

Future Options of the Kurds.¹ Part I: The Current Situation

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Abstract

The Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum on September, 25, 2017, initiated by Masoud Barzani, former elected President of the Kurdistan Region Iraq (KRI) (in office: June 13, 2005 to August 19, 2015) was not intended as the basis for a declaration of an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq in the foreseeable future. It was, rather, aimed at strengthening his own domestic political position as well as that of other leading politicians of the Barzani family and of the Kurdistan Democratic Party Iraq, currently leading the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The referendum aggravated the persisting constitutional crisis in Iraq since 2005 over as-yet unresolved crucial questions, above all regarding the status of Kirkuk and other “*disputed territories*”. The Iraqi Kurds lost to a great extent their influence over Kirkuk and about 40% of other “*disputed territories*” they were controlling before. On the regional domestic front, it polarized antagonisms among rivaling Kurdish parties, threatened to split the KRI again into two separate administrations and also deepened the ongoing severe economic KRG crisis. In geostrategic terms, it enabled the Islamic Republic of Iran to further extend its influence on Iraq and beyond effectively towards the eastern Mediterranean via pro-Iranian Shia-proxy-militias and, last but not least, it also intensified various crises in the Middle East and Eurasia².

¹The following analysis in two parts is an extended new English version of a German text of the author in “*Europa Ethnica*”, 1/2 2018, pp. 2-30, “*Facultas*” publishers, University of Vienna. It was compiled and edited by the author together with its chief editor Max Doppelbauer, linguist at the Vienna University. It also contains contributions of the following academic experts which are recommended for further reading: Europa Ethnica, 1/2 2018, Vienna: Facultas: Rubin, M. (U.S.A.-Kurds): 31-39; Jongerden, J. (Turkey-Kurds): 40-48; Schmidinger, T. (Syria-Kurds): 49-54; Ahmed, K.M. (Arabs-Kurds): 55-63; Dorsey, J.M. (Whither the Kurds?): 64-67; Six-Hohenbalken, M.-A. (Europe-Kurds): 68-74.

²The Kurdistan Region Iraq is a geostrategic neighbor of the European Union in the remote South-east in Eurasia, adjoins the official EU accession candidate country Turkey and is also part of the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed on 11 May 2012 (L204/20 of 31 July 2012).

Keywords

Kurds, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Gulf States, Egypt, Russia, UN, USA, EU, NATO, Future Options

1. Introduction

Iraqi Kurds are now deeply insecure, divided between haves and have-nots, with their society estranged and fragmented, consigned to a “*twilight*”, “*divided future*” (Hiltermann, 2017; Hiltermann & Fantappie, 2018). They are victims of shock, frustration, disappointment, of being let down again by the rest of the world, and they also blame each other for dangerous miscalculations and acts of treachery. Once again there are protests and riots by unyielding young activists demanding democracy and social justice. As in 2011, young people are getting killed.³ There are urgent warnings of a new civil war. Hope is fading for the vision of an independent Kurdistan. Fears are growing for escalating tensions, division and new armed conflicts.

The Independence referendum of September 25, 2017, initiated by Masoud Barzani, triggered aftershocks in the entire Middle East. The Iraqi Kurds themselves ended up losing almost 40% of the territory they held in northern Iraq before the referendum. They were de facto partly thrown back to where they had started in the early 1990s, a good quarter of a century earlier: limited federal, regional autonomy and freedom (Hiltermann & Fantappie, 2018: “*a setback of historic proportions*”).⁴ Iran managed not only to control large parts of Iraq via Shia-proxy-militias, but for the first time to establish a direct land bridge across Syria and Lebanon all the way to Israel and towards the eastern Mediterranean. Unbridgeable differences between leading Iraqi Kurdish parties are threatening to divide the Kurdistan Region again in two. In this time, under Iran’s influence, the governorates of Halabja and Sulaimaniyah, as well as parts of Kirkuk and other “*disputed territories*” could be formed into a second Kurdistan region. This would mean a renewed partition of Iraqi Kurdistan into a northern autonomous region under the leadership of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and with dominant Turkish influence, and a southern region under the control of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Reform Party “*Gorran*” (“*Change*”), Barham Salih’s new “*Coalition for Democracy and Justice*” set up in 2017, as well as smaller parties dominated by the Islamic Republic of Iran. If this

³Hennerbichler, 2011: *Autonome Region Kurdistan Irak: vom Demokratie-Labor zum Mini-Polizeistaat*. http://hennerbichler.info/aufstande_2011.html.

⁴Territories under control that the KRG lost since October 2017 account for ca. 40% of those before 2014. However, some elements indicate a pre-2003 (Saddam Hussein’s regime) situation like the loss of own regional income and its distribution independent from Baghdad. Beyond that, the process of democratization suffered severe setbacks and brought again conflicting elements to the surface which were common in the 1990s, like: renewed claims to one party-camp hegemony, incapability to democratic majority rule, renewed marginalization of the regional parliament, extra-parliamentary power deals beyond democratic control, deteriorating corruption, new warnings about a civil war or calls (in media) to execute opponents, to name but a few elements.

really comes about, there would be unpredictable consequences, and all the grave problems that brought about this development, including dangerously unresolved issues relating to the 2005 Iraqi constitution, would remain as explosive as before.

2. Iran Dumps Kurds

Iran emerged as the clear winner from the recent confrontation over an independent Kurdistan (Spyer, 2017b⁵; IRIS, 2017: p. 8⁶; ICG, 2017: pp. 12-13). Turkey was pushed back to the position of junior partner. Russia is trying to take on a new role as a world leader as President Donald Trump's U.S. administration withdraws from the Middle East and Eurasia. Currently, Iran (now the "*Islamic Republic of Iran*") has once again left the Iraqi Kurds at a geostrategic disadvantage and thus achieved, for the first time in history, two important goals. Iran wields broad control over northern Iraq, thus gaining influence over the north's oil and gas resources, and over vital trade routes west of the Zagros. The other key gain is a direct land bridge from Iran across Iraqi Kurdistan, (mainly south of) the mountain chain Jabal Sinjar⁷ northwest of Mosul, and further, via military and political allies in Syria and Lebanon, as far as the border of Israel and the Mediterranean, the so called "*Shiite Crescent*" stretching from the Gulf to the Levant.⁸

3. Turkey's Geostrategic Poker-Game for Control of Kirkuk

Turkey continues its military occupation of parts of northern Iraq and the Kurdistan region, and is expanding its influence via newly-established, Tur-⁵Spyer, Jonathan (2017b). *Tehran Is Winning the War for Control of the Middle East*. Foreign Policy, 21.11.2017:

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/21/tehran-is-winning-the-war-for-control-of-the-middle-east-saudi-arabia>; Spyer, Jonathan (2017a). *The Fall of Kirkuk. Made in Iran*. The American Interest, 18.10.2017: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/10/18/fall-kirkuk-made-iran> (both accessed 21 Nov. 2017). Katzman, Kenneth (2018). *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*. Congressional Research Service, 19.01.2018: Iraq, 2018: pp. 32-34; 32: "Iranian involvement in Iraq might complicate the longer-term effort to stabilize Iraq": <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf> (accessed 19 January 2018).

⁶IRIS l.c.: "Iranian political and military influence has expanded dramatically since the 2014 formation of Shia militias to command a vast mercenary force moving between Iraq and Syria, today exerting varying degrees of control over many of the politicians and parties across sectarian divides."

⁷The Sinjar Ridge is also of strategic importance. During the Gulf War in 1991, it was used by the then Saddam Hussein regime for rocket attacks, including a number against Israel. For military backgrounds see: Rosenau, William (2002). III: *Coalition Scud-Hunting in Iraq*, 1991, 29-44:

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1408/MR1408.ch3.pdf (accessed 20 January 2017). However, as of end July 2018 neither Iranian nor pro-Iranian Iraqi proxy militias managed to establish a military base on Jabal Sinjar (communication KRG security forces).

⁸Cf. Spyer, 2017a: "So, the long-developed, mostly unseen influence that Iran exerts on both Iraqi and Kurdish political and military life is powerful indeed. [...] Iran... wants to control Iraq from Baghdad and maintain its unfettered access to the Levant and the Mediterranean Sea.":

<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/10/18/fall-kirkuk-made-iran> (accessed 18 Oct. 2017).

Example for an Arabic analysis: Alavi, Heshmat (2017). "The [Popular Mobilization Forces] PMF is specifically seeking to occupy certain areas to facilitate the land bridge sought by the Quds Force between Tehran and Damascus, stretching to Lebanon and the shores of the Mediterranean. With such means the Quds Force would enjoy the ease of providing necessary arms and equipment for the Lebanese Hezbollah, and beyond.": Al Arabiya English, 23.10. 2017:

<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/10/23/How-the-tide-turned-against-Iran-in-Iraqi-Kurdistan-.html> (accessed 23 Oct. 2017).

kish-dominated “*Turkmen*” paramilitaries too, set up by Ankara in 2014. It also claimed it wanted to protect and support the legitimate rights of the Turkish minority in northern Iraq. Turkey has two main geostrategic objectives: First, to recover the upper hand in the historic struggle for Kirkuk and its oil-rich province,⁹ which the Ottoman Empire had lost during the First World War, initially to Great Britain, and second to use military incursions, air-strikes, and invasions to force the creation of Turkish-controlled buffer zones of up to some 30 km from the Mediterranean to the Zagros, the Turkey-Iraq-Iran triangle and down to PKK strongholds in the Qandil mountains in border areas of its southern neighbors in northern Syria and Iraq. Ankara’s (or rather incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s) aims are to underpin claims to inter-regional supremacy and to secure his increasingly autocratic rule. What happens next is still unclear, but the situation is evidently becoming more and more explosive.

Recent military influence of Turkey in northern Iraq in keywords:¹⁰

1986: The Turkish Army has maintained a military base in the Amadiye area (37°05'33"N, 43°29'14"E) in Dohuk governorate near the Turkish border since 1986. This Turkish garrison on foreign soil dates back to several agreements and has been extended several times by the then Saddam Hussein regime. This enabled Turkish forces to fight against armed Kurds, especially those of the “*Kurdistan Workers’ Party*” (PKK), and also to carry out attacks up to around 30 km into Iraqi territory. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, virtually all Shiite-led coalition governments in Baghdad have, at least on paper, urged Turkey to withdraw its troops from Iraq. Ankara has yet to comply at the time of writing. Baghdad sees these Turkish units on Iraqi soil as *prima facie* illegal, arguing that their presence was based on historical and no-longer-valid agreements with the former Saddam Hussein regime, as well as condemned under international law as illicit and infringing human rights.¹¹ The Turkish Army’s gar-

⁹IRIS, 2017: p. 7: “*Turkey will maintain its foothold.*”

¹⁰The stated details are based on current data provided by the competent Security Agencies of the Kurdistan Region Iraq as of end February 2018. We tried to list in our text the most important Turkish bases in northern Iraq and in the KRI but could not mention all of them.

¹¹Kurds regard UN Security Council resolution 688 of 5 April 1991 as key in discussions regarding the international legitimacy of the use of military means against the own population (in cooperation with neighboring states). It condemns both in introductory sentences as well as in points 1. and 2. “*repression*” of “*Iraq’s*” own civil population “*including most recently in Kurdish-populated areas*” as threat to international peace and security in the region and as grave violation of Art. 2.7 of the UN-Charter, “*which led to a massive flow of refugees towards and across international frontiers and to cross-border incursions*”; decrees to “*immediately end this repression*” (or otherwise face international consequences), “*deeply disturbed by the magnitude of the human suffering involved*”; reaffirms “*the commitment of all Member States to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Iraq and of all States in the region*” and expresses the hope “*that an open dialogue will take place to ensure that the human and political rights of all Iraqi citizens are respected*”. According to considered opinion of Kurdish analysts it would not be possible to deduce from such global sentencing and binding international legal wording a so called “*hot pursuit*”-right of Turkey against Iraqi Kurds included in a bilateral treaty of 1989 with the condemned former Saddam-Hussein-Regime and claim that it would be valid until today (2007). Sources: UN-Security Council: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/688>; USA: The White House interpreted UNSCR 688 (April 5, 1991) “*as worldwide condemnation of Saddam Hussein’s repression of the Iraqi civilian population*”: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/decade/sect4.html> (note: “*historical material*”, “*frozen in time*” (accessed 2nd March 2018).

garrison at Amadiye currently has about 10 tanks, some cannons, and about 1000 men under arms.

1992: Since July 1992, Turkey has also established a secret service center in Amadiye.

1997-2003: “*Peace Monitoring Force*”: At the end of the Iraqi Kurdish civil war 1994-1997 a peacekeeping mission was established called “*Peace Monitoring Force*”. Its main task was to enforce a cease-fire between rival Kurdish forces in northern Iraq (mainly KDP-I and PUK). These blue berets were 400 peacekeepers strong, formally led by Turkish officers and sergeants, but the rank and file were local Turkmen and Assyrians. Roughly 85 percent of the force were Turkmen. The mission of the “*Peace Monitoring Force*” was evaluated rather contradictory. Turkey appraised their mission as success that would have contributed decisively ending inner-Kurdish fighting. In contrast, Kurdish political leaders accused the peacekeepers of training ethnic Turkmen militias, of preparing to assist a Turkish incursion, and of spying. Kurds also expressed fears that the Turkmen minority in Iraq (ca. 5 percent of the population), supported by Turkey, would make political and land claims against the Kurds in the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk.¹²

2014: Since 2014 Turkey has increased its garrison at Amadiye by a further 1000 soldiers and also brought in heavy weapons. Ankara’s justification is that it needs to protect both its border with Iraq and its foreign forces at Amadiye against possible attacks (by the terrorist militia “*Islamic State*” (IS).

2014: With Turkey’s help, “*Turkmen Brigades*” were formed in northern Iraq in 2014. They see themselves as “*Iraqi Turkmen militias*” and are part of the Iraqi Shiite “*People’s Mobilization Forces*” (PMF). Its current troop strength is estimated by KRG security forces¹³ at about 3000 men. The “*Turkmen Brigades*” claim to be defending the interests of the Turkish minority, above all in Kirkuk - if necessary by force.

2015-2016: Turkey established another military base in the hill country of Bashik, near Mosul. This was officially agreed after negotiations between Turkey and both with the KRG government in Erbil and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense in Baghdad. Turkey sought to secure its trans-national influence over Bashik at a time when bitter fighting against terrorist militias of the “*Islamic State*” IS was at its height. Kurdish “*Peshmerga*”¹⁴ played an important role in the reconquest of Mosul and the defense of Kirkuk. The hill country of Bashik is of strategic importance. On the one hand, IS militia supplied fighters there, and infiltrated

¹²Cf. Chivers, C.J. (2003). Threats and Responses: The Peacekeepers; Iraqi Kurds are wary of a Turkish-Led Force. NYT, Febr. 23, 2003, online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/23/world/threats-responses-peacekeepers-iraqi-kurds-are-wary-turkish-led-force.html> (accessed 25 July 2018).

¹³Personal communication 1st and 5th February 2018.

¹⁴Kurdish “*Pêşmerge*”, literally: “*pesh*” = confront/face & “*merg*” = death > “*one/those who face(s) death*” (Chyet, 2003: p. 452, 453; Lortz, 2005: VI, 1), in general terms: Kurdish soldiers (freedom fighters), Iraq: Kurdish soldiers of the autonomous Kurdistan Region Iraq.

them via Turkey to Europe. But they were expelled by Kurdish “*Peshmerga*”, before they in turn retreated from invading Turkish troops. On the other hand, the Bashik hills are also strategically important communication routes to Kurds in northern Syria, which the Turkish military are also trying to bring under their control. Most recently, in 2016 Turkey was formally granted two temporary military training camps at Dubardan and Bashik, near Mosul. This has been approved by both the KRG government in Erbil and the Iraqi Defense Ministry in Baghdad. A further ca.1000 men have been assigned to these bases. Officially, they have the status of military advisers and are supposed to train local Iraqi security forces in the fight against ISIS. At the same time, Turkey’s declared goal is to provide military protection to the Turkish minority of Kirkuk too and to bolster Turkey’s a commanding strategic influence in the area. Reactions to this remain controversial and emotionally explosive. Kurds, who are fighting Turkey’s growing influence in the KRG and northern Iraq, accuse Ankara of being less interested in training anti-terrorism in Iraq than, above all, military intelligence and reinforcing the defense of Kirkuk’s Turkish minority with para-militaries. Turkey denies this. Following IS defeats in the Mosul area, there have recently been calls from Baghdad for the Turkish troops to withdraw immediately. Ankara has not so far complied, arguing the need to protect Turkey’s military advisers in Iraq.

2017: At the end of 2017, the Turkish Army began construction work on a strategic base for around 1500 soldiers, tanks, heavy artillery, and warplanes at Siro Hill in the Bradost area in the border region of Iraq-Iran. The headquarters of the “*Kurdish Worker’s Party*” (PKK) is not far away, in the Qandil mountains. Alongside local Bradost Kurds, PKK has been fighting Turkey’s latest foreign military project. This tribe traditionally pursues an independent stance from the regionally dominant KDP and the Barzanis, who come from neighboring Barzan. Recent developments: in mid-January 2018, after prolonged battles with PKK units, Turkish military forces have apparently largely withdrawn from the Bradost area.

The Turkish secret service has recently built a base in Erbil from where it is trying to gain an overview of military, political, and social developments in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (**Illustration 1**).

Description of map: According to current KRG security forces information, Turkey currently maintains around 50 different military bases in northern Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region. As the graphic shows, most are located in the south between Mosul and the border with Syria up to the Semalka border crossing on the upper reaches of the Tigris. The Turkish Army’s military bases in the north, circled in the graphic, were established in Iraq’s Kurdistan territories, all of them in the vicinity of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) bases. These in turn are located from their strongholds in the Qandil mountains south of Sidakan near the Iraqi-Iranian border up to northern areas of the KRI around Amadiye and Zakho. Turkish forces began at the end of March 2018 a large-scale, still ongoing military operation in V-formation along vast border areas, difficult to access

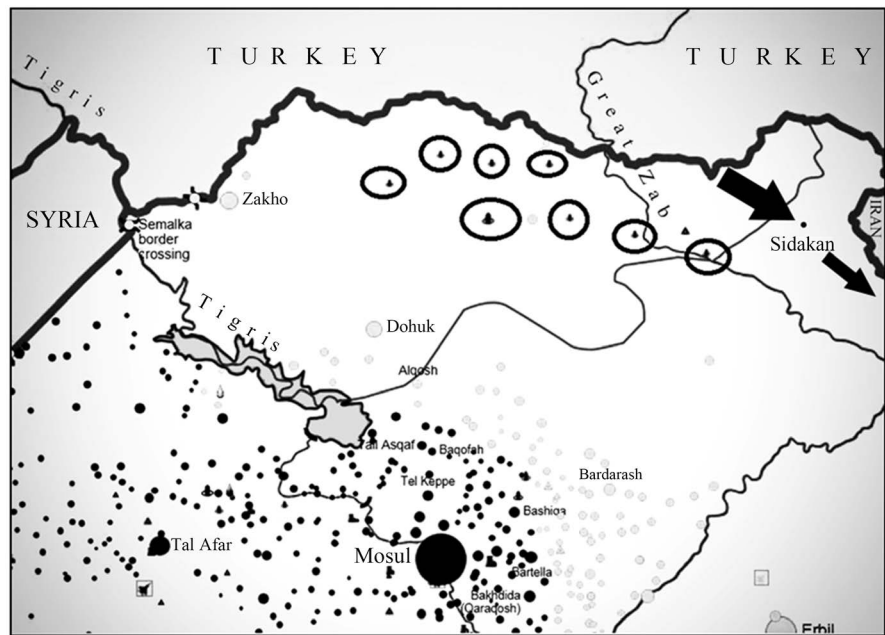


Illustration 1. ● ○ Military bases of the Turkish army in northern Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region as of July 2018. → Ongoing Turkish military operation against PKK strongholds in the KRI © the 2018, data courtesy KRG security forces Kurdistan Region Iraq.

mountainous, from the Anadağ massif in the Turkish province of Hakkâri down to Sidakan in the KRG district Soran and further south to PKK bases in the Qandil mountains, which are located at the Iraqi border with Iran south of the strategically important Hamilton Road¹⁵, which ran from Erbil through Rawanduz to the border town Haji Omeran and Piranshahr in Iran. Turkish forces are also currently trying to gain a foothold in strategically important mountain areas around Sidakan and north of it near the Iraqi-Iranian border, and to establish new military bases there. The extent of these Turkish military bases is considerable and includes, for example, more than four hectares (40,000 m²) in the area around Sidakan. Military parts were also flown over from Turkey into these Iraqi Kurdish mountains with transport helicopters (such as “*Sikorsky*”). Turkish soldiers were also parachuted into the area. In latest moves the Turkish invasion forces were trying to encircle PKK strongholds in the Qandil mountains and destroy their military bases. Heavy fighting is reported. Both sides claim success. The outcome of this latest military struggle remains unclear. The local Iraqi Kurdish mountain farmers are increasingly concerned about being caught up in fresh fighting. There is also fiercely escalating dispute about who has tolerated or encouraged Turkey’s military presence in northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.¹⁶

¹⁵Named after Archibald Milne Hamilton (1898-1972), a New Zealand born British civil engineer who constructed and built the road 1928-1932. It helped British forces decisively to control Kurdistan and Northern Iraq but has been fought over many times. Hamilton had hoped the road would unite peoples and regions.

4. The Battle for Kirkuk

Kirkuk also continued to play a, perhaps, pivotal role in the Iraqi Kurds' referendum of 2017 on independence and ethnic self-determination¹⁷; they continued to see this as the key to their future. A multi-ethno-linguistic city with ancient Mesopotamian roots ("Arrapha")¹⁸ and Kurdish, Arab, Turkish, and Christian population groups, as well as other minorities, Kirkuk had in 2014 been brought largely under control by Kurdish "Peshmerga" units (mostly from the PUK) in successful battles against the terrorist militia Islamic State IS, Iraqi forces retreated without a fight. In mid-October 2017, Kurdish forces were ousted from the city by a military blitz, apparently planned, conducted, and executed by senior commanders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, regular Iraqi forces, pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militias, and Turkmen Brigades, the latter set up in 2014 with the help of Turkey, and armed by Ankara to reinforce Turkish influence on Kirkuk.¹⁹

Current developments can be traced to unresolved issues in the Federal Re-

¹⁶Legally, the Parliament of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq in Erbil already took a clear position on December 5, 2003, and by resolution no. 37 called on Turkey to immediately withdraw its troops from Iraqi Kurdistan. The position of the Iraqi Parliament and the federal government in Baghdad does not seem so clear. Although the Iraqi government has repeatedly called on Ankara for years to withdraw Turkish forces, especially from areas around Mosul, and it also appealed to the UN Security Council to intervene because Turkey refuses to withdraw (cf. e.g.:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/12/iraq-appeals-to-un-and-demands-turkey-withdraw-troops-from-its-north>;

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-turkey/iraqi-pm-says-turkey-not-respecting-agreement-to-withdraw-troops-idUSKBN0UD1GJ20151230>, accessed 4 February 2018). However,

the former prime ministers of both countries, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Nuri al-Maliki, signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" at a meeting in Ankara in August 2007, in which they also discussed all important agreements of the past on the settlement of neighborhood conflicts, list three in total from 1926, 1946 and 1989, and declare them valid: "are in force between the two states":

http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/DISPOLITIKA/Bolgeler/MEMORANDUM_OF_UNDERSTANDING_IRAQ.pdf. The last listed is a bilateral agreement "on Legal and Judicial Matters signed on 19 September 1989" with the then Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. It apparently contains a clause under international law called "hot pursuit" that allowed Turkey to chase armed Kurds on Iraqi territory, albeit only on a geographically limited scale. According to the law of the autonomous Kurdistan Region from 2003, such a clause would in any case be legally obsolete. Even then, should it be (tacitly) tolerated by the federal government in Baghdad for territories of the KRG, but simultaneously condemned for the rest of the country as a violation of Iraq's international sovereignty. From the point of view of (most of) the Iraqi Kurds, the presence of Turkish troops in northern Iraq is not only symbolic, but also massive, military, strategic, imposed and against national interests of Iraq. Cf. e.g. the RFERL-analysis: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1078921.html>; see to key questions under international law i.a.: Bowers, 2008: http://works.bepress.com/charles_bowers/2/ and Sheikhmous, 1992: p. 141.

¹⁷Invoking the Charter of the United Nations, October, 24, 1945, Article 1 ("The Purposes of the United Nations are."), 2: "To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace"; <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-i/index.html> (accessed 14 January 2018).

¹⁸Hennerbichler, 2004: pp. 174-182. Hennerbichler, 2010: pp. 94, 111, 159, 162-166, 173-177.

¹⁹Note: The task was here to describe correctly which proxy militias were involved in the "Blitz" for Kirkuk and not to give a breakdown on all of them in Iraq, which would have been a different story altogether. We emphasize from own observation and information that Iran is currently in a commanding position to practically control all military in Iraq decisively (communication KRG security forces as of end July 2018).

public of Iraq's 2005 Constitution²⁰. This remains neither finalized nor implemented. Thus, Kirkuk is still without a final constitutional status and is regarded as “*disputed territory*”, a fiercely contested zone stuck between the Kurdistan Region and the federal government in Baghdad. But both the background and the exact course of events of the latest concerted military operation by Iran-Iraq-Turkey remain to a degree obscure. The Kurds were bluntly threatened to be “*crushed*” (Iranian Colonel Eghbalpour)²¹, including the use of heavy US weapons, if they did not surrender Kirkuk immediately. The “*blitz*” was then executed in a mere 48 hours, in mid-October 2017.

1) The “*Blitz*”-operation to recapture Kirkuk mid-October 2017

Details of this concerted military operation so far are scarce, not immediately verifiable independently, and are mainly based on contradictory information that comes from rival actors. A final assessment is currently impossible. We had access to numerous eyewitness accounts by practically all sides, were able to immediately check decisions of the PUK and their “*Peshmerga*” commanders on various front lines, were also kept informed by leaders of “Gorran” but could not get verifiable direct access for example to decisions of former regional President Masoud Barzani or acting KDP-Iraq (military) leaders in the struggle for Kirkuk. However, we are not aware of any other published comparable comprehensive description of the Kirkuk events in October 2017. Overview of available information: The operation was apparently initiated and directed by Iran, coordinated with Turkey, and executed by Iraqi forces together with “*Iraq's Second Army*”²² of Iraqi Shia militias who cooperated closely with Iranian Revolutionary Guards and with “*Turkmen Brigades*”, which acted as proxies for Turkey.²³ Chronology: (**Illustration 2**)

14 September 2017: At a meeting in Dohuk on September 25, 2017, UN, US

²⁰English:

https://web.archive.org/web/20161128152712/http://www.iraqinationality.gov.iq/attach/iraqi_constitution.pdf (accessed 15 January 2018).

²¹Quoted by Fazel Hawramy:

<http://www.barcelonaradical.net/info/9929/how-iran-helped-baghdad-seize-back-kirkuk> (accessed Oct. 17, 2017).

²²Cf. e.o.: Nijjar, Farah (2017): *Iraq's second army. Who are they, what do they want?* Aljazeera, 31 Oct. 2017: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/iraq-army-171031063012795.html> (assessed 31 Oct. 2017). See for use of U.S. weapons in Iraq the *Status of Forces Agreement, 2008*.

²³Dorsey 2017: “*Iranian-backed Iraqi blitzkrieg*”:

<https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.hu/2017/10/kurdish-battle-positions-kurds-as-us.html> (accessed 18 Oct. 2017). Sound overview on various “*Proxy*”-Para-Militias of Iran and Turkey in Iraq also in: Gaston, Derzsi-Horváth, van den Toorn, & Mathieu-Comtois (2017): *Literature Review of Local, Regional or Sub-State Defense Forces in Iraq*. GPPI & American University of Iraq, Sulaimani; 06 August 2017:

<http://www.gppi.net/publications/peace-security/article/literature-review-local-regional-or-sub-state-defense-forces-in-iraq>; Gaston & Derzsi-Horváth (2017): *Iraq after ISIL: An Analysis of Local, Hybrid, and Sub-State Security Forces*. GPPI, 21 August 2017:

<http://www.gppi.net/publications/iraq-after-isil-an-analysis-of-local-regional-and-sub-state-security-forces>; Derzsi-Horváth, András (2017): *Iraq after ISIL: Kirkuk*. GPPI, 30 Aug. 2017:

<http://www.gppi.net/publications/iraq-after-isil-kirkuk/> (all accessed 1 Sept. 2017). Further reading: Katzman, 2018: pp. 32-34.

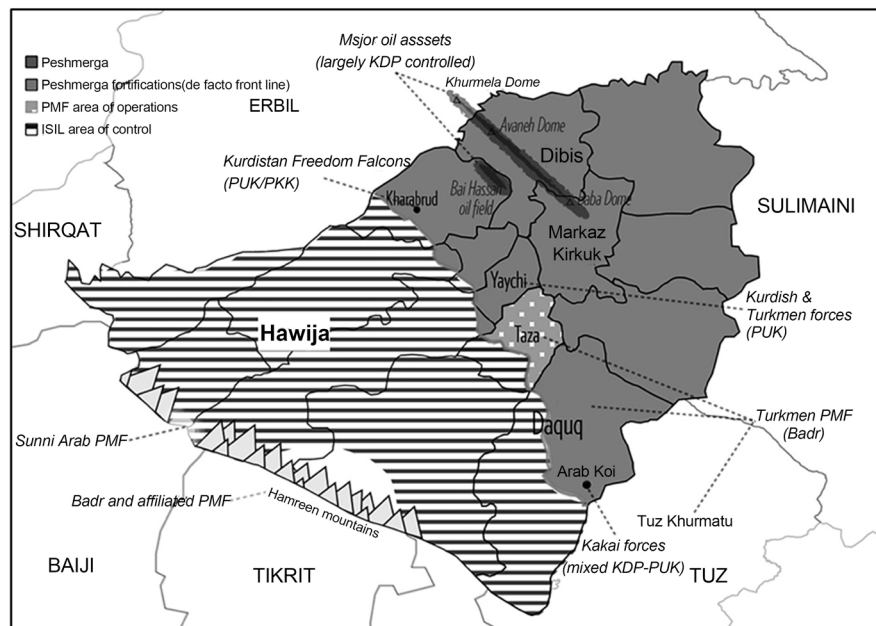


Illustration 2. Map of Kirkuk prior to the reconquest of previously dominant Kurdish “Peshmerga” units in the north and in the center at a time when southern parts of “Hawija” were still under the control of IS terrorist groups, subsequently evicted. © Erica Gaston/Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin.

and UK representatives made a (final) joint diplomatic move and presented the KRG leadership under Masoud Barzani with a compromise alternative to holding the referendum. They essentially proposed to postpone the referendum for two years to allow for a last-minute, peaceful settlement with Baghdad. The following participated at the meeting: Jan Kubiš, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, the British Ambassador to Iraq Frank Baker, US Ambassador Douglas Silliman, and US Special Representative in the “*Anti-ISIS Coalition*”, Brett McGurk. The Iraqi-Kurdish leadership had this international alternative plan officially checked by the grand-sounding but politically weak “*High Elections and Referendum Commission*”, which rejected the appeal. Details of the rejection are absent from the Commission website.²⁴ Kurdish media cite a statement of “*The media office of the High Referendum Council*” dated September 14, 2017: “*that on September 25, the vote of the people of Kurdistan would be ‘Yes’ to found the state of Kurdistan.*”²⁵ Masoud Barzani said at a subsequent referendum campaign rally in Zakho that a postponement without guarantees for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state would be unacceptable. In an interview for the British “*The Guardian*” (September 22, 2017) Barzani demanded as precondition for a postponement of the referendum “*only the offer of a UN mandated solution, with a prescribed agenda and timeline*”.²⁶ Talking to

²⁴http://www.khec.krd/blawkrawakan_en.aspx (accessed 30 September 2017).

²⁵Cf.: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/140920173> (accessed 15 September 2017).

²⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/22/masoud-barzani-on-the-kurdish-referendum-iraq-we-refuse-to-be-subordinates> (accessed 22 September 2017).

journalists in Erbil as early as September 14, 2017, Brett McGurk reaffirmed that the referendum had been rejected, calling it “*ill-advised*” and “*ill-timed*”.²⁷

22 *September* 2017: Three days²⁸ before the Iraqi Kurds’ independence referendum (both in the Kurdistan Region and in “*disputed areas*” such as Kirkuk), Iranian Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the al-Quds (Jerusalem) Brigades, the elite units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran) IRGC, launched a series of tough meetings with the leaders of the Iraqi Kurds. They were issued with an ultimatum from Baghdad, either bow to Iraqi government demands or risk devastating military strikes (by pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militia forces too), and lose everything, including Iran as a partner. The latter phrasing of “*losing everything*” (in Kirkuk since 2014) has been a leitmotif in (pro-) Iranian statements. The first meeting with the high-ranking Iran general Soleimani was held on September 22, 2017, taking place at the headquarters of Masoud Barzani in Massif Salahaddin, near Erbil. All leading KDP and PUK representatives were assembled, including Masoud Barzani, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, Pavel Talabani, Nechirvan Barzani, Kosrat Rasul, and Mala Bakhtiyar. Soleimani warned that Iraq, Iran, and Turkey would under no circumstances tolerate the independence referendum scheduled for 25 September 2017. The Iraqi Kurds would still have time to cancel the referendum or lose everything that they would have gained from independence, especially in 2014-2017.

26 *September* 2017: Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called on Iraqi Kurds to cancel the previous day’s referendum and its results or take tough measures, including military ones. A day later, al-Abadi ensured a majority vote supporting the parliament in Baghdad to authorize his bringing Kirkuk and its oilfields back under Iraqi control. Kurdish MPs reacted by temporarily boycotting parliamentary sessions.

13 *October* 2017: US President Donald Trump categorized Iran’s Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organization and sanctioned them for “*supporting the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF)*”.²⁹ As a result, the situation in Iraq (and beyond) heated up sharply, most of all in the struggle for Kirkuk.³⁰

13 *October* 2017: Premier Haider al-Abadi enacted a 48-hour ultimatum for Iraqi Kurds to annul the referendum or face military consequences.

13 *October* 2017: in an urgent report³¹ Kirkuk’s PUK commanders³² informed the formal commander-in-chief of the Iraqi-Kurdish “*Peshmerga*” forces, Masoud Barzani, that they had neither the necessary sophisticated weapons nor adequate ammunition, nor sufficient food, to defend Kirkuk, and requested immediate deliveries. Barzani then pledged (according to these PUK commanders)

²⁷<https://www.state.gov/s/secsi/2017remarks/274148.htm> (accessed 14 September 2017).

²⁸As early as September 4, 2017, the pro-Iranian, Iraqi Shia-politician and commander of the “*Badr*” militia, Hadi Al-Ameri, in an interview with “*Rudaw Arabic TV*” threatened the Iraqi Kurds with “*armed confrontation*”, should they perform the referendum on 25th of September 2017, and should it lead to a “*regional Entity*”:

<https://www.memri.org/tv/iraqi-shiite-militia-leader-referendum-kurdistan-independence-armed-confrontation/transcript> (accessed 10 September 2017).

to promptly send all the necessary supplies for the defense of Kirkuk. The PUK commanders affirmed that the promised weapons never arrived.

14 October 2017: The PUK politburo agreed on a 4-point plan for the peaceful defusing of the Kirkuk crisis.

The wording:³³ “*Given the current difficult situation in disputed areas outside*”
²⁹<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-new-strategy-iran>;
<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0177.aspx>;
<https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20171013.aspx>
 (accessed 14 Oct. 2016). The “*Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Qods Force as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT)*” was put as early as 25th of October 2007 under “*Executive Order 13224*”, and Brigadier General Qasem Soleimani as “*commander of the Qods Force, as Individual associated with IRGC, designated under Executive Order 13382*”:
<https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/oct/94193.htm>. Saad Hadithi, spokesperson of the Iraqi government in Baghdad, on 16 October 2017 termed Qassem Soleimani, commander of “*Iran’s Qods Force*”, a “*military advisor*” of the Iraqi Al-Hashd al-Schabi militia:
<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/151020176> (accessed 16 Oct. 2017). Al-Hashd al-Scha’bi is the umbrella organization of ca. 40 Shia militias in Irak (so called “*Popular Mobilization Units, PMU*”), who were incorporated 2014 in order to fight and defeat IS. The PMU’s are also denoted “*Iraq’s second army*” und “*Iran’s oldest proxy in Iraq*”, and are accused of committing atrocities: cf.: Dehghanpisheh, Babak (2014): *The fighters of Iraq who answer to Iran*. Reuters, 12.11.2014:
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-militias-specialreport/special-report-the-fighters-of-iraq-who-answer-to-iran-idUSKCN0IW0ZA20141112>; George, Susannah (2014): *Breaking Badr*. Foreign Policy, 06.11.2014: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/>; Sowell, Kirk H. (2015): *The political rise of the Badr Organization and its leader, Hadi al-Ameri, is paving the way for a garrison state in Iraq*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13.08.2015:
<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=61016&lang=ar>; Sowell, Kirk H. (2015): *The Rise of Iraq’s Militia State*, 23.04.2015: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/59888>; Stanford University (2016): *Mapping Militant Organizations. Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development*, last updated 13.11.2106: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/435>; Nijjar, Farah (2017): *Iraq’s second army: Who are they, what do they want?* Aljazeera, 31.10.2017:
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/iraq-army-171031063012795.html> (all accessed 13 October 2017).

³⁰Iran interpreted the statement of US President Donald Trump of 16 Oct. 2017: “*we’re not taking sides in that battle... but we don’t like the fact that they’re clashing*”
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-senate-majority-leader-mitch-mccconnell-joint-press-conference>, acc. 16 Oct. 2017) as indication, that the USA would tolerate the continued ascendancy of Iranian influence over Iraq; cf. e.o.: Spyer, 2017b: “*This is in effect to accede to the Iranian ascendancy in Iran*”
<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/10/18/fall-kirkuk-made-iran>, accessed 18 Oct. 2017). Gunter, 2018: p. 29: “*After the Iraqi forces retook Kirkuk with considerable Iranian aid on October 16, 2017, a U.S. Pentagon spokesman claimed that U.S. commanders in the region were actively trying to mediate between the two sides in the city but did not allude to the ironic situation that both the U.S. and Iran were on the same side.*” Other experts criticize, that the Kurds were only supplied with light arms (as of end November 2017) to fight IS; weapons that the US Congress authorized for Iraqi Kurds would ultimately have ended up with militant Shia militias who in turn would have used these weapons against Kurds, especially in Kirkuk: “*To date, the Kurds were given only light arms to fight Islamic State (ISIS). All of the arms the US Congress authorized to go to the Kurds were diverted to the Iraqi central government, which gave those arms to the Shi’ite militias. These militias in turn utilized those weapons to attack the Kurds in Kirkuk and elsewhere.*”: Avraham (2017): The Jerusalem Post, 27.11.2017:
<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Israel-should-arm-the-Kurds-515340> (accessed 28 November 2017).

The following: Cf. also: ICG, 2015: p. 158.

³¹Verbal communication 15 October 2017.

³²The center of Kirkuk has been controlled since 2014 mainly by PUK “*Peshmerga*”, KDP units there were until recently only a few represented.

³³Courtesy PUK, 14 October 2017.

the Kurdistan Region and especially in Kirkuk, on the one hand, and in view of disputes between the Iraqi government and the KRG on the other; and in order to prevent war between the Iraqi army and Kurdish forces, the (PUK) Leadership Committee has decided: “1) A joint military leadership is to be formed of American, Iraqi and “Peshmerga” forces. 2) No military forces are allowed to enter the city center (of Kirkuk). 3) Open problems between the KRG and the Iraqi government are to be resolved through dialogue and on basis of the Iraqi constitution. 4) UN and USA are called upon to support the implementation of these points.”

15 October 2017: Decision day in several places: Dukan: The Iranian Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani again negotiates with the Iraqi-Kurdish leadership, this time in Dukan,³⁴ northwest of Sulaimaniyah. As on 22 September 2017 in Massif Salahaddin, Masoud Barzani, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, Pavel Talabani, Nechirvan Barzani, Kosrat Rasoul and Mala Bakhtiyar were present. These negotiations dragged on throughout the day. In conclusion, KDP and PUK agreed on a 5-point program whereby they would jointly defend Kirkuk. At 9pm local time, Nechirvan Barzani, KDP, and Mala Bakhtiyar, PUK, held a press conference in Dukan. The incumbent KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said the Iraqi Kurds would resolutely defend Kirkuk and would be confident of winning as they had against the Saddam Hussein regime and the IS. Mala Bakhtiyar spoke of a successful, historic session.

Kirkuk: General Soleimani had already left Dukan before this press conference of the Kurdish representatives and had gone to Kirkuk with his entourage. There he negotiated for the last time in Talabani's house (opposite the governor's building) in Kirkuk with Aras Talabani, a nephew and close confidant of the late Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (1933-2017), as well as with regional PUK commanders. At the last minute, Aras Talabani negotiated for an extension of the Abadi ultimatum to 72 hours and received a pledge that the Iraqi army and pro-Iranian Shia militia would not advance into Kirkuk city center and would neither cause a humanitarian catastrophe for the civilian population nor destroy the city. Soleimani insisted that the Iraqi Kurds had to accept Baghdad's conditions or face military strikes. Hardened fronts.

Kirkuk: After negotiations lasting most of 15 October 2017, Pavel Talabani, elder son of Jalal Talabani, claimed³⁵ that an agreement with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi had been reached. Abadi “*asked us to leave,*” explained Pavel Talabani, in return, “*regular troops*” of the Iraqi army would “*not unilaterally*” take Kirkuk. Rather, the strategically important military airport base “K1” would

³⁴See also: Masrouf Barzani (2018). *Despite losses, Kurds have ‘promising future’ if united.* Masrouf Barzani, Interview Rûdaw, 10 Jan. 2018: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10012018> (accessed 10 January 2018).

³⁵Cf. interviews of Pavel Talabani for BBC

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05kj6wv?ocid=socialflow_twitter) and France 24 TV (<http://www.france24.com/en/20171020-interview-bafel-talabani-kirkuk-barzani-sulaymaniyah-puk-abadi-baghdad-referendum-turkey>, both accessed 20 October 2017).

be transformed and expanded into a major “hub” in the fight against the IS and should be jointly managed by American, British “and other” soldiers along with Kurdish “Peshmerga”. He finally submitted this “honorable compromise” to the PUK leadership for approval. Of the 50 PUK politburo leaders, 37 had finally approved and signed this deal, but the “leadership of the Iraqi Kurds” rejected the agreement.³⁶ In the face of a “vastly superior firepower” and to prevent “massive loss of Peshmerga lives, civilian casualties and collateral damage”, competent PUK regional commanders ultimately decided on a “strategic retreat” from Kirkuk.

Kirkuk: It finally came to a military showdown at PUK headquarters in Kirkuk on the evening of 15 October 2017. At around 8pm local time³⁷ Qassem Soleimani’s deputy, Colonel Eghbalpour³⁸, commanding “Quds” (Jerusalem) militias officer of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) in Iraq fighting for Kirkuk, delivered a final ultimatum to local PUK “Peshmerga” commanders. Eghbalpour confronted the Iraqi Kurds with the option of either surrendering Kirkuk without a fight or face crushing defeated and “losing everything”. The PUK commanders immediately consulted “the top Kurdish leadership” and then told Eghbalpour they would not give up on Kirkuk. The Iranian task force commander then spread out a map of Kirkuk in front of the PUK officers, announcing an imminent, devastating three-front attack with the words: “This is our military plan. We want to hit you tonight from three points: here, here and here”. Eghbalpour left the meeting immediately afterwards, with his delegation, which also included the two chiefs of pro-Iranian Shia militias in Iraq: Hadi Al-Amiri³⁹ and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis⁴⁰.

³⁶Pavel Talabani: “a shortsited Kurdish leadership made a historical mistake, a colossal mistake” (quoted ibidem). The minority of 12 of the 50 PUK Politbureau members included Kosrat Rasoul Ali, first deputy SG of the PUK, veteran “Peshmerga” leader and (formerly elected) Vice President of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Rasoul (similar to Masrour Barzani) accused unnamed “PUK elements” of “betrayal” abandoning Kirkuk and spoke of an “Iranian invasion”. Pavel Talabani announced several PUK-internal investigations: “into accusations of treachery, one for Kirkuk [and another one] for the Kurdish leaders that led us to this situation today, thoroughly to see if they are fit to lead the Kurdish people” (quoted ibidem).

³⁷Cf. Fazel Hawramy: *How Iran helped Baghdad seize back Kirkuk*, *Al Monitor*, *Iran Pulse*, 2017 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/iran-kirkuk-recapture-soleimani-quds-force-eqbal-pour.html> (accessed 17 October 2017; source available now under: <http://www.barcelonaradical.net/info/9929/how-iran-helped-baghdad-seize-back-kirkuk>, accessed 25 July 2018).

³⁸His brother Ali Eghbalpour is Iranian Vice Consul General (and security administrator) in Sulaimaniyah.

³⁹Hadi Al-Amiri, former Iraqi transport minister, leader and SG of the “Badr Organization”, a political party and one of the most influential pro-Iranian Shia-Paramilitaries (“Badr Brigade”) in Iraq. Among other things, Al-Amiri was blamed by the US for a bomb attack in June 1996, in which 19 “US Air Force servicemen” were killed (see the Stanford documentation: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/435>, accessed 20 October 2017).

⁴⁰Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi), Iraqi military commander who heads the Shia-dominated “Al-Hashd Al-Sha’abi”⁴¹ “Popular Mobilization Forces PMF”. Al-Muhandis is accused of terrorism and was convicted to death in absentia by a court in Kuwait for involvement in 1983 Kuwait bombings: cf. NYT 07.02.2007: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/07/world/middleeast/07bomber.html?r=0> (accessed 20 October 2017).

16 October 2017: Around 2:30 am local time, Iraqi army forces and pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militia, led by officers of the “*Quds*” brigades of the Revolutionary Guards of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and “*Turkmen*” paramilitaries, backed by Turkey, began to attack Kirkuk in concerted military “*blitz*”, with operations on several fronts from the northwest and the south. The detailed course of these battles is still largely unclear, with divergent accounts by the fighting parties completely contrary. A final assessment does not seem possible based on currently available sources. From independent information however, the following seems relatively clear.

The much-needed adequate weapons to defend Kirkuk demanded from Masoud Barzani and promised by him, never arrived with PUK “*Peshmerga*” commanders.⁴¹ Moreover, Kirkuk was generally not abandoned by PUK “*Peshmerga*” without a fight. Lack of ammunition and notorious rivalry between “*Peshmerga*” leaders of PUK and KDP did, however, contribute significantly to the Iraqi Kurds being militarily ousted from Kirkuk within a few hours.

Which “*Peshmerga*” units ultimately withdrew and when, from certain front sections in and around Kirkuk is still highly controversial. Available information is utterly contradictory. According to independent⁴² sources KDP-”*Peshmerga*” withdrew from the oilfields Bai Hasan and Avana northwest of Kirkuk, held by them since 2014, “*without firing a shot*”. These two oil fields produced almost half of the Kurdish regional government’s oil, 295,000 barrels of crude oil per day. The “*KDP-Peshmerga*” would then have left areas in the northwest, such as Sinjar, Bashiqa and from mainly Christians inhabited areas northeast of Mosul. Following this, Iraqi army troops, along with Shia fighters of the “*Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi*” and “*Turkmen*” militia, had advanced from the north towards Kirkuk and occupied the key oilfields.

As for military engagements south of Kirkuk and around the city center, so far only contradictory inconclusive information is available about these. A chronology published by the KDP-related media house “*Rûdaw*”, in which numerous eyewitnesses are quoted,⁴³ says this: *Battles: “Fierce fighting”* by PUK “*Peshmerga*” units confirmed especially in the south of Kirkuk, from Tuz Khurmatu via Daquq to about Taza. This is confirmed by other sources, quoting a young PUK commander (Major Nihad), who said he and his corps Taza had resisted advancing Shia militia for four hours, but then had to give up because his unit run

⁴¹Verbal communication of leading PUK commanders in Kirkuk from 17th October 2017.

⁴²Reuters, 17.10.2017:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-oil/iraqi-forces-take-control-of-all-oil-fields-operated-by-state-owned-north-oil-in-kirkuk-idUSKBN1CM0KN?ref=hyper.com> (both accessed 24 Jan. 2018). Similar as well: Spyer, 2017b: “*The demoralized KRG has abandoned positions further west. In Sinjar, Khanaqin, Makhmur, Gwer and other sites on the Ninawah Plain, the Iraqis are pushing forward. The intention appears to be to take back the entirety of the Plain, where the peshmerga of the ruling KDP, not the PUK, were dominant. Yet they too have so far retreated without resistance.*” (<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/10/18/fall-kirkuk-made-iran>, accessed 18 Oct. 2017).

⁴³Kurdistan. *Iraqi forces take Kirkuk, lower Kurdistan flag*, Rûdaw, 16.10.2017:

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/15102017> (accessed 16 Oct. 2017, but not available online anymore on 22 August 2018).

out of ammunition.⁴⁴ Lack of ammunition, disunity and rivalries among “*Peshmerga*” leaders (PUK and KDP alike) are also generally cited as major internal reasons for Iraqi Kurds ultimately quickly losing military control of Kirkuk. How many PUK commanders ultimately defended Kirkuk to their last bullet, and how many left the city without a fight, cannot be finally determined on the basis of available information. Statements by eyewitnesses are striking, including that pro-Iranian Iraqi-Shiite “*Hashd al-Sha ‘bi*” militias committed atrocities. “*Rûdaw*” journalist Hevidar Ahmed reported that he had seen the bodies of ten “*Peshmerga*” killed in Kirkuk battles against “*Hashd al-Sha ‘bi*” being piled on an open flatbed truck. All had been beheaded.⁴⁵ The “*Peshmerga*” had fiercely resisted at first, but then gave up after increasing losses and lack of ammunition. “*Hashd al-Sha ‘bi*” had also engaged in burning and looting Kurdish houses in Tuz Khurmatu. The PUK High Command has recently put the number of its “*Peschmerga*” killed in fighting around Kirkuk at around one hundred. “*Dozens of PUK Peshmerga*” were wounded or missing.⁴⁶

2) Iraq “*Iranian-controlled satrapy*”

The direct involvement of officers of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the fighting for Kirkuk is also confirmed by European and American witnesses. The “*blitz*”-operation to recapture Kirkuk under Iran’s obvious guidance and critically co-executed by pro-Iranian Shia “*proxy*” militias in Iraq is currently compared with the conquest of West Beirut by the “*Hezbollah*” in May-June 2008 Lebanon (Jonathan Spyer: 2018).⁴⁷ As in Lebanon and Beirut, Iran has exploited a vulnerable, fragmented political system in Iraq and Kirkuk, suddenly putting the screws on, and creating new facts, he writes.⁴⁸ This was “*a black day for the Kurds*”. The “*fall of Kirkuk*” showed how far Iraq has already become an “*Iranian-controlled satrapy*”, demonstrating how “*unrivaled efficient*” Iran has become in using “*methods of revolutionary and political warfare*”, as Iranian Re-

⁴⁴Fazel Hawramy: *How Iran helped Baghdad seize back Kirkuk*, *Al Monitor*, *Iran Pulse*, 2017, Oct. 17, l.c.

⁴⁵According to eyewitnesses, these “*Peshmerga*” were not supposed to have been decapitated alive, their bodies had rather been defiled. Responsible for this are (according to Hevidar Ahmed) “*Hashd al-Sha ‘bi*” militias, who had previously been trained in the fight for Mosul against IS terrorist groups.

⁴⁶Pavel Talabani, elder son of Jalal Talabani and Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, in an interview with BBC Newshour, 20th Oct. 2017: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05kj6wv?ocid=socialflow_twitter; likewise, with France 24 TV, the same day: <http://www.france24.com/en/20171020-interview-bafel-talabani-kirkuk-barzani-sulaymaniyah-puk-abadi-baghdad-referendum-turkey> (both accessed 20 October 2017).

⁴⁷Spyer, Jonathan (2018): *The Fall of Kirkuk: Made in Iran*. *The American Interest*, 18.10.2017: “*the sudden application of force... Perhaps the closest parallel might be the Hezbollah takeover of west Beirut in May-June 2008*”: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/10/18/fall-kirkuk-made-iran> (accessed 18 Oct. 2017).

⁴⁸“*Indeed, the fractured nature of Kurdish politics, the absence of a single, united military force, and the differing international alliances and orientations of the two main parties in the KRG, namely the Kurdish Democratic Party of President Masoud Barzani and the PUK, have long constituted a central vulnerability of the Kurdish system in northern Iraq. We appear to have witnessed a masterful exploitation of this vulnerability, a sudden and decisive turning of the screw.*” (Spyer, 2017b, l.c.).

volutionary Guards have practiced it throughout the Arab world.⁴⁹

3) Warnings of a new civil war

The rapid and dramatic military loss of Kirkuk and (other) “*disputed territories*” triggered a highly emotional war of words among Iraqi Kurdish leaders, primarily between KDP and PUK. Both accused each other of “*high treason*”, “*failure*” and “*cooperation with the enemy*”. For example, in a TV interview with “*Rûdaw*”, Masrou Barzani, the elder son of Masoud Barzani and head of the KRG “*Security Council*” in Erbil, accused unnamed “*people from the PUK*” of committing “*the biggest treason ever in modern Kurdish history*”, surrendering Kirkuk to “*the government of Iraq and the Hashd al-Scha ‘bī militia and “selling out... the territory of Kurdistan”*. “*A national court*” should decide “*the fate of such people who committed treason*”, he said, and pass judgement on them.⁵⁰ Anonymous postings appeared in KDP-related media calling for top PUK politicians to be tried and, if convicted, to be shot by “*a firing squad*”.⁵¹ These allegations were rebuffed by Pavel Talabani as “*baseless and disgusting accusations*”.⁵² Qubat Talabani, younger son of Jalal Talabani and acting KRG vice-premier, warned that the PUK’s existence was threatened at both “*foreign and domestic*” levels, which could also have a direct impact on the survival of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a whole.⁵³ Mala Bakhtiyar, a member of the PUK politburo, deplored an increasing “*atmosphere of hatred*” and openly warned against “*dangers of a new civil war*”.⁵⁴ At the end of 2017, widespread protests and riots broke out in large parts of Iraq’s Kurdistan Region, particularly in December. According to various sources, about ten young people were killed by Kurdish security forces and another hundred were temporarily arrested.⁵⁵ The demonstrations were

⁴⁹“*It is a black day for the Kurds, from every point of view. The fall of Kirkuk confirms the extent to which Iraq today is an Iranian-controlled satrapy. And it vividly demonstrates the currently unrivaled efficacy of the Iranian methods of revolutionary and political warfare, as practiced by IRGC throughout the Arab world.*” Spyer (2017b): *Tehran Is Winning the War for Control of the Middle East*. Foreign Policy, 21.11.2017:

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/21/tehran-is-winning-the-war-for-control-of-the-middle-east-saudi-arabia> (accessed 21st Nov. 2017). Jonathan Spyer is “*director of the Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs at the Interdisciplinary Center IDC, Herzliya, Israel, and a fellow at the Middle East Forum.*”

⁵⁰Rûdaw Interview, 10.01.2018: *Despite losses, Kurds have “promising future” if united: Masrou Barzani*: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10012018> (accessed 10 January 2018).

⁵¹Anonym-posting under “*Comments*” “*rudaw.net*” (<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201120175>, accessed 14 February 2018): Excerpt: “*They must be tried and, if convicted, face a firing squad. That is the demand of the Nation and also fair.*” (got 21 Likes and 7 Dislikes).

⁵²Interviews with BBC and France 24 TV, l.c.

⁵³Source: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201120175> (accessed 20 November 2017).

⁵⁴Source: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/181020174> (accessed 18 October 2017).

⁵⁵Sources, selection:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-protests/kurdish-protesters-set-fire-to-party-offices-in-northern-iraq-idUSKBN1EC1N8>;

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41804717>;

<http://ekurd.net/demonstrations-iraqi-kurdistan-2018-01-05>;

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/181220173> (all accessed 5 January 2018).

similar to those of February-April 2011,⁵⁶ but once again had the character of political and social unrest rather than militant uprisings. Protesters demanded political reform, democracy, and this time the resignation of the entire KRG leadership as well. They were accused of failure, corruption, nepotism, mismanagement, and human rights violations. Above all, the recent protests had been inflamed by years of unpaid or only partially-paid salaries and a growing gulf between rich and poor in the Kurdistan Region. The riots of 2011 could not change the status quo, the newly-rebellious wanted a fresh start. Outcome uncertain.

4) Mutual accusations

The recent Iran-dominated geostrategic struggle for a future solution for Kirkuk and (other) “*disputed territories*” in Iraq has also dramatically worsened intra-Kurdish power conflicts and once again brought Iraq’s Kurdistan Region to the brink of civil war. The main point is that the two traditional political partners, the KDP and PUK, who have been leading Iraqi Kurdistan since the beginning of the 1990s under a continuous power-sharing arrangement, accuse each other of depriving each other (again) of power with the help of neighboring foreign countries (Iran and Turkey). The PUK suspects that their “*Peshmerga*” units, which have essentially controlled Kirkuk since 2014, were deliberately denied adequate weapons for the defense of the city, in order to ensure that the PUK ultimately would not only be displaced from Kirkuk by the vast military superiority of Iraqi and pro-Iranian/Turkish Iraqi Shia-militias, but also be physically eliminated and at last be removed from power. The KDP, in turn, fears that Iran-orientated future options, advocated by the PUK, would ultimately result in a systematic demise both of the KDP and the Barzani family and therefore endanger their decades-long de facto political domination over the Kurdistan Region. This conflict came at a new peak when media reported that, following the fall of Kirkuk, Pavel Talabani reached agreement on October 18, 2017, with Hadi al-Ameri on a nine-point program for a future solution both for Kirkuk and other “*disputed areas*” as well as for the Iraq’s Kurdistan Region.

5) Pavel Talabani - Al-Amiri plan

There is currently no official written text available of this plan signed by the persons who agreed it. So far, it is being called an “*oral agreement*”. The content was discussed in urgent meetings, in which in particular politicians from parties in the Sulaimaniyah area participated, and whose goal was to reach speedy, last-minute compromise solution with Baghdad to prevent an impending war for Kirkuk and other “*disputed areas*”. However, the interlocutors were ultimately unable to agree on a common text in a timely manner. As a result, Pavel Talabani and Al-Amiri presented agreed goals as “*oral agreements*”. A deputy from the “*Gorran*” (change) movement in the Baghdad parliament, Masoud Haidar, summarized nine points from the talks in English and had them pub-

⁵⁶In greater detail: Hennerbichler (2011): http://hennerbichler.info/aufstande_2011.html;
Hennerbichler (2011): http://hennerbichler.info/verbesserte_lage_2012.html.

lished on October 18, 2017, on a web portal in Germany.⁵⁷ This version contains the following key points: (2) 17 administrative districts of Kirkuk, including the city center, which have been managed “*by Kurdistan*” since 2014, will be handed over to the central government in Baghdad. (3) In the “*next six months*”, Kirkuk’s city center to be jointly administered, 15 city districts by Kurds, the remaining 25 “*by others*”. (4) The Iraqi central government to control strategic facilities such as the K1 (military) base and oilfields. (6) The central government also to pay the salaries of Kirkuk and Sulaimaniyah employees. (8) The “*Halabja-Sulaimaniyah-Kirkuk Province*” to be formed. (9) A new (regional) government to be established for this new province.

If confirmed, a new variant would be attempting to negotiate a special status for Kirkuk, in which 15 out of 40 urban districts would be administered by Kurds, 25 by other population groups, along with the federal central government in Baghdad, and where Baghdad would also be responsible for strategic military facilities, oilfields (promotion and sales), and salary payments (in the quoted wording from the text, only for Kirkuk and Sulaimaniyah). At the same time, 15 Kurdish-led Kirkuk city districts would join forces with the governorates Sulaimaniyah and Halabja⁵⁸ to form a new province of the Federal Republic of Iraq, establishing together the “*Halabja-Sulaimaniyah-Kirkuk Province*” with its own autonomous regional government. An internationally-mediated negotiation process (for example, involving the UN and intermediaries such as the USA or France) is expressly not mentioned. The implementation of a 15:25 ethnic proportional control regime for Kirkuk is, according to the text, to be implemented within six months. Up to now no Kirkuk solution has ever met with success in decades. The two partners, Pavel Talabani and al-Amiri, are primarily military men but not government members. According to the “*Gorran*” MP Masoud Haidar their joint agreement came about “*under supervision*” of the Iraqi-Shiite Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and was mediated by the Iranian Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of al-Quds (Jerusalem) Brigades, the elite units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Pasdaran (IRGC). How much support or chances of success this plan may have is therefore largely unclear, as are essential details; so far, reactions have been highly controversial. At its core, it seeks an Iran-dominated Kirkuk settlement based on a 15:25 ethnic proportional representation of Kurds: Turkmen/Arabs/other minority groups that could split the existing Iraqi Kurdistan Region into two: a northern, Turkish-influenced KDP/Barzani dominated one, based in Erbil, but without inte-

⁵⁷“*AWDNEWS*”, 18.10.2017:

<http://www.awdnews.com/index/bafel-talabani-hadi-al-amiri-reach-agreement> (accessed 18 Oct. 2017). “*AWDNEWS*” has no imprint and does not disclose who is behind it. As seat is “Germany” stated (<http://www.awdnews.com/index/contact/>). The “*Gorran*” MP Masoud Haidar himself is considered a very serious parliamentarian. So far, the PUK has not officially issued an opinion as to whether the quoted plan by Pavel Talabani with Al-Amiri could be an agreement between two private persons only or one authorized by the PUK. Pavel Talabani currently has no function in the leadership of the PUK, does not hold a ministerial office in the KRG government, but is vice-chairman of the KRG “*Asayish*” security/secret services.

⁵⁸Halabja has only been a governorate since 2014 and was previously part of Sulaimaniyah.

grating parts of Kirkuk and also without direct access (control) of regional oil fields (production); and a second, new area largely influenced by Iran under PUK/“*Gorran*” (and others’) leadership presumably based in Sulaimaniyah, but with crucial partial integration into a future, geostrategic, oil and power center, namely Kirkuk. If this were to happen, the existing power-sharing arrangement of the KDP and PUK in the leadership of the Kurdistan Region would be replaced by their division into two autonomous Kurdistan regions of Iraq. A de facto two-part Kurdish administration, KDP/Erbil and PUK/Sulaimaniyah, has already existed,⁵⁹ though only temporarily, following fresh civil conflicts in 1994-1997, but in each case within territories of the Kurdistan Region. This had been established in 1992 and was then formally recognized by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq 2005 (Article 117.1). Yet, for the first time, Iraqi Kurdistan would, should the plan be implemented, be politically and territorially divided with a multi-ethno-cultural Kirkuk solution under the auspices of Iran, with an administrative reorganization into two equal Kurdistan regions. The result would no doubt be that both eventually go their own separate political, economic, and social ways. Preliminary reactions are predictably controversial, reflecting conflicting interests. The Barzanis and the KDP have been particularly critical. They see threats to their own vital, and common Kurdish interests.

Recent development as of April 2018: The leadership of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan decided by a clear majority not to adopt the Talabani-Amiri plan regarding the future of Kirkuk and other “*disputed territories*” as an official negotiating position of the party.⁶⁰

6) Rudiments of a Solution for Kirkuk

Prospects. While there is no prospect of a convergence of such entrenched positions, still there now exist basic concepts about a framework of possible compromise, especially on the future of Kirkuk and other “*disputed areas*”. Such ideas command a certain respect, such as the approaches to preliminary solutions which were worked out by the “*United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq*

⁵⁹At that time, in August 1996, Masoud Barzani had also asked Saddam Hussein (in writing) for military assistance to drive the PUK out of Erbil and defeat it in order to avert his own downfall: cf. i.a.: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/2893067.stm;

<http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9609/12/iraq.barzani/index.html>;

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/09/10/kurds-allied-with-saddam-drive-rivals-toward-border/6d3b4185-ab7a-4bbb-ba03-74ada5a7b14b/?utm_term=.f43cfb687e2f;

<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero01240>; Teimourian, Hazhir (1996): Letter: Independent, 6 September 1996:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letter-a-historic-betrayal-of-the-kurds-why-barzani-threw-in-his-lot-with-saddam-5601503.html>;

<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/25/world/us-welcomes-kurdish-leader-who-betrayed-cia-in-iraq.html> (all accessed 16 February 2018); Riedel, 2017: “*Masoud [Barzani] was capable of his own deception. In August 1996, he colluded with Hussein to let the Iraqi army enter Erbil to massacre Iraqi oppositionists to gain strength against his lifelong Kurdish rival Jalal Talabani. Dozens of Hussein opponents were brutally killed. [US operation] Provide Comfort watched and did nothing to stop the slaughter.*”

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/11/02/masoud-barzani-and-the-roots-of-kurdish-distrust-of-the-united-states> (accessed 2nd November 2017); further reading: Cockburn, 2002: p. 20; Galbraith, 2006: p. 156.

⁶⁰Verbal communication 26 April 2018.

(UNAMI)” established in 2003.⁶¹ Moreover, from the Kurdish side there is also a proposal of then Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. This continues to meet with considerable approval: it involves first giving Kirkuk a special federal interim status, as is the case for the Belgian capital, Brussels. This could then be finalized by mutual negotiations based on Article 140 of the 2005, *Iraqi Constitution* (Kane, 2011: p. 27, 52).⁶² UNAMI suggested several future options for Kirkuk in a preliminary study worked out in 2007-2009 (parts of which were published in April 2009). Among these ideas were either according a special partly-autonomous status to the region, this to be confirmed by a final referendum of those entitled to vote, and a so called “*dual nexus*” model, whereby both the federal government in Baghdad as well as the regional KRI government would jointly exercise jurisdiction over Kirkuk and its administration. Since then, all major players have reaffirmed their own partial claims, but with no ultimate willingness to compromise.⁶³ Most recently, a position paper by the incumbent KRG government led by Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, released on 24 September 2017 - the day before the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum - clearly hardened fronts of an “*irreparably damaged*” Iraqi constitution of 2005.⁶⁴ Future options for Kirkuk continue to appear open and uncertain.

⁶¹UNAMI (2009) has not completed preliminary work on a possible Kirkuk solution and published in April 2009 a discussion paper entitled “*Possible Options for the Future Administrative Status of Kirkuk Within the Iraqi Federation*,” “*discussion paper*”, April 2009, (see especially pp. 7-10). Yet, this text is currently not available online.

⁶²Talabani quoted by Kane, 2011: p. 52, fn. 70 (cited original-source not available online): “*President Talabani: ‘Kirkuk Is an Iraqi Issue’*”, *Al-Ittihad* (PUK sponsored), May 31, 2010. *The Brussels capital region includes both French and Flemish communities. It is a distinct federal region of Belgium, alongside Flanders (Flemish-speaking) and Wallonia (French-speaking), and although it is geographically surrounded by Flanders, it is institutionally separate from it and specific measures are taken to protect the cultural and language rights of both communities within it.*”

⁶³Examples, cited by Kane, 2011: p. 52, fn. 69: “*Maliki: Kirkuk Belongs to the Iraqi Government*, *Zaman*, October 15, 2008, where Maliki says that ‘Kirkuk is a city that belongs to the federal government... the only suitable solution, at this time, is to treat it as a special case, like being an independent region.’ Sam Dagher, ‘Iraq Election May Leave Kirkuk Status Uncertain,’ *New York Times*, March 12, 2010, reports Allawi as having called for a ‘special situation’ for Kirkuk that would keep it under Baghdad’s control, but give extra powers to a local government equally divided among all groups; see also ‘Nechirvan Barzani Expresses Readiness to Share Urban Administration in Kirkuk,’ *TurkishPress.com*, October 19, 2008, <http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?id=254359> (accessed December 16, 2010), where the former KRG prime minister says that all ethnic groups should administer Kirkuk together “in a fair way as a Kurdish region.”

⁶⁴*The Constitutional Case for Kurdistan’s Independence & A Record of the Violation of Iraq’s Constitution by Successive Iraqi Prime Ministers and Ministers, the Council of Representatives, the Shura Council, the Judiciary and the Army* (2017):

http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/2017/Constitutional_violations_Sept_24_2017.pdf: key statements (*Executive Summary*, pp. 1-3): “*As this text demonstrates, Iraq’s violations of the Constitution are extensive. No less than 55 of its 144 Articles have been violated, and a further twelve have not been fulfilled or implemented [...]. Therefore, just less than half of the articles have either been violated or are unfulfilled. These failures are persistent and deliberate; they cannot be excused by the presence of insurgencies. ... The democratic as well as the federal principles of the Constitution have been systematically violated. ... The operation of electoral laws and of coalition agreements have simply confirmed Kurdistan’s judgment that neither pluralist democracy nor federalism can be expected from any Baghdad government. This referendum [25 September 2017] will enable the people of Kurdistan and those in Kirkuk and the disputed territories to express their democratic right to dissolve the Constitution of 2005, which has been irreparably damaged.*” See also: KRG Ministry of Extra Regional Affairs, 2007.

7) Recent youth protests with numerous deaths

The defeat by the Iran-Iraq-Turkey forces' blitz offensive in and around Kirkuk in mid-October 2017, also played a crucial part in contributing to renewed protests, especially by young people in the Kurdistan Region. These continued for weeks, and about 10 young people were killed. Unrest repeatedly broke out. Already conflict-laden, polarized, divided and fractured multi-ethno-cultural Iraqi-Kurdish society drifted once again to the brink of a new internal civil war.

5. Russia

Russia sees itself as a rising geo-strategic world-power in a post-colonial reorganization of the evolving Middle East,⁶⁵ a region increasingly engaged in an explosive upheaval with no clear eventual outcome.

Latest development: Middle East/Eurasia in general: Russia wants “to guarantee equal rights” for “the Kurds” “within the countries in which they live”. Any other strategy “in the Kurdish matter” would mean “playing with fire” from Moscow’s point of view, would be “dangerous” and could “disturb the whole region”. This latest strategy of the Russian government regarding the Kurds was clarified by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in February 2018 in a guideline interview with “Euronews TV”.⁶⁶ According to this, Russia’s current Kurdish policy basically consists in helping to secure “equal rights” for Kurds in countries in which they live, and primarily through contacts with the capital powers of these states.

Iraq: In Iraq, however, Russia set significantly more nuanced accents: A few days before the independence referendum of the Iraqi Kurds, the stock exchange listed Russian oil and gas concern “Rosneft” concluded a cooperation agreement with the KRG government in Erbil on September 18, 2017, which was also internationally noted.⁶⁷ According to this “Rosneft” wants to supply Europe from 2020 onwards, to a large extent with natural gas from the Kurdistan Region Iraq. Gas deliveries from Iraqi Kurdistan should then represent around six percent of

⁶⁵Petrov, 2017; Yefremenko, 2017: “The goals of Russian Policy [are] in a greater Middle East. ...a foreign policy priority is to consolidate Russian positions as one of the centers of power in the region ... and have a foothold in different parts of the region.” Russia expects from a “greater Middle East” engagement clearly “economic dividends” too: “Russia’s long-term presence in the region will require considerable resources. Clearly, Russia should offset those costs by gaining serious economic preferences in Syria and other parts of the Greater Middle East, including participation in post-war reconstruction and development of natural resources. Political and military-strategic achievements should be converted into economic dividends.”:

<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/By-the-Rivers-of-Babylon-19037> (accessed 1st Dec. 2017).

⁶⁶Euronews, 16.02.2018:

<http://de.euronews.com/2018/02/16/sergej-lawrow-wir-sind-keine-geiseln-irgendwelcher-erwartung-en> (accessed 16 February 2018).

⁶⁷Zhdannikov, Dmitry (2018): *Russia’s Rosneft clinches gas pipeline deal with Iraq’s Kurdistan*, Reuters, 18.09.2018:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/kurdistan-rosneft/russias-rosneft-clinches-gas-pipeline-deal-with-iraqs-kurdistan-idUSL5N1LY0TS> (cf. also Zhdannikov, 2017, both accessed 18 September 2017).

Barmin, 2017: “Since Kirkuk came under Kurdish control in 2014, Russian energy giants have shown great interest in developing oil and gas fields in Iraqi Kurdistan; in fact, Russia’s priorities visibly shifted from Iran to Iraq.”:

<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Kurdish-referendum-a-double-edged-sword-for-Russia-19026> (accessed 1st Dec. 2017). See for oil and gas details in the KRI, Zedalis, 2012.

total European demand and account for one sixth of Russia's gas exports. A new pipeline is to be built by 2019/2020 and will be routed via Turkey to Europe. For the time being, the inner-Kurdish KRG requirement will be covered by 2019, and by 2020 major gas exports to Europe are planned. According to Reuter's, the value of these investments is estimated at more than \$1 billion, and the "Rosneft" project in Iraqi Kurdistan, which has been announced for the next two years, at some \$4 billion.⁶⁸ In addition, "Rosneft" has granted the KRG government in Erbil financial support, aimed primarily at improving infrastructure, in the form of "hundreds of millions of dollars in loans" ("Reuters"), which should also enable Iraqi Kurdistan to endure the severe financial crisis in ongoing disputes with Baghdad, which have escalated since 2014, when the KRG began to export its own regional oil without Baghdad's formal approval. With its new projects in Iraqi Kurdistan "Rosneft" is also rivaling the Russian competitor "Gazprom", which is also a leading gas supplier to Europe and is drilling for oil in the Kurdistan Region.⁶⁹ Iraqi Kurdistan has some of the largest oil and gas reserves in the world at its command.⁷⁰ About two months after finalization of the gas deal with the KRG Regional Government in Erbil, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said after a meeting with Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi in Baghdad: "The Iraqi government has no complaints about our projects in the Kurdistan territory".⁷¹ So far: Russia is currently especially concerned with a regionally emphasized cooperation with the Iraqi Kurds, that pursues economic priorities, as Moscow stresses, and is implemented in political-diplomatic agreement with the central government in Baghdad.⁷²

Syria: The future of territorial integrity and state sovereignty of both Iraq and Syria cannot be fully assessed at present. As far as the Syrian Kurds are concerned, however, there is a limited geostrategic constant of an otherwise open and unpredictable development: the regime of Bashar Hafez al-Assad on its own accord not only offered the Syrian Kurds limited regional autonomy in March 2013, but also decreed it within the framework of an administrative reform-process in the area around Kamishli/Qamishlo in the north-east.⁷³ At

⁶⁸Mamedov, Ruslan (2017): *Is it time for Moscow's "Kurdish Policy" in Iraq?* RIAC, 06.10.2017: <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-andcomments/analytcs/is-it-time-for-moscow-skurdish-policy-in-iraq> (accessed 6 Oct. 2017).

⁶⁹Cf. on the current status of the KRG-GAZPROM cooperation: <http://www.gazprom-neft.com/press-center/lib/1159674/> (accessed 24 February 2018).

⁷⁰Mills, 2016: pp. 17-21.

⁷¹Citing Rûdaw, 07.12.2017: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/business/071220171> (accessed 18 Dec. 2017).

⁷²Yefremenko, 2017: "Russia ... should be vitally interested in strengthening political, economic, and military-technical cooperation with the government in Iraq as well as with South Kurdistan, whether autonomous (for the time being) or independent. Russia does not want to get directly involved in processes that may lead to the emergence of 'Sunnistan' in Iraq":

<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/By-the-Rivers-of-Babylon-19037> (accessed 1st Dec. 2017). Barmin, 2017: "the key reason Russia shied away from supporting the Kurdish referendum was the timing":

<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Kurdish-referendum-a-double-edged-sword-for-Russia-19026> (accessed 1st Dec. 2017).

first, the Syrian Kurds did not win this form of autonomy in a military struggle. It has now culminated in the “*Democratic Federation of Northern Syria*”. Even though, the future of this “*Federation*” appears to be open and undetermined, Syria’s Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem recently reaffirmed in an interview with “*Russia Today*” on the occasion of the independence referendum of the Iraqi Kurds on September 25, 2017, that the government in Damascus is “*open to negotiations with Kurds over their demand for autonomy within Syria’s borders*”.⁷⁴ Since then, the regular Syrian army has been supporting Syrian Kurds at least temporarily (although lukewarmly) in the fight for Afrin in the north-west, which was recently lost (for the time being) to Turkish invasion forces and its Islamist proxies. Predominantly positive reactions about autonomy for Syrian Kurds were also expressed by Russian authors.⁷⁵ Accordingly, it would not be unfounded to suppose that Bashar al-Assad’s regime would be finally prepared too to grant the Syrian Kurds limited regional self-government, provided a comprehensive future solution could preserve Syria’s territorial integrity (and confirm Bashar al-Assad in power), and that Syria would then intend to further use the Kurdish minority as a kind of “*soldier peasants*” along the northern border to Turkey.

6. Israel

a) Israel’s support for Iraqi Kurds in the 1960s and 1970s

In the 1960s and 1970s, “*Mullah*”⁷⁶ Mustafa Barzani pursued geostrategic, sometimes completely contradictory, multiple tactics at the same time in the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds for self-determination: On the one hand, he tried to achieve self-government for the Kurds in Iraq with the support of the former Soviet Union, but at the same time he also continued his own contacts with Baghdad for an autonomy solution. Firstly, because he did not trust the Soviets because of his experiences of more than ten years in exile (which was based on reciprocity); secondly, because he had seen that the Kremlin had ultimately opted for Baghdad and against the Kurds in the struggle for influence in Iraq; and, last but not least, because he did not want to promote a unilateral supremacy of Moscow over Baghdad. Mustafa Barzani therefore began to co-operate in parallel and then predominantly with Israel, US and Iran. His main objectives were as follows: First, he saw in a growing cooperation with (pro-)Western states

⁷³Cf.: Ibrahim, 2013: p. 274, fn. 34: “*Syrian President Bashar al-Assad declared Kamishli Qamishlo a Muhafazal District in March 2013 as a result of the reorganization of the district administration system in Syria. This has created a district in northern Syria with almost 85 percent of Kurdish citizens.*” (translated from German by the author of this analysis). Further reading: Araabi, Samer (2017): *Syria’s Decentralization Roadmap*. SADA, 23.03.2017: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/68372> (accessed 23rd March 2017).

⁷⁴Quoting Reuters, 26.09.2017:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/damascus-says-syrian-kurdish-autonomy-negotiable-report-idUSKCN1C10TJ> (accessed 26 Sept. 2017).

⁷⁵Barmin, 2017: “*Moscow has accepted the idea of Kurdish autonomy in Syria*”:

<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Kurdish-referendum-a-double-edged-sword-for-Russia-19026> (accessed 1st Dec. 2017).

⁷⁶“*Mullah*” was used as honorary title for Mustafa Barzani (from Arab. “*maulāja*” for “*Sir*”, cf. Lokotsch, 1927: p. 115, 1448: Arab. *maulā*) and not for an Islamic theologian with an academic diploma.

a power-political balance to the formerly dominant influence of the ex-USSR in Iraq (and the Middle East) and was convinced that this tactic could improve future options of the Kurds to achieve regional self-government in Iraq. Secondly, he wanted to weaken the Iraqi army, especially under Saddam Hussein, both in attacks against Kurds and at the height of the 1967 and 1973 Middle East wars against Israel, but without ever burning bridges to Baghdad for good, and indeed continued efforts of the Kurds for a *modus vivendi* in Iraq. Thirdly, he also hoped to prevent a common, threatening, devastating action by the Saddam Hussein regime and Iran against (Iraqi) Kurds. And fourthly: he also wanted to persuade the US to put decisive pressure on Saddam Hussein to grant Iraqi Kurds autonomy, specifically in the expectation that US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger would honor a pro-Western stance on the part of the Iraqi Kurds. This would greatly enhance his US Middle East doctrine of undermining the Saddam Hussein regime, to undermine its claim to leadership in the Arab world and would help to get the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat (1918-1981) out of Soviet influence and push him through as Israel's upcoming future peace partner. Kissinger, however, showed no interest in involving the (Iraqi) Kurds in building an Israel-Egypt Middle East peace process, and finally brutally dumped the Kurds down in 1975 in their struggle for regional self-government.⁷⁷

b) “*New Middle East - Alliance Israel - Saudi Arabia - Gulf States- (France) - Kurds*”

Latest development: Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as the first and so far only acting head of government on the world stage, recognized both the referendum of the Iraqi Kurds of September 25, 2017, and the establishment of an independent Kurdish State (in northern Iraq) as legitimate, and endorsed them. A few days before the referendum, Netanyahu had his office send a statement out to foreign correspondents on September 13, 2017, which consisted of two sentences and ended with the statement: “[*Israel*] supports the legitimate efforts of the Kurdish people to achieve their own state”.⁷⁸ Netanyahu hereby reiterated his appeal on June 29, 2014, before the annual conference of the Institute for National Security (INSS) in Tel Aviv “to support the Kurds’ aspiration for independence... They are a fighting people that have proven political commitment and political moderation but they’re also worthy of their own political independence.” This would strengthen moderate forces in the Middle East and avert the advance of radical Islamists. Netanyahu also announced the foundation of a new “axis for regional collaboration” between Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Egypt, which should also include Kurds.⁷⁹ About a year and a half later, Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, at an INSS conference in Tel Aviv on January 19, 2016, openly called for “the establishment of a Kurdish state that se-

⁷⁷Hennerbichler, 2004: pp. 571-576; see also Black & Morris, 1991.

⁷⁸<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-israel/israel-endorses-independent-kurdish-state-idUSKCN1BO0QZ>;

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-supports-establishment-of-independent-kurdistan-1.5450316> (both accessed 14 September 2017).

⁷⁹<https://www.timesofisrael.com/kurds-in-iraq-deserve-independence-netanyahu-says/> (accessed 1st Febr. 2018).

*parates Iran from Turkey, one which will be friendly towards Israel... The Kurds are an ancient, democratic, peace-loving people that have never attacked any country... It is time to help them.*⁸⁰

c) Controversial reactions to Israel's support for Iraqi Kurds

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's support September 13, 2017 for the independence referendum of Iraqi Kurds and an independent state of Kurdistan has received very different international responses. Harsh rejection was expressed above all by the Shiite leadership of Iraq. "We will not allow the creation of a second Israel in northern Iraq", Iraqi Vice-President Nuri al-Maliki warned at a meeting with US-ambassador Douglas Sliman on 17th September 2017 in Baghdad.⁸¹ In sharp contrast came resolute appeals from Israel to swiftly equip the (Iraqi) Kurds with modern, heavy Israeli weapons in order to help them thus ultimately to achieve a state of their own: "Therefore, we should supply the Kurds with the heavy arms that they need to fight for independence", wrote for example Rachel Avraham in an op-ed article in "The Jerusalem Post".⁸² The Kurds should also be included in a new strategic alliance of improved Israeli relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), possibly also including France, to stem Iran's hegemony efforts over the Middle East. The Israeli government should formally form a strategic alliance (Iraqi) Kurdistan-GCC-France-Israel, "to stop Iran".⁸³ At the same time, other analysts warn that Israel cannot really afford to take on an upswing Iran even in close cooperation with Kurds (Amir, 2017⁸⁴). Particularly critical comments have been published by the American Middle East and Kurdish expert Michael Rubin.⁸⁵ He accuses Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of *playing "a cynical and inconsistent" "game" with the Kurds*. Israel neither seems prepared to help the

⁸⁰Cf.: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/shaked-calls-for-an-independent-kurdistan/> (accessed 1st Febr. 2018).

⁸¹Cf.: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/17092017;> <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Iraqi-VP-warns-against-creation-of-second-Israel-for-Kurds-505332> (both accessed 19 Sept. 2017).

⁸²<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Israel-should-arm-the-Kurds-515340> (accessed 27 Nov. 2017).

⁸³"We should utilize the improved relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia to build a strategic alliance between the Gulf Cooperation Council, Israel, the Kurds and perhaps also France, which has a vested interest in putting a halt to Iranian aggression in Lebanon. [...] Therefore, it is time for the Israeli government to be proactive in the fight against Iran by enabling the Kurds to establish an independent state, which will be at the forefront in the struggle against Iran and will significantly help Israel defend its security. We should put our money where our mouth is and give the Kurds the weapons that they so badly need to defend themselves. Time is running out. The Israeli government should act now and form a Kurdish, GCC, French, Israeli alliance to stop Iran" (Avraham l.c.). Halbfinger, 2017, citing former "US National Security Council" analyst Kenneth M. Pollack: "A breakaway Kurdistan could prove valuable to Israel against Iran, which has oppressed its own Kurdish population. [...] and that an independent Kurdistan will be a base for Israeli operations against Iran, via Iran's Kurdish population.": <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/world/middleeast/kurds-independence-israel.html> (accessed 23 Sept. 2017).

⁸⁴Amir, Daniel (2017): "But Jerusalem can't afford the real cost of a reborn Kurdistan: an empowered Iran": *Why Israel Can't Support an Independent Kurdish State*. Haaretz, 12.09.2017: <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-why-israel-can-t-support-an-independent-kurdish-state-1.5449891> (accessed 12 Sept. 2017).

Kurds militarily if “*Turkish troops, Iran’s Qods Force, or Iraq’s Hashd al-Sha’abi militias enter the region*”, nor “*does it appear that Israel is willing to give weaponry to the Kurds*”, Rubin pointed out. Rather, “*Israeli authorities*” would be “*guilty of inciting the Kurds toward disaster*”, he criticizes and fears Kurdish history could repeat itself with different actors: “*In the early 1970s, the Iraqi Kurds became a Cold War proxy in the battle for influence between the United States and the Soviet Union. [...] Today, however, Israeli leaders treat the Kurds as pawns in a new Cold War between Jerusalem and Tehran.*” Evidently, “*Israel is not going to be able to give Iraqi Kurdistan what it needs.*” Either “*Israel is willing to support the Kurds where and how it counts*” or “*they would do better if Israel simply remained silent*”, Michael Rubin advised. The inconsistency of the Israeli Prime Minister is also diagnosed by Rhys Dubin: After all, Netanyahu has finally come to a “*two-state solution*”, Dubin ambivalently records, but only in Iraq, where he advocates an independent Kurdistan as a buffer state against Arabs and Iranians, which is traditionally called “*periphery policy*” in Israel, while he denies Palestinians their own independent state in coexistence with Israel.⁸⁶

7. The KRI after the Kirkuk “Blitz”

1) Motive search - misjudgments

Setbacks⁸⁷ for the Iraqi Kurds as a result of the independence referendum on 25 September 2017 are attributed primarily to Masoud Barzani,⁸⁸ who initiated it against international warnings.⁸⁹ This is explained differently, but the main

⁸⁵Quotes: Rubin, Michael (2017): *Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu is playing a cynical game on the Kurdish referendum*. AEI, 25.09.2017:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/israels-benjamin-netanyahu-is-playing-a-cynical-game-on-the-kurdish-referendum/> (accessed 25 Sept. 2017). Similar: Hassani, Ramyar (2018): *What the Kurds of Iran and Iraq should learn from Kurds in Syria*. The Jerusalem Post, 04.02. 2018: “*The Kurds of Syria have not been waiting for the support of the West and will not expect it in the future either. They have followed a better path: believing in themselves and ignoring the empty promises called politics and diplomacy.*”: <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=540680> (accessed 10 February 2018).

⁸⁶Dubin, Rhys (2017): *Netanyahu Finally Supports a Two-State Solution, in Iraq*. Foreign Policy, 13.09.2017: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/13/netanyahu-finally-supports-a-two-state-solution-in-iraq> (accessed 13 Sept. 2017). Similar too: Cohen, 2017: “*The Kurdish people must have a state of their own, and the sooner the better. The international community should support the independence of Kurdistan, not only the establishment of a Palestinian state. Self-determination and independence should be the prerogative of all peoples, not a principle selectively applied.*”: BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 507, June 24, 2017:

<https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/kurdistan-referendum/> (accessed 2nd Oct. 2017).

⁸⁷Gunter, 2018: pp. 26-27: “*disastrous failed referendum*”; 29: “*probably the most important reason for the referendum disaster was KRG disunity*”; 40: “*the Kurds have been victims of leaders guilty of selfish partisanship and greed.*” 41: “*some unity in the guise of the KRG, it shockingly collapsea following the failed advisory referendum on independence held on September 25, 2017. So far, no Kurdish leader has proven able to make the transition from tribal or provincial warlord to a true national statesman.*” (For historical background see Gunter 2011²).

⁸⁸Riedel, 2017: “*His leadership has set back Kurdish hopes just when they seemed on the cusp of victory. [...] Iran engineered the whirlwind against Barzani. The White House was slow to react and outmaneuvered by Tehran. The first test of Trump’s new tough Iran strategy is a blowout for the Ayatollahs and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The most pro-American segment of the Iraqi population was kneecapped.*”

points are that Barzani wanted to enforce the date of the referendum against worldwide rejection (with the exception of Israel) for (KRG) internal domestic reasons,⁹⁰ hoping to emerge stronger;⁹¹ that he had been ill-advised,⁹² but also proved to be resistant to counseling again; that he misjudged the international, geostrategic situation,⁹³ that he relied on lip service from ex-politicians, risked

⁸⁹Especially critical Michael Rubin 2017: AEI, 20.12.2017: “Barzani called the referendum not only for nationalist reasons, but as a distraction from the ruin which has resulted from a quarter century of his rule. [...] Barzani refused to step down at the end of his presidential term. Like many autocrats, he clamped down on the free press. Iraqi Kurdistan became a dangerous place for independent reporters as the intelligence service run by Barzani’s eldest son reportedly murdered several who criticized the de facto president’s nepotism and corruption. As so often happens among dictatorships, he unleashed a cycle in which nepotism bred mismanagement, mismanagement encouraged corruption, and corruption which directed the region to economic ruin. Today, Iraqi Kurdistan is more than \$20 billion in debt, investors are fleeing, and the situation is getting worse.”: <http://www.aei.org/publication/is-the-kurdish-spring-here> (accessed 25 February 2018); for background see also: Rubin, 2017.

⁹⁰Cf. IRIS, 2017: p. 10: “To deflect attention [from] KRG’s undemocratic government”; 14: “distracting from the economic and political context”; Collin, Katy (2017): *The Kurdish referendum won’t deliver independence, here’s why it matters anyway*. Brookings, 19.09.2017: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/09/19/the-kurdish-referendum-wont-deliver-independence-heres-why-it-matters-anyway/> (accessed 19 Sept. 2017);

⁹¹Mamedov 2017: RIAC, 10.06.2017: “Barzani [...] deflecting attention from existing problems linked to Kurdistan’s grave socioeconomic situation. In addition, [...] to draw the population’s attention away from his legitimacy as a president; [...] and to ensure popular support for his clan.”

⁹²Cf. i.a.: “Economist”, Feb. 19th 2015, saw “Kurdistan ever closer to independence”: <https://www.economist.com/news/international/21644167-iraqs-kurds-are-independent-all-name-they-must-play-their-cards-cleverly-if-they>: “Never before has Turkey been so friendly to Iraq’s Kurds. Never before has the government in Baghdad needed the co-operation of the Kurds in Erbil so badly. Now, surely, is the Kurdish moment.” Zaman, 2016: p. 1: “[...] Iraqi Kurdistan on the Cusp of Statehood”; 26: “the Iraqi Kurds are closer than ever to realizing their dream. It is up to their leaders...”; A RAND-study of Nader et al., 2016: IX predicted: an independent state of “Iraqi Kurdistan” would no longer be a “someday” issue, but “a very real possibility”, even though, the authors didn’t want to be pinpointed down to a specific date when such an independent Iraqi Kurdistan would be established. See in sharp contrast to such (questionable) presumption i.a.: Natali, Denise (2017): *Iraqi Kurdistan was never ready for Statehood*. Foreign Policy: 31.10.2017: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/31/iraqi-kurdistan-was-never-ready-for-statehood>; similar: Dziadoz, Alex (2017): *The Economic Case against an Independent Kurdistan. The costs will be large and exacting*. The Atlantic: 26.09.2017:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/kurdistan-barzani-iraq-turkey-blockade-oil/541149> (all accessed 1st November 2017). See for older assessments for example MEPC, 2004: vol. XI, no. 1, spring 2004, online: <https://www.mepc.org/journal/kurds-iraq-0> (papers presented: Michael M. Gunter: Why Kurdish statehood is unlikely; Denise Natali: Transnational Networks: New Opportunities and Constraints for Kurdish Statehood; Robert Olson: Turkey and Kurdistan-Iraq, 2003; Nihat Ali Özan: Could a Kurdish State Be Set Up in Iraq?; Khaled Salih: Kurdish Reality in an Emerging Iraq; M. Hakan Yavuz: *Provincial/NOT Ethnic Federalism in Iraq*).

⁹³Hiltermann & Fantappie, 2018: Masoud Barzani “made two miscalculations”: “The first was Barzani’s expectation that the United States would support him as he moved toward statehood, [...] the second source of Barzani’s miscalculation ... lies much closer to home. The inconvenient fact is that Kurdish leaders like to boast that they built a thriving democratic bastion in the largely autocratic Middle East - but they never actually did. After Saddam Hussein’s fall, the two main Kurdish parties, Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani’s PUK, did not pour their energies into creating functional rule-of-law institutions or diversifying the economy. Instead, they used oil money to enrich themselves, their families, and their party cadres.” Bruce Riedel, Brookings, November 2, 2017, explains “the roots of Masoud Barzani’s ‘Kurdish distrust of the United States’ with ‘bearing the legacy of’ the ‘pattern of American betrayal’ and concludes: “But Americans have been consistent for decades. Masoud was right”:

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/11/02/masoud-barzani-and-the-roots-of-kurdish-distrust-of-the-united-states> (accessed 2nd Nov. 2017).

too much,⁹⁴ gambled too high,⁹⁵ , backed the wrong horse⁹⁶ and ultimately lost, which would accelerate his political departure.⁹⁷ Masrour Barzani defended his father by saying that there had been “*negotiations*” with the US and Europe, letters had been exchanged, but the staff of the contacted countries had changed, with the result that none of the “*promises*” had been met and ultimately only “*we*” (the Iraqi Kurds) had to pay the price that (alleged) undertakings were broken.⁹⁸

2) Democratic leadership vacuum

The political future of Iraq’s long-standing Iraqi Kurdish regional president Masoud Barzani does not seem ultimately determined.⁹⁹ Currently, there is conflicting information available. Masoud Barzani was elected KRI President for four years by the Kurdish Regional Parliament in Erbil on 13 June 2005 by a large majority. On July 25, 2009, he was confirmed by direct election with about 70% for another four years in office. His term expired in the summer of 2013. The terms of office of regional Iraqi Kurdish Presidents are not regulated by a KRI Constitution, because that does not yet exist today. There is still only one draft, but so far the parties represented in the regional parliament of Erbil have not been able to agree on it with the necessary constitutional majority (latest draft: Kelly 2010: 774-808). Therefore, the relevant term of Iraqi head of states according to the 2005 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq (Article 72.1) is also used for the maximum term of office of KRI Regional Presidents, and it provides for four years, with the possibility of being re-elected once. Nevertheless, the Iraqi-Kurdish Regional Parliament passed a resolution in 2013 that allowed Barzani to remain in office for another two years. This was justified by a special crisis situation. As a result, its democratically legitimized regional presidency ended on 19 August 2015. But since then Masoud Barzani seems to have continued in office without a democratic mandate. He is also addressed by dip-

⁹⁴ICG, 2017: p. 8: “*Barzani overplayed the Kurdish hand*”.

⁹⁵Cf. Taylor, Adam (2017): “*the Kurds’ gamble did not pay off*”, The Washington Post, 17.10.2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/17/a-new-battle-in-iraq-gives-iran-the-upper-hand/?utm_term=.e219984de781 (accessed 17 Oct. 2017).

⁹⁶Dziadoz 2017 l.c.: “*Barzani gamble*”.

⁹⁷The Guardian (Martin Chulov, Erbil, Julian Borger, Washington, Saeed Kamali Dehghan, London), 16.10.2017: “*devastating blow to the Kurdish region’s de facto president, Masoud Barzani*”: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/16/iraq-kurdish-forces-army-us-military> (accessed 16 Oct. 2017).

⁹⁸Rûdaw-Interview, 10.01.2018: *Despite losses, Kurds have “promising future” if united: Masroul Barzani: “there were negotiations before, promises made, letters were written and handed down to the Kurdistan Region by the United States itself and Europe, but the staff [working for these countries] had changed, and therefore as a result none of the promises were honored, nor were owned up by anyone, neither did anyone pay the price for [breaking them] except us.”*: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10012018> (acc. 10 Jan. 2018).

⁹⁹Riedel, 2017: “*Masoud [Barzani] now is apparently ending his political career although retirement has never really been an option for Middle East politicians. After carrying out a referendum to endorse Kurdish independence against the advice of nearly everyone, he has seen the Baghdad regime recapture the crucial city of Kirkuk and the oil fields essential to Kurdish self-sufficiency. His leadership has set back Kurdish hopes just when they seemed on the cusp of victory. He is widely discredited although his base remains violently faithful.*”

lomats as “*president*”. Most recently, Barzani himself announced that he will no longer run for (KRI) office and resign as Regional President of the Iraqi Kurds.¹⁰⁰ The latter has not yet happened. Barzani had previously initiated a new institution, “*a self-declared High Political Council*” (Rubin, 2017), for whose role there exists no consensus among Iraqi-Kurdish parties and whose future democratic legitimacy is currently unclear. Masrour Barzani has recently indicated that his father had to be regarded a “*national symbol*” who made history, and will continue to hold power as “*president*” of the Iraqi Kurds “*made by history*” because they would continue to “*need him*” in the future too.¹⁰¹ This claim to power is interpreted in such a way that Masoud Barzani could finally use the non-binding referendum of 25 September 2017 as a kind of voter mandate for him personally to remain in power as head of his self-declared “*High Political Council*” (Rubin, 2017: l.c.: “*In other words, he and his family remain in control*”; Riedel, 2017: “*violently faithful*”), until he himself could someday in the uncertain future proclaim an independent Kurdistan and become its first president. Whether such a presidential power claim could be realized in reality after heavy setbacks from the devastating consequences of the referendum initiated by him seems entirely open and not assessable.¹⁰²

3) Democracy deficits: consecutive power sharing

Since the first free elections on 19 May 1992, Iraqi Kurdistan has been governed by power sharing between KDP and PUK.¹⁰³ During the civil war of 1994-1997 there were already two separate regional Kurdish administrations,

¹⁰⁰BBC, 29 Oct. 2017: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41794083> (accessed the same day).

¹⁰¹Rûdaw-interview, 10.01.2018: *Despite losses, Kurds have “promising future” if united. Masrour Barzani: “the history of Mr. President, the struggle of Mr. President, the past of Mr. President, the achievements of Mr. President have made the president a national symbol. It is not like a government position for him to assume power for four, eight, twelve years, and then when post is over, then his role will be diminished. The role of Mr. President will not be over with this, as it did not begin with this. He is a president made by history. We need him ...”*:

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10012018> (accessed 10 January 2018).

¹⁰²See for background for example, Stansfield, 2003; Interestingly, to launch a claim to high power from an unfavorable position was in family tradition already before not seen as unbridgeable contrast. By way of example: In the 1980s Masoud Barzani together with his half-brother Idris and a close relative, the later Iraqi Foreign Secretary Hoshiar Zebari, had three French technicians abducted and kept for months in KDP-I custody who were ordered to modernize for the then Saddam Hussein regime the radar observation system Mosul-Kirkuk-Sulaimaniyah. The President of France at the time, François Mitterrand (1916-1996), campaigned personally for their immediate and unconditional release together with the late Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky (1911-1990). Zebari communicated as “*gestures*” that might help to speed up the rescue letters by the Pope, French communist leader Georges Marchais (1920-1997) and Bruno Kreisky addressed to Masoud Barzani and kindly asking him to release the three technicians. This could be achieved but did not noticeably lead to a breakthrough of his international recognition and reputation. Masoud Barzani then lived with his family in refugee houses in Karaj and was granted by the Shah-Iran in the 1980s also a small KDP power base in exile in Rajan, a village on Zagros east slopes at the triangle Iran-Iraq-Turkey.

¹⁰³Michael Rubin 2017: AEI, 20.12.2017, blames for the historical development equally the two major political parties KDP and PUK led by the families Barzani and Talabani: “*Neither the Barzanis nor the Talabanis have a birthright claim to the region’s leadership. Rather than set Kurdistan down a path to prosperity, they have become the region’s Mubaraks and Ben Alis. Rather than pull Iraq forward, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership for both cynical and corrupt reasons seeks to push it back. [...] Increasingly, it is becoming clear that the real threat to Iraqi Kurds and Kurdistan lies not in Baghdad, Najaf, or Karbala, but with two families in Erbil.*”:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/is-the-kurdish-spring-here> (accessed 25th February 2018).

each run by the KDP and PUK.¹⁰⁴ A parliamentary democracy of changing political majorities has not evolved until now.¹⁰⁵ In short: The first free Iraqi Kurdish regional elections of 19 May 1992 ended with 51:49 for the PUK against the KDP, but were then converted into a 50:50 power sharing. In the second election on January 30, 2005, KDP and PUK entered a joint list called the “*Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan*”. In the third election of July 25, 2009, the KDP/PUK alliance was renamed “*Kurdistani List*”. In the fourth round of voting on 21 September 2013, KDP and PUK ran for the first time since 1992 as individual parties, but at the same time continued their political power sharing cooperation and after protracted negotiations with the 2009 founded reform movement “*Gorran*” (change) finally agreed to an all-party collaboration in the Regional Parliament in Erbil. The latter was the first attempt to execute regional parliamentary rule virtually without an opposition, but ultimately failed because of that. Since the renewed civil war of 1994-1997, Iraqi Kurdistan has been split into two administrations of the KDP in Erbil and the PUK in Sulaimaniyah, each of varying lengths, both claiming to represent of all of Iraqi Kurdistan. So far, there have been four regional, Kurdish-Iraqi, free democratic elections: 1992, 2005, 2009 and 2013. The fifth is scheduled for 2018. At the end of each election political opponents accused each other of electoral fraud. To some extent international observers had been able to monitor KRI elections. Democratic structures of a power-sharing between parliament, government, independent judiciary and administration have been rudimentary ever since. A parliamentary democracy in which power originates from the people as the sovereign and where political decisions are made by (ever changing) majorities so far could not prevail in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Rubin, 2017: l.c. criticizes a “*democracy*”

¹⁰⁴Source of quoted data: KRG-government Erbil: First free elections 19 May 1992. First democratically elected Regional-PM: Fuad Masum, PUK, first Vice-Premier: Rowsch Shaways, KDP-I. Kurdish civil war: May 1994-24 November 1997. Two separate regional administrations Erbil (KDP-I) & Sulaimaniyah (PUK): In PUK controlled areas: 1992-2005, in KDP dominated: 1996-2005. The PUK administration in Sulaimaniyah had 4 Regional-PMs: 1: Fuad Masum: 4 July 1992-26 April 1993; 2: Kosrat Rasul Ali: 26 April 1993-21 January 2001; 3: Barham Salih: 21 January 2001-4 July 2004; 4: Omer Fattah Hussain: 4 July 2004-14 June 2005. KDP/Erbil-administration: 3 Regional-PMs: 1: Rowsch Shaways: 26 September 1996; 2: Nechirvan Barzani: 20 December 1999-14 June 2005. Second regional election (after reconciliation KDP-PUK and formation of the joint party list “*Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan*”: 30 January 2005: mutual consent to two KDP/PUK half-time-PMs: 1: Nechirvan Barzani, KDP: 1st of March 2006-31st of August 2009; 2: Barham Salih, PUK: 1st September 2009-17 January 2012. Third election: 25 July 2009: Joint “*Kurdistani List*” (KDP/PUK): Newly founded “*Gorran*” (change movement) attains big success with 22% of the electoral votes and 25 out of 111 seats in the KRG Regional Parliament and emerges right from the start as second-strongest political force after the first-ranking KDP/PUK electoral alliance “*Kurdistani List*” alliance with 53% and 59 seats (19). Again, two KDP/PUK half-time-PMs: 1: Barham Salih: 28 October 2009-5 April 2012; Nechirvan Barzani: since 17 January 2012. Fourth election: 21st September 2013: KDP & PUK compete for the first time in recent history as single parties; results: KDP: 37.79% & 38 seats; Gorran (defends position as second strongest party): 24.21% & 24 seats; PUK drops back to rank three: 17.80% & 18 seats. Incumbent KRG-government Nechirvan Barzani, KDP-I (Premier), and Qubat Talabani, PUK (Vice-Premier): in office currently as 8th KRG-cabinet since 8th June 2014.

¹⁰⁵Cf. the guideline-interview 2013 with Nawshirwan Mustafa (1944-2017): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7bOReG8WJ4> (accessed 15 February 2018).

charade). Ramifications in the wake of the September 2017 independence referendum threaten to divide Iraqi Kurdistan once again and to aggravate political differences, up to further dangers of a new civil war. Moreover, there are also growing fears that the geo-strategically escalating struggle for Kirkuk and other “*disputed territories*” in Iraq could possibly trigger new military conflicts in the Middle East and Eurasia. Polarization and escalation are dominating widely, relaxation is not in sight, and sustainable compromise solutions not immediately apparent.

4) New Generation of Leaders

At the time of going to press, Kurdistan’s current Iraqi political parties were in the process of changing leadership generations and repositioning. In KDP-Iraq, incumbent KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has provisionally taken on from his uncle Masoud Barzani political and diplomatic settlement negotiations with the central government in Baghdad on the basis of the 2005 Iraqi constitution. The KDP security services are still headed by Masrour Barzani, the elder son of Masoud Barzani. This is interpreted as a possible, future new leadership order within KDP and the Barzani family. Nechirvan Barzani is considered capable of compromising, while Masrour is described as autocratic. However, it seems unclear whether Nechirvan could prevail finally against Masrour Barzani in the long run.¹⁰⁶ The Patriotic Union wants to elect a new leadership at a future congress after the death of Jalal Talabani. The PUK is still fragmented in about half a dozen partly rival wings and also split in crucial questions who should lead the PUK into the future and with what program. The outcome is undefined. But it is clear that women will again play a leading role in future PUK leadership positions. Long-standing PUK Regional (Deputy) Prime Minister and Iraqi Vice-PM Barham Salih has left the Patriotic Union in 2017 to form the new “*Coalition for Democracy and Justice*” party. It presents itself as a modern reform party of the future on the basis of a western, democratic value system. Finally, the “*Gorran*” (change) party founded by Nawshirwan Mustafa in 2009, is also about to regroup, following his death in May 2017. Mustafa emerged from the PUK like Salih. So far “*Gorran*” had been successful above all as an opposition movement. The party fights against endemic corruption, for democracy, human rights, equal treatment of women, press freedom and for a functioning constitutional state.

8. KRI/KRG Economy

1) Economy: Kurdistan Region Iraq insolvent

Because key data is lacking, it is still not possible to describe seriously the economic situation of the Kurdistan Region Iraq according to scientific principles and also administrative rules as they are regulated by law for instance in member states of the European Union, which is associated with Iraq (and the

¹⁰⁶Masoud Barzani “*has raised*” “*his children*” “*to believe they are superior*”: Rubin, AEI, 27.07.2017: <http://www.aei.org/publication/will-masrour-barzanibe-the-cias-latest-embarrassment> (acc. 25 Sept. 2017).

Kurdistan Region) on the basis of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed May 11, 2012. By contrast, the government of the Kurdistan Region Iraq, for example, does not publish (current) budget data modeled on the EU, nor does it provide detailed, published and verifiable evidence of the use of public funds.¹⁰⁷ The “*Kurdistan Region Statistics Office*” in Erbil is a construction site,¹⁰⁸ not an independent authority guaranteed by law such as “*Eurostat*” in Luxembourg, but belongs to the KRG Planning Ministry and is a subordinate office, subject to directives.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, principles such as how the unemployment rate is calculated according to international standards, cannot be compared with those of “*Eurostat*”. Currently, for example, the KRG unemployment rate as of the second half of 2015 is given as a total of 13.52%. But it is in reality much higher. The reason is that in KRG labor market calculations a significant proportion of persons are listed as employed, even though they have no jobs and also do not provide employment/services, and therefore, would be rather classified as social benefits recipients in accordance with “*Eurostat*” guidelines (although KRI does not have an analogous social security system with proper health care insurance and pension fund institutions). The reasons for this are that the Kurdistan Region Iraq has a so-called “*rentier economy*” (DeWeaver, 2017: p. 2). These are mainly understood as regional/national economies that derive revenues largely unilaterally (in most cases) from oil (such as the African states of Nigeria, Angola, Uganda or South Sudan) and distribute from that to a largely state-dependent population a kind of a minimum income (often below poverty level). However, the term “*rentier*” interpreted as “*pensioner*” does not apply to Iraqi Kurdistan precisely because the populations concerned are mainly not “*retirees*” (like former “*Peshmerga*” without pension rights and social security protection), but mainly young people without jobs. Iraqi Kurdistan currently has a very young society. Of the more than 5 million people, 36% are aged up to

¹⁰⁷DeWeaver, 2017: p. 10: “*The current situation in Kurdistan is difficult to quantify because almost none of the statistics commonly published for most other economies are available. There is, for example, no monthly or quarterly timeseries data covering GDP, industrial production, capacity utilization, fixed asset investment, or employment. Indicators based on firm and household-level surveys, often among the most widely followed economic time series, are similarly unavailable.*” Mark DeWeaver, like other employees of the “*IRIS: Institute of Regional and International Studies*”, which is docked at the “*AUIS: American University of Iraq Sulaimani*”, strives through painstaking detail work, mostly based on survey methods, to paint a serious, correct up-to-date picture of the actual KRI economic situation. Recent publications (selection): DeWeaver, Mark (2017): *Economic Issues in Iraq & the Kurdistan Region*. IRIS (Institute of Regional and International Studies) Booklets: The State of the Economy, March 2017:

<https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/ECONOMY%20IRIS%20BOOKLET%20March17.pdf>;

Tabaqchali, Ahmed (2017): *Iraq's Economy after ISIS: An Investor's Perspective*, IRIS, November 2017:

https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IRIS_Iraq%20Post-ISIS%20Economy%20AT_FINAL.pdf;

Bartnik, Aaron (2017): *Obstacles and Opportunities for Entrepreneurship in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region*, IRIS, July 2017:

https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IRIS_Entrepreneurship%20in%20Iraq%20and%20KRI%20report.pdf

¹⁰⁸<http://www.krso.net/Default.aspx?page=article&id=1166&l=1> (accessed 28 February 2018).

¹⁰⁹Cf. the self-portrait of the “*Kurdistan Region Statistics Office*”:

<http://www.krso.net/Default.aspx?page=article&id=975&l=1> (accessed 28 February 2018)

14 and only 4% over 63. The average age is just over 20. Thus, more than half of the population is under 20.¹¹⁰ Yet, among these young people, unemployment is estimated at between 40% and 60%.¹¹¹ Among them are still about 30,000 trained young Iraqi Kurds holding academic diplomas who continue to find no jobs and receive financial help from the KRG administration. And in this sense only, they are officially considered “*employed by the state*” (DeWeaver, 2017: pp. 2-3). In total, around 1.2 million KRG citizens of working age are currently receiving funds from the Iraqi-Kurdish regional administration. On average, these amounted to between about \$300 and \$600 per month (depending on the segment of society). In total, these funds make up around 70% of all current KRG budget expenditures. The KRG thus needs at least about \$750 million per month to pay these salaries. At the same time, there is no viable economic structure in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Above all, there exist no vital small and medium-sized enterprises as the backbone of any viable economy. The private industry in general is only rudimentary in being, with the exception of a few branches of industry such as cement or agriculture.

2) From boom to crisis into bankruptcy

Since 2014, the economic situation of the Kurdistan Region Iraq has deteriorated dramatically. The KRI slid into the biggest recession in its history, with catastrophic implications.¹¹² The reasons are partly homemade¹¹³ and are also due to still dangerously unresolved constitutional issues such as rights for production and export of oil and gas between Iraqi Kurds and the federal central government in Baghdad. Most recently, a dramatic decline in oil prices since about 2014 has had a major effect, though this was beyond the influences of Iraq and the Kurds, but whose consequences were not always assessed as factually-correct by the Kurdish regional administration. For example, the KRG government in Erbil assumed that it could export enough quantities of oil from Iraqi Kurdistan via Turkey in 2014, so that it would be in a winning position to both stabilize and further develop Iraqi Kurdistan on its own. And in all likelihood, as the KRI leadership calculated, they could do this better than before, since the Iraqi Kurds accuse Baghdad for years of having continuously withheld from

¹¹⁰Cf.: <http://cabinet.gov.krd/p/page.aspx?l=12&s=050000&r=304&p=214>; main source for that is the UNDP Iraq Human Development Report 2014:

http://www.iq.undp.org/content/dam/iraq/img/Publications/UNDP-IQ_IraqNHDR2014-English.pdf (both accessed 28th February 2018).

¹¹¹Synopsis by the author: http://hennerbichler.info/aufstande_2011.html and http://hennerbichler.info/%20verbesserte_lage_2012.html as of 2012.

¹¹²DeWeaver, 2017: p. 2: “*Kurdistan’s Great Recession. From boom to bust in the rentier economy. [...] The impact on the private sector has been little short of catastrophic. Consumer spending has collapsed, property prices have crashed, occupancy rates at four and five star hotels have plummeted, and work on many projects has come to a virtual standstill. Capacity utilization at cement plants is falling, car dealerships are struggling, income at banks and insurance companies is down sharply, and sales of big-ticket electronics items are slumping. Businesses that only two years ago were making record profits are now fighting for survival.*”

¹¹³Hassani, 2018: “*On the one hand, despite domestic corruption the hope of greater assistance from the West has pushed the Kurds in Iraq further back. Though it is worth noting that lust for wealth and power has thrown the leadership of KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government) into the peril of Iranian and Turkish control.*”: The Jerusalem Post, 04.02. 2018: <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=540680> (accessed 4 February 2018).

them substantial shares of 17% due to them of the annual federal Iraqi budget (less expenses for general government state services).¹¹⁴ However, this calculation did not work out. As early as 2014, international reliable calculations were already available to all sides involved of how much revenue an independent Iraqi Kurdistan would need in order to survive independently from its own economic power. Such calculations had been done i.a. by the US administration under President Barack Obama and were recently also confirmed in June 2017 by the former CIA Director David Petraeus:¹¹⁵ “*We calculated at one point—the CIA—that they needed to export about 800,000 barrels of oil at US\$105 per barrel*”, Petraeus explained and came to the pessimistic conclusion: “*But I literally don’t think they can afford to be independent. [...] They are only producing 800,000 barrels on a really good day and exporting a subset of that now in the forties per barrel. So, they still need some of what they get from Baghdad.*” A recent analysis, conducted by the international consulting firm “*Deloitte*” on behalf of the KRG government in Erbil published on 13 January 2018, essentially confirms the information provided by Petraeus.¹¹⁶ Following therefore, the US analyses that the Kurdistan Region Iraq would have had to produce and sell more than double as much crude oil as it did in order to survive economically independent from Baghdad, and on top of that, even then, the KRI could have only survived independently if it would have been able to sell crude oil to world market prices “*at US\$105 per barrel*” which, since 2014 had fallen dramatically to less than half of estimated values. When then finally, the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi froze all payments to the KRG because the Iraqi Kurds exported KRI oil without approval of Baghdad, the Kurdistan Region slid dramatically into the biggest economic crisis of her young history. The consequences are partly catastrophic and continue: about 70%, or about 1.2 million Kurds, who depend on the income of the regional government in Erbil, including about 126,000 teachers, have received for years only about 50% of their salaries, and for some months none at all. This sharply widened the gap between rich and poor and brought hundreds of thousands to the poverty line.¹¹⁷ Many families continue to rely on last savings or borrow money from relatives who still have reserves. Private loans are currently hard to come by. Many thousands of employees on KRG payrolls continue to stay out of office for days or, if at all, show themselves occasionally for a few hours.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴KRG GOV, 2017: pp. 17-18: <http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/2017>.

¹¹⁵Rûdaw, 26.06.2017: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/260620171> (accessed 2nd February 2018).

¹¹⁶http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/2018/Deloitte_Report_on_KRG_Oil_Export_Consumption_and_Revenues_for_First_Half_of_2017_ENG_KU_AR.pdf (accessed 13 January 2018).

¹¹⁷Rubin 2017 stresses a particularly sharp contrast, according to which Masoud Barzani earns more each month than US presidents in a whole year: “[*Masoud*] *Barzani receives more per month than the US president does in a year*”: AEI, 20.12.2017: <http://www.aei.org/publication/is-the-kurdish-spring-here> (accessed 25 February 2018).

¹¹⁸DeWeaver, 2017: p. 44: “*The bureaucracy is corrupt and poorly managed, lacks competent staff, and is so underfunded as a result of the salary crisis that employees are coming in as infrequently as only once a week. Under these circumstances, there is bound to be a considerable gap between how policies are supposed to work in theory and how they actually turn out in practice.*”

3) *Insolvency without Baghdad* “rescue umbrella”

Further research aspects worked out by DeWeaver, 2017: pp. 2-18, 37-44 (selection): Private consumption declined exceptionally sharply. Meat consumption per capita dropped in the KRI from 45 kg before the current “*big recession*” to 23 kg in 2015. The poverty rate escalated from 3% in 2013 to 12% at present (estimates of the “*Kurdistan Region Statistics Office*”),¹¹⁹ which above all hit the more than two million refugees who are receiving humanitarian aid from the KRG since 2011.¹²⁰ The KRG administration deplores a continued lack of adequate international funds for refugees hosted by the Iraqi Kurds and sees no options that the majority of them could return to their homes in the near future.¹²¹ Car dealers hardly grant loans for new purchases. KRG’s debts to oil companies currently exceed \$3 billion. Infrastructure projects came largely to a standstill. Approved projects dropped from \$12.4 billion in 2013 to \$793 million a year ago. Hundreds of project partners and their sub-contractors went bankrupt this year alone, many are financially ruined for years to come. Some investors committed suicide (DeWeaver, 2017: p. 9). Particularly hard hit is the construction industry (largely dominated by Turkish companies), hotels and tourism. According to the latest estimates, Turkey could face up to around \$30 billions of unpaid bills in the Kurdistan Region Iraq. Many banks are insolvent. The KRG government continues to issue (currently) uncovered checks (bad or “*blocked checks*”), hoping that one day they might be worth something again. These pa-

¹¹⁹Current figures provided by the KRG Ministry of Interior on 26 April 2018 online (<http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56760>) are: “*the unemployment rate has increased by threefold from 3% in 2013 to 14% in 2016 and poverty rate dramatically augmented from 6% to 14%.*”

¹²⁰KRI has absorbed more than two million inland Iraq & Syria refugees since 2011, an increase of about 28% of the KRG population of about 5.2 million 2014-2015: Data quoted by PM Nechirvan Barzani at a KRG-World bank conference in Erbil in February 2015:

<http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=52985> (accessed 2nd February 2018). Latest available figures published by the KRG Ministry of Interior’s Joint Crisis Coordination Centre, JCC, in Erbil on 26 April 2018 are as follows (<http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56760>): “*Today, the Kurdistan Region hosts more than 1.4 million displaced individuals of which 250,000 are refugees. Overall, our region is host to 97% of the Syrian refugees in Iraq and 40% of the internally displaced Iraqis. [...] Today, 37% reside in nine refugee camps in Erbil, Duhok and Slemani governorates of the KRI and the rest are hosted within local communities.*” -KRI Refugee Situation - Statistical Overview: “*A total of 274,931 persons of concern (refugees) are in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; 248,382 Individuals (81,000 families) Syrian refugees are registered in Iraq; 37% live in 9 camps in Erbil, Duhok and Slemani and 63% living in out of camps; 47% Syrian refugees are female and 53% are male; 34% of Syrian refugees are children aged 0 - 11 years; 70% of Syrian refugees in Kurdistan Region of Iraq are either women or children; 35% Families do not have proper shelter and live in difficult conditions; 32% Families have members with a serious medical condition who need special support and care; 70% Children aged 6 to 12 years enrolled in formal and informal schooling.*” “*We must also draw attention to the fact that the KRI is also hosting 20,700 Turkish, 13,120 Iranian and 697 Palestinian formally registered refugees. This brings the total number of refugees in our region to 274,931 individuals who are in need of different types of support and assistance.*” The KRG statement also emphasizes a “*KRG’s rights-based policy that granted freedom of movement, residency and work permits and free access to the region’s healthcare and education services.*”

¹²¹KRG Ministry of Interior JCC statement 26 April 2018

(<http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56760>): “*The nature of the crisis in Syria and Iraq has turned displacement protracted, preventing the majority of the refugees and IDPs from returning to their homes.*”

pers are traded in a similar way as debt securities issued by bankrupt municipalities in Europe between the wars. As far as tax revenues are concerned, so far, the KRG administration was only able to collect about 5% or \$-600 millions of all regional levies due annually (so called “*presumptive tax system*”: DeWeaver, 2017: p. 42).

4) Gloomy economic outlook

The incumbent KRG government is currently trying to tackle the severe recession with an austerity program similar to Greece’s financial crisis in the EU but with no bailout “*rescue umbrella*” from Baghdad. As the Kurdistan Region does not have its own currency, the KRG also ultimately relies on Baghdad to rescue insolvent banks. Although, the Iraqi central bank has regional branches in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah, it has recently shown no interest in saving insolvent banks from impending collapse by injecting money. The KRG government has admittedly (again) announced a major program to invest the region out of the current crisis and to diversify its unilateral dependency on oil. However, experts do not see the outlook for private investment encouraging in the foreseeable future, given the ongoing, severe economic difficulties. Private investment and consumption is also hampered by the fact that more than one million Kurds who remain on KRG’s payrolls are continuously experiencing delays in their salaries as well as cuts to benefits and pensions up to 50% (as of June 2018). This could aggravate social tensions, widen the rich-poor gap, further worsen the jobless rate, and force up both prices and inflation. Analysts assume different scenarios. Michael Rubin fears, as explained, that everything threatens to get worse because of a resistance to reform and democracy by a leading, corrupt elite. Mark DeWeaver, on the other hand, sees massive pressure from an on-going crisis as an at least temporary increase in readiness to reforms, not least due to an unrelenting rebellious, dynamic youth fighting for democracy and a socially just society. Options could kick off in two directions: either into viable, drastic, and painful reforms, or into a relapse of old habits “*and generate the same powerful incentives for rent seeking and corruption as it always has*”, so DeWeaver. Results are open, but cautiously optimistic. In any case, the Kurdistan region will remain dependent on crude oil and its fever curves on the world markets for the foreseeable future.

9. Health: War Damage to National Health

New research¹²² proves that the population of vast territories of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region are faced with drastically limited future health options. They are continued threatened by a deadly mix of still untreated sediments of chemical and nuclear (contamination from Depleted Uranium DU) Gulf war agents which cause to date a number of illnesses up to a magnitude never detected in contemporary Iraq before, like: a “*sharp rise in congenital birth defects and cancer cases in Iraq*”, further “*illnesses in the kidney, lungs, and liver, as well as a total collapse of the immune system*”, and eye and skin diseases, as well as DNA

(mutations who can be demised from parents to children) damages (synoptic summaries: Croddy et al., 2002: pp. 1-266; NCCI Brief 2011: pp. 1-27). Final comprehensive results are still not available for the whole of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.¹²³ According to UN estimates, more than 1730 km² of Iraq are contaminated and about 1.6 million people in 1600 towns affected. The main consequence is that the “*communities’ ability to develop livelihoods*” is continuously inhibited (IAU 2012 and Zwiijnenburg & Ghalaieny, 2013: p. 49). Until now only a small part of all contaminated areas in Iraq and the Kurdistan region could be identified. 300 of them had been cataloged and listed in urgent need of redevelopment. 42 out of the 300 were declared most contaminated areas of Iraq. One of them is Halabja, a KRI governorate (since 2014) and border town to Iran, who’s population was gassed in 1988 by the then Saddam Hussein regime.¹²⁴ In surveys by local and regional Kurdish doctors a higher percentage of medical disorders (miscarriages, colon and other cancers, heart diseases, respiratory ailments, skin and eye problems, fertility and reproductive disorders) could be found in the area of Halabja. Increased rates of birth defects are also raising concerns that the chemical attacks in 1988 may have lasting genetic impacts on the Kurdish population. Reports also indicate that “*survivors of this particular attack have permanent injuries, including burns, and some exhibit symptoms of neurological damage, although this cannot yet be adequately confirmed*” (Crod-

¹²²New studies are published since 2011 on a variety of topics commissioned mainly by the Iraqi ministries of health, environment and science in Baghdad. Some of them were already introduced at an international conference 2011 at the Luleå University of Technology in Sweden, including: *Assessing the Impact of the Gulf War and Economic Sanctions*, 1999; Al-Taha, 1994; Al-Sadoon, Hassan, & Yacoub 2002; Al-Shammosy, 2002; Ala’Aldeen, 2005 & 1991; Al-Ansari & Knutsson, 2011: “*radioactive military wastes*”; Al-Ansari, 2013; Al-Ansari, Zakaria, Mustafa, Ahmad, Ghafour, & Knutsson, 2013; Al-Ansari, Knutsson, & Pusch, 2014; Al-Ansari, Pusch, Knutsson, & Al-Muqdad 2014; Al-Muqdad & Al-Ansari 2011a: “*contaminated areas*” & 2011b; Al-Taii, 2011, later also: Al-Hadithi et al., 2012: pp. 1-7: “*Birth defects*” or Al-Azzawi, 2017: “*Depleted Uranium and Radioactive Contamination in Iraq. An Overview*”; see also: idem 2013). Since 2011 relevant scientific studies are coordinated by an Iraqi NGO in Baghdad, the so called “*Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI)*”. Further reading (selection): Galbraith & Hollen, 1988; Cook-Deegan, et al., 1989; Ah-tisaari Report, 1991; EIR, 1991; HST, Harvard Study Team, 1991; Lee & Haines, 1991; Roberts, 1996; Garfield, 1999; McDiarmid et al., 2000; Nordhaus, 2002; Salih et al., 2009; Salih et al., 2015; Janulewicz et al., 2017; Parrish et al., 2017.

¹²³Pioneering research is currently done in the KRI notably by scientists of the Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies and Scientific Research (KISSR) and the Sulaimani University (UoS), Sulaimaniyah, Kurdistan Region Iraq.

¹²⁴The Saddam Hussein regime had gassed the population of Halabja on March 16, 1988, at the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Between 3500 and 5,000 Kurds were killed and another 7000 to 10,000 injured, most of them civilians (HRW, 2006; Hiltermann, 2007: pp. 160-166, 170-172, 195-197). A United Nations medical investigation concluded that mustard gas was used in the attack, along with unidentified nerve agents (HRW 1993). Saddam Hussein’s cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid (1941-2010), nicknamed “*Chemical Ali*”, commander of Iraqi forces in northern Iraq at the time, was convicted in June 2007 by an Iraqi court in Baghdad for orchestrating the 1988 gassing of Halabja’s Kurds, sentenced to death for crimes of “*genocide*” (HRW, 2006) and later hanged on 25 January 2010. On March 8, 2010 an Iraqi supreme court reversed an earlier decision by recognizing chemical weapons attacks on the Kurdish city of Halabja in 1988 as an act of genocide (UPI, Erbil, March 8, 2010: https://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/03/08/1988-Kurdish-massacre-labeled-genocide/UPI-93471268062566/ (accessed 02 June 2018)). See for armed conflict and environment the comprehensive discussion in Grunawalt, King, & McClain, 1996.

dy et al., 2002: p. 164). Both the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the KRG regional administration in Erbil affirm that they don't have the necessary financial resources available to clean up all repercussions of chemical and nuclear Gulf warfare in time. They appealed already several times for increased international help, which, however, is still not forthcoming in a sufficient amount. If it remains absent, the implication would be that a vast part of the Iraqi population, notably in the Kurdistan Region, could be faced with drastically limited health options in the future too including incalculable consequences.

10. Conclusions¹²⁵ on Future Options of Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran

1) Turkey and the Kurds:

Future options for the Kurds in Turkey currently depend almost exclusively on the one-man, autocratic agenda of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As long as he will be in power, Kurds can expect more or less the same treatment of his autocratic rule as to date, namely of confrontation, suppression, persecution, expulsion, invasion and inter-regional power mingling. His past moves for dialogue with representatives of the Kurds proved to be not genuine, highly suspicious and aimed at buying him time on his long way to a one-man-autocracy. EU, NATO and the U.S. will continue to tacitly tolerate his one-man-rule and will not take decisive action against him. However, even within this framework of an ongoing power-struggle in Turkey some crucial parameters appear to be stable and largely unalterable by all sides involved: Firstly, the Kurds emerged as an important democratic force in contemporary Turkey. They are here to stay, have to be reckoned with, will prevail as an integral part of a future Turkey and (as such,) cannot be suppressed any longer. Second, both autonomy and an independent state, remain unfeasibly unrealistic future options for the Kurds in Turkey, due to fact that any central power in Ankara will continue to deny them both. Also, the Kurds themselves, including the PKK, will not be able to enforce either aims through armed struggle. Thirdly, in reverse, no central power of Turkey, including Erdoğan's autocracy, will, in the foreseeable future, be able to either crush the PKK or its affiliates militarily once and for all. Rather, the PKK network will continue to critically influence future options of the Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, as well as a marginal part in Iran to a varying extend in each of these countries.

a) EU-Turkey integration of the Kurdish majority

Based on these parameters, Kurds seem to have only one realistic future option, although only feasible for a new post-Erdoğan era in Turkey: the continua-

¹²⁵The following conclusions were drawn up by the author in close cooperation and agreement with two valuably contributing scholars and dear friends: Omar Sheikmous M.A., veteran Kurdish Syrian scientist from Amude, who has been living in Sweden for decades now and who in the 1980s started, together with the author, to record the oral history of leading Kurdish personalities in their exile in England; Abdol-Hamid Hosseini M.A., veteran Kurdish expert on Iran from Mahabad, who acts as scientific assistant of the author at the Sulaimani University UoS, since his research assignment in 2012.

tion of Turkey's integration process into EU-Europe. This option exists already and remains on the negotiating table for all the people of the Turkish Republic, including notably the Kurds, since the vast majority of them live in Turkey. However, its outcome continues to be an open and highly disputed question. At the moment, full EU membership for Turkey seems unlikely, because some Union states threaten to veto it. Still, a special contracted status solution seems attainable. One of the most crucial unresolved topics in this regard is currently the international refugee crisis, which brought both sides already to their limits and the EU to the brink of collapse. In the case of any future EU-Turkey agreement, both sides would then be faced with the evermore difficult task of dealing with millions of refugees, this time inside and not, as to date, outside the EU's southeastern borders. Moreover, Europe as a union of sovereign national states, would inevitably have to be more closely involved in international efforts to stabilize Eurasia and work actively for a sustainable post-colonial order for the Middle East. As for national aspirations of Kurds, Europe would be, on the one hand, challenged to help finding a sustainable solution for the vast majority of the biggest non-state-nation of our times, the Kurds, and, on the other hand, they would also inherit another national independence movement in the southeast. Even so, terms like "Kurds" or "Kurdistan" are hardly ever mentioned in available official papers of the EU-Turkey negotiation process, which started in 2005, but will not close crucial chapters provisionally "until Turkey agrees to apply the Additional Protocol of the Ankara Association Agreement to Cyprus".¹²⁶ It is also worth mentioning, that currently the European Parliament indicates greater interest in the Kurdish question compared to the European Commission's attitude, which acts explicitly restrained, and that both have so far seemingly not developed any clear geostrategic vision for an intended EU-Eurasian national identity of the Kurds (in Turkey).

While, consequently, a huge gap still exists between future option and reality, the evolvement of a viable Eurasian EU-solution for the majority of the Kurds would undoubtedly be seen as a breakthrough that would also have important democratic impacts on Kurds in Syria, Iraq and Iran. To recall but a few targeted common aims: even if it is not yet the case, the democratically elected and legitimized representatives of the Kurds in Turkey, who continue fighting like other oppositional groups for their political survival and very existence, could at least in the future play an important role in the stagnant EU negotiation process and could directly bring in own Kurdish objectives. Moreover, the majority of Kurds too could become citizens of the European Union. Their regional interests would be safeguarded by a special advisory Assembly of European Regions. Their constitutional legal binding value system would be that one of the EU with the Eu-

¹²⁶European Commission:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/turkey_en; Additional Protocol, EUR-Lex:

[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:21970A1123\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:21970A1123(01)), both accessed May, 20, 2018.

ropean Court of Justice in Luxemburg as its highest independent legal authority. A separate, parallel (Turkish) Islamic version of the EU constitution would not be possible. Kurds would also have access to the biggest available funds for reconstruction of backyard regions like Anatolia, which could decisively improve their chances for a better live in a foreseeable future.

b) Stumbling block Erdoğan's autocracy¹²⁷: not necessarily the Turkish Republic as such

Right now, the EU-Turkey accession negotiations came to a (temporary) hold, mainly because the autocratic agenda of President Erdoğan proved to be incompatible with European democratic constitutional fundamentals. Additionally, Brussels's methods and procedures guarantee that they are calling the shots for future common relations and not the leaders of candidate countries. Furthermore, as the negotiations are dragging on, clear limits, or rather red lines, also emerged for Erdoğan's autocratic ambitions. Firstly, should he try to reintroduce capital punishment, which he threatened, but avoided repeatedly, Brussels would be obliged to break off the negotiations altogether, because the death penalty is incompatible with the "*Community acquis*" (or "*acquis communautaire*").¹²⁸ Also, the EU (together with other leading powers) will resume their policy of sitting the Erdoğan-regime out, hoping for a limitation of damages caused by it, bow to "*services*" to stop flows of refugees towards Europa, continue to pay royal financial contributions for that, as well as continuing to largely tolerate the ongoing oppression of the Kurds. Second, should Erdoğan introduce Islamic Sharia law, he would openly break with the secular constitutional pillar of Mustafa Kemal's modern Turkish Republic, which could also lead to civil war and trigger an open rebellion of the armed forces, who still consider themselves as custodian of Atatürk's secular Republican legacy. Thirdly, since the survival of Erdoğan's autocracy will also mainly depend on Turkey's economic future performance, red lines for its viability are emerging in this regard to the following: The last available economic data¹²⁹ indicates a negative outlook of a currently downgraded status as a "*non-investment grade speculative*" country (Moody's, S & P, Fitch) and affirmed warnings of a "*hard landing*" in the future. The key assessment being that the longer Erdoğan's autocracy lasts and it progressively interferes into the economy and the independent monetary system, the more foreign investors shy away, capital flight increases and Turkey is faced with ever growing problems of mounting government debts, which are increasingly (expensive for-

¹²⁷Cf. for instance interviews of Hamit Bozarslan with Walter Friedl, *Kurier*, 13.01.2017:

<https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/tuerkei-steht-nahe-am-buergerkrieg/240.847.283> or Noura Maan, *Der Standard*, 14.01.2017:

<http://derstandard.at/2000050705670/In-der-Tuerkei-wird-Oesterreichs-Aussenminister-gehasst> (both accessed 14 January 2017).

¹²⁸Definition: <http://eurovoc.europa.eu/drupal/?q=request&uri=http://eurovoc.europa.eu/5411>.

¹²⁹Cf.: *Fitch Rating's: Turkey—Rating Report (2018)*, published London on 13 July 2018; *REUTERS, Istanbul, 2018*: S&P cuts Turkey's rating deeper into "*junk*"; *Çetinkaya (2018)*. Macroeconomic Outlook and Monetary Policy in Turkey. Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey Governor's report, 2018 Spring Meeting of the IMF and the World Bank Group, April 2018 Washington DC.

eign) credit financed.

c) Mustafa Kemal's Historic Promises to Kurds

The aim to grant Kurds equal treatment and some form of regional autonomy has also important original Turkish republican roots, even if such efforts were finally never implemented and failed for reasons accountable to all sides (details are explained elsewhere: [Hennerbichler, 2004: pp. 424-425, 480-481](#)). Both, at the congresses of Erzerum (July 23, to August 6, 1919) and at Sivas (September 4-13, 1919), the pioneering Turkish Republicans promised Kurds self-determination within the new common Turkish state, indicating some form of decentralization and cultural autonomy. Moreover, at the opening ceremony of the newly founded Turkish Grand National Assembly on April 23, 1920, in Ankara, a number of Kurdish representatives participated and were welcomed as “deputies Kurdistan’s”. Mustafa Kamal was elected as its chairman and spoke in his inaugural address of two people of the new Turkish Republic, Turks and Kurds. He promised all people, including notably the Kurds, a new, modern Turkish Republican state, where Kurds would also be granted equal rights and treatment. The Kurds would be equally respected, like brothers. Therefore, it can be argued, with solid historical reasoning, that Kurds too represented an integral part of Mustafa Kemal's republican heritage, notably in its early founding years and stages, even though Kurds were later brutally suppressed, persecuted and stripped of legitimate rights in Turkey. Kurds not only helped Mustafa Kemal and his Republican movement decisively reconquering the fading Ottoman Empire from the East, they also participated in the foundation of the new Republic, addressed as equal partners. For that reason, any feasible future EU-Turkey agreement could be also soundly seen within the pioneering beginnings of Mustafa Kemal's multi-ethnic Republican heritage, and certainly not against it altogether, as repeatedly claimed by President Erdoğan and others.

2) Syria and Kurds:

a) PKK & PYD

Success or failure of an intended Eurasian EU-Turkey solution for the vast majority of Kurds will in the future mainly depend, as already indicated, on the credible involvement of their democratically elected representatives, and last but not least, on the inter-regional Kurdish independence movement “Kurdistan Worker's Party” PKK and its affiliates like the “*Democratic Union Party*” PYD in Syria. Although, it would not be possible within the limited space of this study to outline a contemporary history of the PKK and the PYD, we will briefly come to the point that both continue to play a significant role in influencing future options of the Kurds, not only in Turkey, but also in Syria. In a nutshell: After the implosion of the Soviet communist model at the beginning of the 1990s, the PKK repositioned itself as far-left movement. Previously, they adhered to some form of muddled Marxism-Leninism ([Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012](#); [Sheikhmous, 2013](#), see also his assessment of 1992; [Zisser, 2014](#); [Bonsey, 2017](#); [Leezenberg, 2016](#); [Černý, 2018](#)). Then under the influence of a little known American politi-

cal theorist, Murray Bookchin,¹³⁰ the PKK adapted his theory of a so called “*libertarian municipalism*” to their own version of local and decentralized governance among different peoples and ethnic groups in specific regions, which they called “*radical democracy*”, “*autonomous democracy*” or “*democratic confederalism*”. Since then they are attempting for some years now to implement this theoretical model in Kurdish dominated areas of northern Syria, called “*Rojava*” which they have turned it into an experiment of a political left laboratory embattled region. “*Rojava*” (Kurdish: *Rojavayê Kurdistanê*) stands for “*Western Kurdistan*”, and is administered by de facto autonomous “*Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS)*”, consisting of three self-governing cantons. This civil authority is politically and militarily dominated by two Kurdish formations, namely its (unilateral) armed forces of Kurdish “*Peshmergas*”, aka “*People’s Protection Units (YPG)*”, who control much of northern Syria. Their political wing is known as “*Democratic Union Party (PYD)*”. Their regional achievements are highly controversially rated. Ahmed Hamdi Akkaya (ex-PKK), scientifically supported by Joost Jongerden, explains the somewhat ideologically transformed PKK out of the so called “*Jacobin paradox*”, suggesting that out of the “*reign of terror*” executed by the French “*Jacobin*” revolutionaries finally evolved Western style democracy in Europe (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012: p. 5). Similarly, out of a “*reinvented*” former militant PKK would have emerged “*Rojava*” as a “*truly*” regional “*radical democracy*” and as a pioneering future political Kurdish model (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012: pp. 5-8; Constitution of Rojava, 2016). While elements of a “*paradox*” could be accepted, we disagree with the attempt to portrait the “*Rojava*” political laboratory experiment as a definitely successful transformation of a militant PKK past to a modern Kurdish Western style democratic model. We argue that neither the PKK nor the “*Rojava*” PYD experiment can be applied to a “*Jacobin paradox*,”¹³¹ mainly for the following

¹³⁰Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), American left political theorist and pioneer in the ecology movement, who developed the concept of social ecology and urban planning within anarchist, libertarian socialist and ecological ideas. Bookchin was originally a communist, then an anarchist. He became disillusioned with that as well and developed his own theory of regional grassroot democracy by replacing the failed idea of class struggle with “*libertarian municipalism*”, which could never be imposed from above or would cease to exist the moment it tried to do so.

¹³¹The term “*Jacobins*” is multi-layered used in historiography: formally, “*Jacobins*” were members of political club (the most famous one out of some 8000 around 1793) during the French Revolution. But this club as such had never got hold of power and did not rule France directly. Rather, the club was heterogenous, and only some of its prominent members who otherwise belonged to different dominant loosely knit parliamentarian factions, notably the “*Mountains*” and the “*Girondins*”, who eventually emerged as the most influential one, and who perpetrated a reign of terror 1792/93-1794. It ended on July 28, 1794, when the leader of the “*Mountains*”, Maximilien de Robespierre, was guillotined without trial in the Place de la Révolution, aged 36. In this sense the term “*Jacobins*” was used as mixed label under the temporarily prevailing banner of the “*Mountains*”. In other terminological use, which cannot be explained here in further detail, “*Jacobins*” are used for instance in a pejorative sense for radical, left-wing revolutionary politics in general, and also as supporters of a strong centralized state advocating massive government intervention to transform society. Further reading (selection): Soboul, 1975: pp. 313-416 & 1977: pp. 87-92; Boshier, 1988: pp. 191-202 (8.II: The Jacobin Dictatorship); Kennedy, 2000: p. 53 et seqq. (constitutional questions); Tackett, 2006, in Kates G., Ed. 2006²: The French Revolution: recent debates and new controversies (Jacobins: pp. 149-150, union of three orders: p. 139); see also in: The American Historical Review, vol. 94, no. 2 (April 1989): 271-301 Further reading war and revolution: Conge, 2000.

reasons:

b) PKK & “*Jacobins*”

Firstly, the “*Jacobins*”, as (the most influential) political club, directly never got hold of central power and did not rule France. Also, it would be historically problematic to compare the networks of political clubs (mainly) of deputies during the French Revolution with the Kurdish urban and mountain guerilla movement PKK of our times. Second, the three cantons of “*Rojava*” were not liberated by military struggle but were a result of an agreement with the Assad regime and were simply turned over to the Syrian Kurds. Continued governmental presence was obvious in some areas like Qamichlie and Hassakah. Thirdly, because the outcome of “*Rojava*’s” de facto regional autonomy is not a Western style democracy and can therefore not be interpreted as “paradox” from terror to true democratic majority rule. Rather, the real “*paradox*” was/is that in contrast of claims to the contrary the PKK leadership never accepted Syrian Kurdish “*Rojava*” grassroot democracy like the Swiss model, where majority decisions from local to national levels are automatically binding for the ruling political elites as well, but in reality constantly intervened and made sure that the cantonal DFNS administration was/is obeying its instructions and not the other way round, as numerous eyewitness accounts available to the authors of these findings confirm. According to Omar Sheikhmous, “*it has failed miserably, despite the infatuation of some leftist and Green groups with their movement.*” “*PKK and PYD are neither communist organizations nor Democratic Socialists*”, he notes and recognizes that they show “*some elements of democracy, egalitarianism, gender equality and secularism*”, but concludes that “*their thinking and methods are still Stalinist and totalitarian*” and that “*they are definitely not a Western Style Democracy*”. “*There is a lot of dissatisfaction with PYD rule among the Kurds in Syria*”, Sheikhmous explains, “*but what has helped them is that they have protected the Kurds from DA’ESH*”. All in all, he interprets the “*Rojava*” laboratory experiment as a renewed example for the historically endemic paradox among Kurds which he labels as “*united in disunity*”.

As a result, the future options for Syrian Kurds seem limited and certainly not optimized.¹³² Although, they could prove that they are outstandingly able fighters against ISIS and credible as well as reliable partners of the West in stabilizing Syria, they (PYD, YPG and PKK alike) could not (yet) demonstrate that they would be capable of Western style democracy. Their Stalinist and totalitarian thinking and methods will not be internationally accepted and will not be seen as breakthrough future options, but rather as autocratic political retro-backlash for the Syrian Kurds. Still, some hopes could be pinned on continued promises by the Assad regime and Russia to grant Syrian Kurds some form of ultimate autonomy in an intended new post-war order for Syria. And also, the ongoing international negotiations for a new sustainable Syrian constitution indicate to some degree readiness to incorporate elements of federalism and some forms of

¹³²Cf.: Bonsey (2017). Will the Americans Abandon Us? International Crisis Group Commentary, Middle East & North Africa.

regional self-government for minorities like the Kurds. However, if the Kurds continue to fail to convince international partners that they are indeed capable of Western style democracy and committed to democratic majority rule they will risk in an ever-changing future to be again used as military proxies, just like they were in the past, but not effectively supported as reliable political partner for the democratization of Eurasia and the Middle East. Their outlook in Syria therefore continues difficult to predict, but mainly doubtful and uncertain. As far as an intended EU-Turkey-integration of the majority of the Kurds is concerned, both future options appear feasible: a non-violent democratic reaction of the PKK similar to European independence movements, such as the Catalans, Scots, Irish or the Basques, respectively like previous militant ones as the Basque ETA or the Irish IRA. Yet, their ultimate attitude towards Eurasian EU-Turkey integration is not predictable. Finally, and in any case, the PKK and their affiliates too will continue like all other Kurdish movements of our time to follow a political agenda by democratically legitimate means, both of an independent Kurdish state and a greater Kurdistan comprising majority habitats of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria in some indefinite future.

3) Iran and Kurds

a) Ghassemlou - Kreisky

One of the first Kurdish leaders who believed in a European promoted EU-Turkey integration solution for the Kurds as the most feasible and realistic one for them in the near future was the late chairman of the KDP-Iran, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou (1930-1989). He developed a long-standing personal relationship with Austria's Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky (1911-1990) since the early 1980s. One day in 1981-1982 he telephoned Kreisky in Vienna, Ghassemlou told some twenty KDP-Iran representatives in Europe at a leadership meeting in Paris¹³³ in July 1982. Kreisky invited him to come to Vienna and attend a traditional birthday party at his residence in the Armbrustergasse in the 19th district of the Austrian capital. There Kreisky encouraged him to declare an independent Kurdish state in Iran and informed him that he had already several talks with Western politicians like Philippe Gonzales in Spain or Olof Palme in Sweden and that they would be ready to recognize an Iranian Kurdish state. Austria too would acknowledge it and also the Socialist International movement whose Vice-President Kreisky was 1967-1989. He further indicated that Bulgaria and some Arab states like Iraq and Jordan would as well be prepared to recognize a Kurdish state in NW Iran. All in all, Bruno Kreisky told Ghassemlou that in 1981-1982 some six countries and the Socialist International showed readiness to acknowledge an independent Iranian Kurdistan. Ghassemlou answered Kreisky, although he and the Kurdish people would deeply appreciate his diplomatic initiative but regretted to decline it because such an Iranian Kurdish state would be too small to survive, completely isolated and would lack vital economic and military basics. Even so, Ghassemlou added, he would fully agree with Kreisky that

¹³³Eyewitness account Abdol-Hamid Hosseini 1982-1985.

a democratic European backed future national solution for the Kurds had good prospects. Later, Ghassemlou used to validate efforts of KDP-Iran representatives for closer Kurdish-European cooperation on a regular basis. At another leadership meeting in June 1985 again in Paris he said he felt himself vindicated by numerous encounters with Western statesmen that the EU integration process of Turkey meant in “*Realpolitik*” that in this regard the Kurds had practically arrived at the doorsteps of Europe. Thus, the European member states would be in a commanding position to get Turkey finally consenting to concede the Kurds equal status and treatment, Ghassemlou pointed out. He expressed optimism that the Kurds could be granted legitimate rights in way of such a European dominated solution and would also be ultimately recognized diplomatically by the West. He specifically instructed the KDP-Iran representatives to intensify their work for such a European future option for the (Iranian) Kurds.

b) Current situation Iran and Kurds:

In Iran are currently some eight Kurdish liberation movements active.¹³⁴ The traditional KDP-Iran split into two groups, one is closer to the KDP-Iraq led by the Barzanis and the other by the PUK. The “*Komala*” (Society/Community) developed three different organizations: one under the leadership of Ibrahim Alizadeh forms part of the Iranian communists and is regarded as their Kurdish wing. A second one is headed by Abdolla Mohtady and a third by Omar Elkhanizadeh. All three “*Komala*” groups are close to the PUK and have military bases in Sulaimaniyah and surroundings in the KRI. Two more Iranian Kurdish movements are near to the PKK: “*Kodar*” (“*Komalgay Demokrat w Azadi Rojhalaty Kurdistan*”, *Democratic and Free Society of Eastern Kurdistan*) and “*PJAK*” (“*Parti Jianawey Kurd*”, *Kurdistan Free Life Party*). “*Kodar*” is regarded as main ally of the PKK. Both “*Kodar*” and “*PJAK*” published recently a joint statement that they follow the political line of PKK. In addition exists “*Sazmany Khabat*” (*Revolutionary Organization*), an armed organization founded already in 1979 by Sheikh Jalal Hosseini, the brother of Sheikh Ezzedin Hosseini (1922-2011), the late Sunni spiritual leader of the Iranian Kurds. There is also another group who calls itself “*PAK*” (“*Parti Azadi Kurdistan*”, *Party Freedom for Kurdistan*), headed by Hossein Yazdanpanah. “*PAK*” is under the influence of the Barzani led KDP-Iraq and aims at an independent Kurdistan. All of these Iranian Kurdish groups command some estimated 15,000 “*Peshmerga*”. Three of them (KDP-Iran close to the Barzani KDP-Iraq, the “*Komala*” Iranian communists under Ibrahim Alizadeh and the “*Komala*” led by Omar Elkhanizadeh close to the PUK) have good contacts to Iranian opposition groups abroad (*People’s Mujahedin* and *Monarchists*), mainly in the U.S and France, meet on a regular basis and hope for help from the administration of President Donald Trump. All in all, the fractured Iranian Kurdish opposition continues neither to be in any position to endanger the Shiite regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Teheran nor to overthrow it. Future options of the Iranian Kurds are therefore, more or less a continuation of the status quo, where neither meaningful political auton-

¹³⁴Compiled by Abdol-Hamid Hosseini as of 24 July 2018.

omy nor an independent state will be feasible.

However, there are currently renewed and increasing protest movements in Iran. They have rather the character of social unrests than of an open rebellion and will not present the clerical Shia autocracy with any grave danger of falling in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, they are mountingly showing a common denominator in which broad layers of societies see themselves as future generation of losers, ideologically overlapping from ultra-conservative mullahs in the pilgrimage site of Mashad in the north-east, to traditional pro-western liberal reform strongholds in Teheran, and to nationally shaped freedom movements, especially of the Kurds in the northwest. They express growing determination to fight against what is viewed by them as ever deteriorating living conditions at their expense. First and foremost, they want to thwart Shia clerical elites in Iran from continuing to invest primarily in massive military rearmament (including a nuclear option) and in the export of militant Shia missions abroad, and thus depriving millions of Iranians of opportunities to significantly improve their living standards.

11. Latest Trends

Global Power Vacuum: Middle East rifts are widening amid a global power vacuum (Bremmer, 2017). The lack of clear uncontested international leadership has a destabilizing impact most evident in Middle East: more uncertainty, more assertive behavior, more lines crossed, rising fears that no one has the power to contain the risk of new forms of Middle East conflict. Multiple Middle Eastern disputes are threatening to spill out of control.

USA: The U.S. politics towards the Kurds remain largely consistent. This is also true for the administration of President Donald Trump. Washington is against a Kurdish state (in Iraq), supports regional Kurdish autonomy within the existing borders of sovereign states, promotes Kurdish democracy, recognizes their effective fight against IS terror groups and did (so far) not dump the Syrian Kurds either in their struggle for legitimate rights. However, the Trump administration continues to thin out U.S. engagement in the Middle East up to an extent that, on the one hand, it appears to grant Middle Eastern partners near *carte-blanche* (Dorsey, 2018a & 2018b) but diminishes their ability to rely on the U.S. and raise to question whether a newly emerging alliance of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE would be capable of stabilizing the Middle East and forcing upon a sustainable post-colonial future order. President Trump's mercurial unpredictability makes him, on the other hand, equally unreliable in the eyes of Middle East partners raising doubts whether the U.S. would continue to honor for instance commitments of substantially helping to clear up still immense Gulf war destruction particularly in Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region.

Russia: The Kremlin leadership under President Vladimir Putin continues to try to step in and fill a kind of a vacuum where no regional power manages to dominate the region and force upon his version of a new order. Russia is currently pursuing an intensified Middle East engagement, which primarily relies

on cooperation with central powers such as Baghdad and Damascus and at the same time promises to secure autonomy for the Kurds both in Iraq and in Syria. In the Kurdistan Region Iraq, Russia is currently pursuing an emphatically accommodating stance based on massive regional economic investment. Whether this could for the first time also lead to the formation of a separate Kurdish policy by the Kremlin seems to be open. According to Ruslan Mamedov, Moscow is in the process of “*shaping its ‘Kurdish policy’*”. This includes the possibility of forming a new Kurdish state, but only “*in agreement with all parties concerned*” (Iddon, 2017; Mamedov, 2017: RIAC, 6 Oct. 2017).

Iran: The Islamic Republic of Iran will continue undeterred its efforts to expand its strategic network of pro-Iranian Shia militias across the Middle East and expand territorial spheres of influence all over Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, and in Syria and Lebanon, not only up to the borders of Israel, but also into (Eastern) Mediterranean areas.

Israel: In geostrategic terms, Israel will not be able for the foreseeable future to seriously endanger and strategically undermine the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran without the help and military aid of United States (which seems not immediately forthcoming). This holds true also for the announced plans to severely destabilize Iran by massively arming the Kurds with state-of-the-art modern weapons, which basically remains to be seen, at any rate for the time being. Efforts to build a new, geostrategic power alliance Israel, Saudi Arabia, GCR Gulf States, (France?), Egypt and Kurds to check the unabated growing influence of the Iran over the Middle East and Eurasia are currently largely vague and cannot be judged conclusively.

Iraq: Constitutional Crisis: The 2005 federal constitution of Iraq de facto provides the one and only peaceful and democratic solution for a sustainable compromise regarding the final status of Kirkuk and other “*disputed territories*”:¹³⁵ via direct negotiations between Kurds and Baghdad. Both sides should also accept international mediators. UNAMI should be given a new mandate and be able to continue its already successful mission with final recommendations.¹³⁶ The options remain that either the Kurds and Baghdad will find a final, sustainable compromise on this basis, or the confrontation will continue to be prolonged and threaten to push Iraq and the Kurdistan Region back to war at any time. The outcome is still open and unpredictable.

Latest elections on May, 12, 2018: Kurds interpret the outcome of this latest election cautiously positive. The “*Sairoon*” (Forward) movement headed by prominent Shi’ite cleric nationalist leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, in cooperation with the Iraqi Communist Party, emerged as the strongest single Iraqi political al-

¹³⁵IRIS 2017: 14: “*Kirkuk will be the catalyst for conflict between the Kurds and the central government*”. See for latest developments: Knights & Wahab, 2018.

¹³⁶See too: ICG, 2017: p. 1: “*the only sensible way forward is a return to UN-led negotiations, supported by the U.S., EU, Iran and Turkey*”; 15: “*The objective should be to reach a deal on the disputed territories and oil revenue-sharing, while also supporting improved governance and political participation in both Baghdad and Erbil. Such an outcome would provide the two sides with a face-saving solution.*”

liance. This is seen as indication for an improved dialogue of Iraqi national reconciliation. It was also noted with interest that Muqtada al-Sadr spoke in favor of the return of the Jews who were evicted from the country half a century ago. “*If their loyalty was to Iraq, they are welcome*”, Sadr said.¹³⁷

Kurdistan Region Iraq: The KRI is not a democracy and will not become one in the foreseeable future. Despite endemic corruption, nepotism, mismanagement and notorious reform jams, the Kurdistan region of Iraq remains one of the most stable regions in the Middle East and Eurasia, even in times of crisis and war. It has at least begun a democratization process, although not completed. Above all, her emphatically reform-oriented youth has been fighting for years for genuine democracy, a functioning constitutional state, an independent judiciary and administration, a socially just society, and women’s rights and press freedom modeled on Europe and the West. Furthermore, new parties have also emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan, which are pursuing political programs with social and value systems comparable to those in Europe. Ultimately, the great goal for the vast majority of Kurds is to one day lead a life such as the people of Europe.

IS: Terrorist groups of the so-called IS (Islamic State) are neither dead nor close to it. They will continue to act in a constantly waxing and waning network alliance of various proxy-militias. They will be continuously used both by dominant international and regional powers forcing upon a post-colonial reorganization of the Middle East. Therefore, proxy-wars will further on determine the future of battered states fighting for their very survival like Iraq and Syria. Until now, Kurds have played a credible and efficient role in fighting IS terrorist groups in Iraq as well as in Syria, even with limited weaponry. If the Iraqi Kurds continue their impoverishment, it would be sound to assume that Kurds could also join proxy-militias again.¹³⁸ Ultimately, a policy to humiliate and impoverish Kurds could radicalize them too and trigger new refugee flows towards Europe.¹³⁹

Post-colonial reorganization of the Middle East: A breakthrough to such a reorganization is still not in sight. Supremacy interests continue to be primarily argued nationally and, at least in the cases of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, they are also justified on religious grounds. Essentially, however, all are within existing historical framework conditions. For example, most of the protagonists insist on the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs of other countries, introduced in 1648 in the Westphalian Peace of Münster and Osnabrück, which ended the Thirty Years War and established a new order for Europe, wherefrom the priesthood (Pope) turned out as loser and the secular politicians (princes) emerged as winners. The colonial rearrangement of the Middle East by British, French and later also Americans, which was based on segmentation initiated by

¹³⁷<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/06/iraqi-jewish-muqtada-sadr.html> (acc. 11 June 2018).

¹³⁸Cf. IRIS, 2017: p. 12, 15, 27.

¹³⁹Avraham, 2017: “*the only way to prevent an additional flow of refugees to Europe is to grant them a safe haven in the Middle East located in Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan.*”

the so-called Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between London and Paris, now shows increasingly eroding borders, but not yet their final total collapse. In the case of Iraq and Syria, neither their territorial integrity nor national sovereignty seems to be finally guaranteed. The development oscillates between principles (such as autonomy, state formation, plebiscites), as agreed in the never-entered peace of Sèvres in 1920, and a move away from the borders that were established in the Sykes-Picot agreement but are still far from a possible consensus on a future, sustainable, post-colonial reorganization of the Middle East. Religion continues to be widely misused for power-maximization, however, seems not capable of winning a majority in already epic efforts for a post-colonial rearrangement of Eurasia and the Middle East. The future looks dramatically indefinite.

Role of Turkey and Iran: As far as the continuously dominating northern and northeastern neighbors of the Kurdistan Region Iraq are concerned, it seems sound to assess that in geostrategic terms, “*Realpolitik*” effectuated into conflicting proxy-systems on the ground and guided from abroad would also continue in the Kurdistan Region Iraq. Whereby Iran would further intensify supremacy advances in Iraq and the Middle East as far as the Mediterranean and risk undeterred anew global confrontation with western and eastern powers alike. In this regard, Israel will intensify military actions to draw “*red lines*” for Iran’s influence in Syria. Turkey would try to make up for its role as a junior partner of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East. Turkish policy would seem to be: on the one hand banking on a continuation of the battered central powers in Baghdad and in Damascus and further trying to influence their power composition by steadily destabilizing them, and on the other to raise the stakes beyond single-state control by pushing for comprehensive military incursions into territories of its southern neighbors Syria and Iraq, and systematically attempt to occupy foreign border areas from the Mediterranean to the Zagros, even against mounting international condemnation and growing warnings of hazardously escalating Middle East tensions.

Values System: In the future, the fight for the reorganization of the Middle East will ultimately not be decided by weapons, but in the minds of the people. Kurds play an important role in the long-term struggle for value systems of future generations in the Middle East and Eurasia. At the moment, all Kurdish societies have a clear loss of confidence in leading Western powers and their values system. Kurds are accusing them of tolerating and passively watching as Kurds are brutally crushed by their weapons, and where fighting in northern Syria also show evidence of a new genocide.¹⁴⁰ They also see fundamental global humanitarian rights like the international law to seek asylum systematically eroded, questioned and challenged. If this loss of value and confidence continues, this could also drastically aggravate the Kurdish question and escalate consequences for the

¹⁴⁰Hiltermann & Fantappie, 2018: “*To make matters worse, the combination of Western abandonment and internal political dysfunction has left the Kurds in a more precarious position than ever.*” (See also: Hiltermann, 2016 & 2017).

entire Middle East further.¹⁴¹ If, on the other hand, it were possible to keep the Kurds on the path of values and democracy, this could make an important contribution to stabilizing the Middle East and Eurasia.

War & Peace: Finally, analysts expect either a continuation of the status quo on the Kurdish issue, a pessimistic horror scenario with new wars,¹⁴² or, in the optimistic case, negotiation and compromise solutions. The outcome is open but leans infinitely more in the direction of renewed military confrontation than peace.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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¹⁴¹Avraham, 2017: "If the enemies of the Kurds succeed in this, it will be a major blow not only to Kurdish national aspirations but also to the struggle against Iranian aggression in the Middle East, the war against radical Islam and anyone who supports democracy, human rights, women's rights and minority rights."

¹⁴²Kane, 2011: 3: "The greatest potential threat to Iraq's stability is not extremist groups but the prospect of Arab Kurdish conflict over oil-rich Kirkuk and other disputed territories." Cafarella, Kassim, & Malik, 2017: "The attack against Kurdish forces in Kirkuk could lead to full-sale war between the KRG and government of Iraq.": *The "War After Isis" Begins in Iraq*. Institute for the Study of War, 15.10.2017: <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/war-after-isis-begins-iraq> (accessed 28 February 2018).

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Abbreviations

AUIS: American University of Iraq Sulaimani
DA'ESH: State Islamic of Iraq and the Levant
GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council
ICG: International Crisis Group Middle East
IDP: Internally Displaced Person
INSS: *Institute for National Security Studies*
IPCC: Iraq Property Claims Commission
IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRIS: Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques
IRIS: Institute of Regional and International Studies
IS: Islamic State
ISF: Iraqi Security Forces
ISIL: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP-I: Kurdistan Democratic Party Iraq
KDP-Ir: Kurdistan Democratic Party Iran
KGB: Committee for State Security (Ex-USSR, 1954-1991)
KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI: Kurdistan Region Iraq
MERI: Middle East Research Institute
NGO: Non-Government Organization
NKVD: People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party
PM: Prime Minister
PMF: Popular Mobilization Forces
PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD: Democratic Union Party
RAND: RAND Corporation (Research and Development)
RIAC: Russian International Affairs Council
SSR: Soviet Socialist Republic
TAL: Transitional Administrative Law
UCDP: Uppsala Conflict Data Program
USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
UNAMI: United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNSC: United Nations Digital Library System
UNTC: United Nations Treaty Collection
UoS: University of Sulaimani
WWI: World War One
WWII: World War Two