Iraqi Kurds, their idea of statehood consists of an independent state including the Kurdish region in Iraq and the Iraqi Kurds. In accordance with Miller's theory, KRG seeks an independent state for the people they include in their definition of national identity. KRG claims that an independent state is necessary for them to protect themselves which matches Miller's theory.

PYD however has a broader definition of national identity. The political organization includes all Kurds from different states in their definition of national identity. PYD do not seek an independent Kurdistan for all Kurds. Their ideology is against the idea of nation-state and therefore they advocate a decentralized political system. With regard to Miller's theory on national self-determination, PYD views Kurds from different state as

belonging to the same national community. The political organization opposes the theory's idea of seeking an independent state and presents a different model for their existence that includes coexistence with other nationalities within the same state.

## 6.2 Discussion

Regarding the common topics within the research field of the “Kurdish issue”, the topics can be compared to the common statements made by KRG and PYD. In regard to KRG's statements on national identity and statehood, the issue of the disputed area of the city Kirkuk was brought up, which is a commonly studied among scholars. Another topic mentioned by KRG that is also studied amongst scholars, is its relationship with its neighboring countries. Kaya and Whiting argue that since the Kurdish region of Iraq is the most self-governing region of all Kurdish regions, it makes the neighboring countries nervous about them being independent since it would pose a risk of mobilization of their own Kurdish population. Due to this it is important for the KRG to build a relationship with its neighbors if they want to seek independence.<sup>79</sup> This claim can be found in the KRG's statements when they state that their aspiration in Iraq won't cause a threat to any other country. This is also seen when they state their support of the Turkish government against PKK.

When it comes to commonly studied topics in the research field of the “Kurdish issue” in Syria, similarities can be found between the studied topics and the findings in PYD's statements. The studied topic of the tense relationship between PYD and the Turkish government is highly present in PYD's statements. PYD's statements emphasize multiple times the oppression they face by Turkey and use it to unite all Kurds by portraying the Turkish government as Kurds common enemy. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the topics studied by scholars regarding the “Kurdish issue” in different states, are reflected in the statements given by the KRG and the PYD on national identity and statehood.

In connection to the existing research on Kurdish nationalism the different arguments from scholars within this field can be applied to the findings from the analysis. In

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<sup>79</sup> Kaya and Whiting, 2017, pp. 85-86.

Gourlay's study on Kurdish identity it is argued that Kurdish nationalism extends across borders and does not necessarily include any territorial claims. This claim matches PYD's view on national identity when they state that that they seek Kurdish national unity with Kurds from different states without compromising any political borders. Both Gourlay and Nezan argues that the Kurdish unity strengthens in times of trauma.<sup>80</sup> PYD claims that Turkey seeks to oppress all Kurds which according to PYD means that all Kurds have a common enemy. According to Nezan and Gourlay this would strengthen the Kurdish unity. Lowe's study concludes that Kurds in Syria have a broader sense of identity which includes Syrians nationality whereas the Kurds in Iraq shares a stronger Kurdish identity.<sup>81</sup> Even though the PYD is very clear that they are a Kurdish political organization, they still express a wish to operate in coexistence with other nationalities and other factors in Syria which support Lowe's claim.

On the other side of the argument about research field of Kurdish nationalism, scholars argue for an existing fragmentation between different Kurdish communities. Yavus argues in his study that there exists no developed unified Kurdish identity due to regional, religious and linguistics differences amongst Kurds.<sup>82</sup> Fuller also argues for a weak sense of Kurdish identity which can be seen in different Kurdish movements that is seeking autonomy for their region only.<sup>83</sup> Yavus' and Fuller's arguments match the case of KRG since they, according to the findings, seek independence only for the region of Iraq and not in other Kurdish regions in other states. KRG's inclusion of only the Iraqi Kurds in their definition of national identity is further highlighted when they blame other Kurdish political organizations instead of the Turkish government, in an attack made by Turkey. This can further be noted in PYD's call for KRG to try to stop the Turkish aggression towards Kurds, in which the KRG does the opposite by supporting the Turkish government. Scholars further argue that the fragmentation among Kurds is because of the physical scattering of Kurds among different states which has deprived the Kurds the opportunity to develop a single political culture with a unified vision. According to the results from this study, it is very clear that the PYD and the KRG do not share the same political priorities which supports this argumentation.

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<sup>80</sup> Gourlay, 2018, pp. 25-26.

<sup>81</sup> Lowe, 2014, p. 140.

<sup>82</sup> Gourlay, 2018, pp. 25-26.

<sup>83</sup> Fuller, 1993, p. 110.

Litterateur on the division of Kurdish cross-border politics is highly visible in the findings of KRG's and PYD's statements regarding national identity and statehood. Since the majority of KRG consists of members from KDP, Barzani's ideology is thus influential within the political organization. On the other hand, PYD is influenced by the ideology of Ocalan. This means that the two chosen political organizations for this study are influenced by two different political ideologies according to scholars. Ocalan's ideology on "democratic confederalism", which is based on the idea of a decentralized system without creating new state-borders, is clearly present in the PYD's statements. The political organization state their support for Ocalan and their wish to operate within Syria's borders, according to the findings. Barzani's ideology on the other hand is based on a nation-state formation and emphasize ethnic self-determination, according to Kaya and Whiting.<sup>84</sup> This ideology can be found in KRG's statements when they seek for an independent state for the Iraqi Kurds. It is highlighted that the idea of independence is "only" referring to the Kurdish region of Iraq when the KRG assure this to its neighboring states.

The results have shown that although the two studied Kurdish political organizations share the same ethnicity, they view the issues of national identity and statehood differently from each other. Several scholars have tried to give an explanation to why the Kurdish identity and politics is fragmented. Çakmak highlights the importance of the political circumstances, where a national group that controls a territory is more likely to seek for independence.<sup>85</sup> In the case of KRG and PYD, KRG is in a region with more self-governance which according to Çakmak is the reason why they seek independence unlike the PYD. Ahmedi further claims that the division between the Kurds is due to the four states oppression of the Kurdish people and had it not been for them, the Kurds would be more inclined to claim independence for all the Kurds.<sup>86</sup>

This study has contributed to more knowledge about how two different Kurdish political organizations link national identity and statehood. This and similar studies on Kurdish views on these issues, can contribute to a better understanding of the Kurds current situation and to an insight to their views for their future. To get a more comprehensive understanding of the issues which were the focus of this thesis, other Kurdish groups in

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<sup>84</sup> Kaya and Whiting, 2017, p. 87.

<sup>85</sup> Çakmak, 2018, p. 129.

<sup>86</sup> Idris, 2018, p. 218.

different states is of relevance for further studies. According to the results made from the study, the character of the Kurdish identity and the Kurds' views on statehood is fragmented, which implies that a sovereign state for all the Kurds seems unlikely in the nearest future. However, the Iraqi Kurds which the KRG states are the ones included in their view of national identity, might be more likely to reach their aim of forming an independent state in the current Kurdish region in Iraq. It is of great interest to further study this issue by studying any eventual differences in views on national identity and statehood by Kurdish groups. It is also of interest to study this issue from different perspectives such as an international one in order to gain an understanding of the political circumstances that affects the Kurds.

What the study has contributed more generally to, in the field of human rights study, is more knowledge about the largest minority group in the Middle East without a sovereign state. The topics of national identity and statehood is highly relevant in human rights studies since it is the state's responsibility to guarantee human rights for its citizens. According to Miller this will be done when every national group has its own state, otherwise the rights of the majority of a national group within one state will be prioritized. After studying the findings concerning KRG and PYD, it can be said that both these political organizations get their rights violated by either the state they reside in or by neighboring states. It is therefore important to keep studying the issue of the Kurdish people.

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