

The Issue of Kurdish Sovereignty: Why a Kurdish State Developed from the Kurdish Regional Government is Impossible

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Abstract: *Scattered across Northern Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, the Kurds are the largest nation with a unique language, culture, religion, and identity without a state. Totalling over 28 million people in the Middle East, their requests for independence have been denied since the early 1900s when they were part of the Ottoman Empire. Centered in Erbil, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq has made the most progress towards independence and acts with almost full autonomy in Iraq. In 2017, the KRG held an official independence referendum to open dialogue about the possibility of a Kurdish state. Taken as an attack on Iraqi sovereignty and condemned by all parties, including the U.S., this act was seen as a threat to internally divide and dissolve Iraq. This paper analyzes the limiting factors of the KRI gaining an independent state. I have concluded that despite the Kurds being deserving of sovereignty, the future of a Kurdish state is unlikely as long as the current political conditions persist. If the KRI were to leave Iraq, Iraq would likely lose territorial integrity, struggle financially without Kurdish oil money, and have administrative holes from Kurdish officials leaving Baghdad. The KRG's current state of fragility will be crippling if the KRG cannot develop its infrastructure and economy. Additionally, the political divide and nepotism in the KRI would cause the newly minted state to fail before establishment as the PUK and the KDP would be unable to collaborate on nation-building, in addition to being too corrupt to serve Kurdish citizens. With the combination of internal and external pressures on Kurdistan, a Kurdish state will only be a possibility if the new state is strong enough to sustain the regional pressures. Where the KRG stands now, a Kurdish state would not be a stable addition to the Middle East.*

Keywords: *Kurdistan, Sovereignty, Independence Referendum, Iran, Kurdish Regional Government, Talabani, Barzani*

Introduction

Scattered across Northern Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran is a group called the Kurds. They are the largest nation of people with a unique language, culture, religion, and identity without a state. There are approximately 15 million Kurds in Turkey, 6.5 million in Iran, 5 million in Iraq, and 2 million in Syria. These numbers are not insignificant but regardless of their presence in the Middle Eastern Region, their requests for independence have been denied since the early 1900s.

Before World War I, the Kurds populated the Ottoman Empire. In 1920, when the Empire fell, the Treaty of Sèvres made accommodations for an independent state. However, in 1923 the Treaty of Lausanne created the borders of modern Turkey, absorbing any territory that would have been delegated to the Kurdish state. In the past century, the region (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria) has been accused of trying to “suppress the Kurds’ culture and restrict the use of the Kurdish Language,” thus rejuvenating the Kurdish desire for their own state.¹

The Kurdish region that has made the most progress towards independence is in Northern Iraq. Centered in Erbil, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) acts with almost full autonomy under the Iraqi government operating out of Baghdad. In 2014, the KRG took control of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk in Northern Iraq that provided the KRG its economic baseline.² Since the overthrow of Hussein, the Kurds have worked diligently to maintain control of their territory.³ In many ways, the KRG maintains the symbolism of an independent state: they have a Kurdish national flag, national anthem, the KRG controlled Peshmerga forces, an international airport into the Kurdish region, an independent education system, and a Kurdish passport stamp.⁴

In 2017, the KRG enacted an official independence referendum with the intention of opening dialogue between Erbil and Baghdad about the possibility of a modern Kurdish State. This act was taken as an attack on Iraqi sovereignty and condemned by all parties, including the

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¹ “Why Kurds are losing hope of having their own state,” *The Economist*, (2021), <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2021/04/13/why-kurds-are-losing-hope-of-having-their-own-state>.

² Ömer Taşpınar, “ISIS and the false dawn of Kurdish statehood,” *Brookings*, (December 2019), <http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/13/isis-and-the-false-dawn-of-kurdish-statehood/>.

³ Alireza Nader, Larry Hanauer, Brenna Allen, and Ali G. Scotten, “Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan,” *RAND Corporation*, (2016), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1021550.pdf>.

⁴ Michael Gunter, “Unrecognized De Facto States in World Politics: The Kurds,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20 (2): 161-178, (2014), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24590980.pdf>.

United States, for its rash action and implied threat to Iraq. The main concern was that it would internally divide and dissolve Iraq into a fragmented state. In response to the referendum, President Barack Obama said that the US is “committed to the united, federal, and democratic Iraq.”⁵ In the Middle East, the referendum was seen “as a challenge to Arab patrimony and [the consideration of] a federal state for the Iraqi Kurds within Iraq as a prelude to secession.”⁶ Iraq interpreted the referendum as a declaration of independence and responded by blocking the airspace above Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as capturing one third of the Kurds’ territory, including Kirkuk.⁷

My aim for this paper is to enumerate the limiting factors to the KRG’s plan to achieve a sovereign state. The Kurds have been subjected to oppression and genocide since the Ottoman Empire ended and are deserving of their own state where they can live without fear of persecution. However, as Iraq is dependent on the KRG for oil revenue and for the minimal political support that the Kurds provide, the international community would not support their succession from Iraq. The possibility of negative repercussions that would affect the region's stability is too great a risk.

Additionally, within the KRG the two dominant political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are wrought with corruption, nepotism, and permeating animosity and distrust between the platforms. The KRG is therefore an unstable governing authority and incapable of managing a sovereign state. If the Iraqi Kurds were to form a state, it would not include the Kurds in Turkey, Syria or Iran. This

⁵ Yoosef Abbas Zadeh and Sherko Kirmanj, “The Para-Diplomacy of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and the Kurdish Statehood Enterprise,” *Middle East Journal* 71 (4): 587-606, (2017), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/90016497.pdf>.

⁶ Gunter, “Unrecognized De Facto States in World Politics: The Kurds,” 161-178.

⁷ *The Economist*, “Why Kurds.”

transnational disunity has been cultivated through the KRG electing to move forward with independence that does not include other Kurdish parties, meanwhile forming alliances that actively damage other Kurdish actors. The KRG would need the support of the majority Kurdish population in the Middle East to succeed with its sovereign ambitions; however, this is support that the KRG does not have. Without this support, the KRG is susceptible to manipulation from external actors which would only increase if a new state was created and in need of support.

For these reasons, I argue against the creation of an independent Kurdistan, at this time, formed from what is now the Kurdish Region of Iraq and led by the Kurdish Regional Government. Through the study of the Kurdish struggle and the failing factors of the Iraqi Kurds separatist movement, other separatist nations can be evaluated and potentially avoid the obstacles that the KRG faces. Middle Eastern politics permeate all international politics and it is in the favor of all to maintain a stable region as much as possible. Although the historical implications in the Kurdish issue are great, the future of sovereignty is in the Kurds hands, and can be achieved if fundamental changes are made to the Iraqi Kurdish independence movement.

History of the Kurdish Struggle

Turkish Kurds

Before analysis of the current Kurdish political field can be done, the history of the Kurds across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran must be taken into consideration for why the Kurds are entitled to their own state. Turkey has been a flagrant oppressor of the Kurdish people from the 20th century into the 21st. What has been referred to as the “Kurdish Problem” is the presence of a Kurdish population in Turkey, despite Turkish officials denying recognition and liberties to the Kurdish people.⁸ With the establishment of the Turkish State in the early 1920s, the government

⁸ Baris Ünlü, “The Kurdish Struggle and the Crisis of the Turkishness Contract,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 397–405, (2016), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0191453715625715>.

refused to acknowledge the existence of the Kurdish nation within its borders. The official policy was “to downplay the existence of the Kurdish people” by assimilating all Kurds into a Turkish mold. The Turks persisted in the idea that the Turkish Kurds were descendants of a pure Turkish race and were ethnically “Mountain Turks.”⁹ During the 1920s Kurdish Uprising, Turkish Lieutenant Ismet Ionu, reiterated Turkey’s oppressive policies saying, “Only the Turkish nation is entitled to claim ethnic and national rights in this country. No other element has any such right.”¹⁰

The “Turkishness Contract” emerged during 1924-1925 as an amendment to the Post-Ottoman Empire “Muslimness Contract,” which posited that any person had to be Muslim to have rights in Turkey. The contract was modified to require all Muslims in Turkey to “be Turkish or become Turkish in order to enjoy the privileges of the contract,” and to ban the act of “produc[ing] knowledge or to pursue politics with regard to the Kurds who resisted the process of Turkification.”¹¹ The “Turkishness Contract” specifically targeted the ethnic Kurdish minority with the intent to oppress the group until the “Kurdish Problem” was solved.

Over the next six decades, Turkey would ban the Kurdish language and prevent Kurds from assembling in an attempt to restrict the Kurdish desire for autonomy.¹² It was not until 1970 when the Turkish Workers Party (TWP), a leftist Turkish political party, stated that “there is a Kurdish people in the East of Turkey” that the Kurds were ever officially recognized as an ethnicity in Turkey.¹³ With the “Kurdish Problem” of Kurdish nationalism increasing during the 1960s, Prime Minister of Turkey Nihat Erim announced in 1971 that “Kurdish Nationalism has

⁹ Michael M. Gunter, “The Kurdish Problem in Turkey,” *Middle East Journal* 42, no. 3 (July 1, 1988), 389–406, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.4327776&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹⁰ Gunter, “The Kurdish Problem in Turkey,” 389–406.

¹¹ Ünlü, “The Kurdish Struggle and the Crisis of the Turkishness Contract,” 397–405.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gunter, “The Kurdish Problem in Turkey,” 389–406.

joined left and right political extremism to threaten Turkey's government," thus villainizing all Turkish Kurds.¹⁴ All Kurdish activists were labeled "alleged terrorists" and were subject to spontaneous arrests and inhumane detainment. Amnesty International concluded that during this time, those apprehended were "subjected to torture and, in some cases, the ordeal ends in death."¹⁵

As a response to this oppression, the Kurdish Workers Party, or the PKK, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s with the goal of establishing greater Kurdistan with all Kurds over Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.¹⁶ The radical PKK used violent tactics against the Turkish government, much to the resentment of the majority of Turkish Kurds who viewed the party as "brutal, reckless, and irresponsible."¹⁷ Largely considered a guerilla group and currently on the United States current list of known terrorist groups, the PKK would form armed gangs, use crime to finance the organization, and take over territory in Southeastern Turkey through militant force.¹⁸ On the Turkish-Iraqi border, PKK militants would try to "foment Kurdish nationalism. They stole money, food, and other supplies and attacked Turkish trucks."¹⁹ In 1981, Turkey imprisoned 2,000 PKK members in a military crackdown. Subsequently, in August of 1986 and March 1987, Turkey formally struck against the PKK after observing 12,000 PKK guerilla fighters assembled on the Turkish-Iraqi border. These strikes started the ongoing war between the Turks and the PKK which is still present today in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.²⁰

¹⁴ Gunter, "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey," 389–406.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ünlü, "The Kurdish Struggle and the Crisis of the Turkishness Contract," 397–405.

¹⁷ Gunter, "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey," 389–406.

¹⁸ Mehmet Alaca and Bilgay Duman, "Turkey and the Kurdish Factor in the Middle East," *GMFUS*, The German Marshall Fund of The United States, 13 May 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkey-and-kurdish-factor-middle-east>.

¹⁹ Gunter, "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey," 389–406.

²⁰ Ibid.

Iraqi Kurds

Saddam Hussein's leadership of Iraq, beginning in the 1960s, mandated the process of "Arabisation." Similar to the "Turkishness Contract," "Arabisation" was the process of minimizing the Kurdish presence in Iraq through the means of "systematic eviction and mass deportation."²¹ Hussein's oppressive policies increased, culminating in the Anfal and Halafal Military Operations in 1988. Anfal and Halafal have been formally recognized by the Iraqi government as a genocide against the Iraqi Kurds.

The Anfal Campaign began in February of 1988 as ordered by Iraq's Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party.²² The military campaign "intensified over a six-month period, against the mostly Kurdish civilian population, with the principle aim of exterminating Iraqi Kurds."²³ With the secondary purpose of the Iraqi government taking control of the oil fields in Northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurds were forcefully removed from their villages after the government deemed the already settled communities as "prohibited zones," to justify the arrests of Kurds. The affected Kurds were moved to the southern region of Iraq to be under surveillance by the Iraqi Army, where they had little access to food and other basic necessities. Many died within the year after they were detained due to mistreatment.²⁴

Mass disappearances were also ordered under the Anfal Campaign involving the seizing of Kurdish men, women, and children who would then be taken to "clandestine areas never to be seen again."²⁵ The men of military age were "generally executed in cold blood and buried in

²¹ "The Kurdish Genocide: Achieving Justice through EU Recognition," European Parliament Meeting Documents, (2014), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/d-iq/dv/03_kurdishgenocidesofanfalandhalabja_/03_kurdishgenocidesofanfalandhalabja_en.pdf.

²² "Anfal Campaign and Kurdish Genocide - Department of Information Technology, KRG," n.d. Kurdistan Regional Government, <https://us.gov.krd/en/issues/anfal-campaign-and-kurdish-genocide/>.

²³ "The Kurdish Genocide: Achieving Justice through EU Recognition."

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

mass graves.” In 1988 alone, an approximate 182,000 Kurds disappeared and 90 percent or approximately 2000 Kurdish villages and 20 small towns and cities were destroyed. Since the 1960s, the Kurdish Regional Government has calculated that an estimated one million Kurds disappeared as a result of Anfal.²⁶ The Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights estimates that there are approximately 400 mass graves on Iraqi soil from the Anfal Campaign.²⁷

In the town of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Iraqi government carried out the “largest scale chemical attacks since World War I.” The mass gassings occurred in March of 1988, solely targeting civilians, with casualties approximately totaling 5000 and upwards of 7000 injured.²⁸ The weapons that were used had been banned by the UN Chemical Weapons Convention.²⁹ The Iraqi High Court ruled this as genocide, and sentenced Al-Majid, the military leader of the Anfal and Halabja Campaigns, to death for his administration of the chemical weapons and his commanding orders of genocide. The attacks on the Iraqi Kurds were carried out as part of Hussein’s Arabisation program “on account of their ethnic or collective identity, rather than their individual status;” with the sole purpose to eliminate the Iraqi Kurds.³⁰

Syrian Kurds

The Kurdish population in Syria began to increase around 1925 after the Sheik Said Rebellion, and although the question of Kurdish origination versus indigeneous status has been contested within the Kurdish population, Syrian Kurds have asserted that they possess an equal claim to Syrian land as the ethnic majority. In 1956, Nûredîn Zaza became the first president of the Kurdish political party in Syria. He united the party on the grounds of “preserv[ing] the

²⁶ “Anfal Campaign and Kurdish Genocide - Department of Information Technology, KRG.”

²⁷ “The Kurdish Genocide: Achieving Justice through EU Recognition.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Article II – Definitions and Criteria | OPCW,” n.d. Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, <https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/articles/article-ii-definitions-and-criteria>.

³⁰ “The Kurdish Genocide: Achieving Justice through EU Recognition.”

identity of the Kurdish people, and to develop themselves in order to pave the way for their national liberation within the framework of the Syrian State.”³¹ This action set the Kurdish nationalist movement in motion, gaining momentum in the 21st century after the increasing prominence of KRG success in Iraq and evolving nationalist political leaders, such as Meshal Tammo.³² At a conference in 2007, the moderate Kurdish political party, al-Parti, stated that the Kurdish cause in Syria “is founded on the existence of a Kurdish people living on their native land of Syria. The matter is therefore one of land and people.”³³ These movements evolved into a plea for Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

Founded by Tammo in 2005, The Kurdish Future Movement in Syria propelled the cry for autonomy forward during the Syrian Civil War in 2013 through 2015, when the Discourse of the Future Movement prepared to declare the northern region of Syria as the autonomous zone Syrian Kurdistan.³⁴ Led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), or the Syrian branch of the PKK, the intention of the Kurds was to form a government that was “an experiment in multiethnic, gender-equal self-rule.”³⁵ Due in part to the connection to the PKK, the movement failed to establish credibility and full autonomy as a result of the resistant Assad regime, Turkish influence, and KRG dismissal. This intent for autonomy was seen as a threat to the Turkish border which would additionally aid the PKK and “resume an anti-Turkish insurgency if peace talks fail.”³⁶ KRG President Barzani even condemned the declaration as being “clearly an

³¹ Mohannad Al-Kati, “The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study,” *AlMuntaqa* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.31430/almuntaqa.2.1.0045.pdf>.

³² Michael M Gunter “The Kurdish Spring,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (January 1, 2013), 441–57. doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.785339, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/42002134.pdf>.

³³ Al-Kati, “The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study.”

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Jane Arraf, 2022, “Syria's Kurds Wanted Autonomy. They Got an Endless War,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/middleeast/syria-kurds.html>.

³⁶ Nader, Hanauer, Allen, and Scotten, “Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan.”

unilateral...act which disregards the other Kurdish parties,”³⁷ alluding to the deep Kurdish disunity which is preventing a Kurdish state.

Kurdish Syrian autonomy is an unlikely possibility as long as President Bashar al-Assad is in command and the various Kurdish political parties continue to disagree on a unified Kurdish goal in Syria. The Kurdish left and right leaning factions in Syria have politically split into separate parties approximately nineteen times between 1971 and 2011 and these “internal vertical and horizontal splits that have beset the Kurdish movement in Syria reflect its weakness.”³⁸ With the Kurdish movement in Syria being disjointed while facing political suppression by the Assad regime, who “angrily resists” a Kurdish region in Syria, the prospects for a Kurdish state with a foundation on Syrian soil is highly unlikely.³⁹ Therefore the oppression against Syrian Kurds has not been in the form of attempted erasure as with Turkish or Iraqi Kurds, but through the prohibition of the right to self-determination.

Iranian Kurds

The Iranian Kurdish movement differs from Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, by its lack of traction and desire for full autonomy. In Iran, the Kurds make up approximately 10 percent of the population. The majority of Iranian Kurds reside in the northeastern provinces of Kurdistan. The province is relatively subdued in the scope of Kurdish nationalism and is characterized by “unemployment, social problems, and drug abuse.”⁴⁰ The “smuggling economy” helps the border towns to survive.⁴¹ The Iranian Kurds have participated in Kurdish nationalism since the Treaty

³⁷ Gunter, “Unrecognized De Facto States in World Politics: The Kurds,” 161-178.

³⁸ Al-Kati, “The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study.”

³⁹ *The Economist*, “Why Kurds.”

⁴⁰ Ozan O Varol, “Alien Citizens: Kurds and Citizenship in the Turkish Constitution,” *Virginia Journal of International Law* 57, no. 3, (May 2018): 770–97, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=131723925&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁴¹ Filip Sommer, “Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan: A Role of External and Internal Actors in Kurdish Issue,” Edited by Libor Jelen, Ph.D. Charles University, (2021), <https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/124477/120380052.pdf?sequence=1>.

of Lausanne, the most progress being the short-lived independent Republic of Mahabad in 1946, as declared by the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI). The Republic was the Iranian Kurds' attempt at an independent territory and was backed by the Soviet Union, but fell back under Iranian control less than a year after creation when Soviet troops withdrew.⁴² Since then, Iranian Kurdish movements have been described as maintaining a “relatively low profile.”⁴³

The Iranian government has been against an independent Kurdish region within its borders. Although some scholars claim that “Kurdish language and cultural rights...are protected...and Kurds have not been subjected to assimilationist programmes as in Turkey, nor long-running military campaigns as in Iraq,” the majority opinion is that Iran has taken measures to politically and economically discriminate against Iranian Kurds.⁴⁴ Iran’s primary means have been limiting the use of the Kurdish language in schools and government services by declaring Persian the national language, and as recently as 2019, “contin[uing] to use the law to arrest and prosecute Kurds for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association.”⁴⁵ Additionally, Iranian Kurds have reported bureaucratic obstacles on account of their minority ethnicity, such as restricted access to business licenses, economic support, university admissions, or job opportunities.⁴⁶ The unemployment rate among Iranian Kurds is 16.3 percent, the highest in Iran. As a result of this, many Kurds have turned to smuggling goods such as tea, tobacco, or fuel.⁴⁷

⁴² Garrett Nada, and Caitlin Crahan, “Iran's Troubled Provinces: Kurdistan,” *The Iran Primer*, (2020), <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/sep/08/iran%E2%80%99s-troubled-provinces-kurdistan>.

⁴³ Varol, “Alien Citizens: Kurds and Citizenship in the Turkish Constitution,” 770–97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Nada and Crahan, “Iran's Troubled Provinces: Kurdistan.”

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Christine Caldera, “Kurds in Iran: Current Conditions and Future Prospects,” *Institute for the Study of Human Rights*, (2020), <http://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/publications/kurds-iran-current-conditions-and-future-prospects>.

Iranian Kurds suffer primarily from systemic discrimination that prevent them from realizing self-determination. Tehran has taken actions against Kurdish political movements with the intent only to subdue them, with the motivation to “maintain stability and enhance national cohesion.”⁴⁸ Kurds see these actions as repressive and unite more so with Kurdish transnationalism, specifically forming ties with the KRG. Modern Iranian Kurds have had to fight for their domestic rights as equal citizens of Iran and have therefore “mobilized to a lesser degree and have been less successful in establishing an international profile.”⁴⁹ Despite this, Iranian Kurds have formed resistance movements against Tehran, the capital of the Iranian Central Government, the first of which being the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) formed in 1945 and the most modern being the PKK-affiliate Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), formed in 2004. Both the PDKI and PJAK are now banned in Iran.

Iranian Kurds have worked with the KRG to gain a political footing in Iran, as well as supporting the KRG independence referendum in 2017. After the PDKI was banned, the KRG allowed the group to use northern Iraq as a base of operations. The PDKI returned the favor by voicing their support for an independent Kurdistan led by the KRG as, “thousands of Iranian Kurds took to the streets of Baneh, Saghez and Sanandaj in Kurdistan province to support the KRG move.”⁵⁰ This show from the Iranian Kurds was a tribute to the Kurdish transnationalism that ties all Middle Eastern Kurds together, despite political differences.

Transnationalism and Kurdistan

The Kurdish struggle is definitively pronounced. Their exclusion from the Treaty of Lausanne and the abject attacks on their human rights as an ethnic minority have established a

⁴⁸ Varol, “Alien Citizens: Kurds and Citizenship in the Turkish Constitution,” 770–97.

⁴⁹ Varol, “Alien Citizens: Kurds and Citizenship in the Turkish Constitution,” 770–97.

⁵⁰ Nada and Crahan, “Iran's Troubled Provinces: Kurdistan,”.

strong claim for the Kurdish desire for an independent state. The collective wound of Kurds across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, unite the population under the umbrella of transnationalism, defined as, “the diffusion and extension of social, political, economic processes in between and beyond the sovereign jurisdictional boundaries of nation-states.”⁵¹ To be Kurdish is to be a part of the cultural identity associated with the language, traditions, and history of Kurds across state lines, including the experiences of the oppression that all Kurds have endured. As the Discourse for Movement Syrian Kurdish party said in 2012, “the Kurdish people in Syria are an extension of the people of Kurdistan, and their land is a region of Kurdistan.”⁵² The Kurdish populations of the Middle East are inherently connected and tethered to the unrealized territory of Kurdistan.

This is the diaspora of the Kurds, “now used to describe a people who have been dispersed from their original homeland, have a strong ethnic identity and wish to return to their homeland,” a homeland that they were denied after WWI, and have since been forcibly prohibited from establishing.⁵³ In Syria, the northern Kurdish region is called *Rojava* meaning “west,” which is an allusion to the “western Kurdistan and a longstanding but seemingly unattainable dream of an independent state that would stretch over the Kurdish areas of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey.”⁵⁴ During the Kurdish split for Turkish leftist parties during the 1970s, “Kurdish socialists began to argue that Kurdistan was an international colony, divided and shared by Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria” and that an “national liberation war on the part of Kurds inevitable,”⁵⁵ this mantle of which is being carried by the PKK. In Iraq, President Masoud

⁵¹ Bradley W Williams, “Transnationalism – GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY,” Global Social Theory, (2022), <https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/transnationalism/>.

⁵² Mohannad Al-Kati, “The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study.”

⁵³ Andy Curtis, “Nationalism in the Diaspora: A Study of the Kurdish Movement,” Universiteit Utrecht, (February 2005), 2-9, <https://tamilnation.org/selfdetermination/nation/kurdish-diaspora.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Mohannad Al-Kati, “The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study.”

⁵⁵ Baris Ünlü, “The Kurdish Struggle and the Crisis of the Turkishness Contract,” 397–405.

Barzani said in 2017, “Kurdish independence is not a new topic. Self-determination is the natural right of every nation and country. The Kurdish nation has this right like every other nation in the world.”⁵⁶

As President Barzani attested, self-determination is a human right and has been referred to as the “first right” and “where self-determination is achieved, human rights can begin,” says former US Ambassador to the UN Barabara White.⁵⁷ Even without acknowledgement of the atrocities committed against the Kurdish nation, the right to self-determination is possessed by the Kurds and should not be denied to them on the basis of international actors’ self-interests. The transnationalism that unites the Kurds is the driving force behind their pleas for self-determination, autonomy, and a sovereign Kurdish state. The complexity of this process is a limiting factor to Kurdistan. Despite the Kurdish right to their own state, without complete unity and stability, the Kurds future of statehood is unlikely.

Fragility of Iraq

The stability of Iraq directly affects the livelihood of the Kurds and the future stability of a Kurdish state. While the Iraqi Central Government in Baghdad was adamantly against Kurdish independence after the failed 2017 independence referendum, Iraq is currently not strong enough to take a powerful stance in preventing a Kurdish state—and this fundamental weakness is the predominant reason for their opposition. The government cannot oppose independence when it cannot provide basic amenities for its citizens such as water, electricity, or jobs. Since the takeover of Mosul by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and eventual liberation of the city, Iraqi citizens have experienced “near daily” electricity outages, leading to nationwide

⁵⁶ Masoud Barzani, “Masoud Barzani on Kurdish Independence,” interview by Martine Dennis, Al Jazeera, July 19, 2004, Video, 25:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBGsr9v6dDc>.

⁵⁷ Bradley R Simpson, “Self-Determination, Human Rights, and the End of Empire in the 1970s.,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 4, no. 2 (August 7, 2013): 239–60.

protests for government change.⁵⁸ These protests began in 2019 and were an outcry from the hurting citizens for the government to provide services, rebuild Mosul, and also was a plea for “the reduction of foreign influence on Iraqi governance (mostly in relation to Iran, also the US).”⁵⁹ As Baghdad is already competing with the KRG for regional control, a “secession of the Kurds would pose a direct challenge to Baghdad’s authority,”⁶⁰ congruent with the neorealism theory that one state’s gain would threaten the authority of the existing state.

As the state of Iraq is weakened and cannot even provide for its citizens, it cannot maintain Kurdish regional integrity, or protect itself from outside influence. The lack of power in Iraq derives from the lack of reliable action from the central government. As a weakened state, Iraq has little intangible power and all natural power from its oil industry is located in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI). Northern Iraq is one of the most oil-rich provinces in the Middle East, and the KRG prioritized creating a stable oil market, independent from Baghdad. In 2013, approximately 50 large and small firms internationally relied on KRG oil, including ExxonMobil, Chevron, and Total.⁶¹ The biggest export of the KRG is Turkey, who signed a 50-year oil export contract with the KRG and in 2014, increased its consumption by 60 percent.⁶² In May of 2012, Turkey reported that, “of the USD 11 million of Turkey’s trade with Iraq, about 70 percent is within the Kurdistan Region”, and some scholars have suggested that this trade relationship would better serve Turkey if negotiations could be held with an independent Kurdistan, unrestricted by Baghdad.⁶³

⁵⁸ Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi and Erwin Van Veen, “The Fragmentation of Shi’a, Kurdish and Sunni Politics in Iraq,” *Iraq’s Adolescent Democracy- Clingendael CRU Report*, (June 2020).

⁵⁹ Al-Shadeedi and Van Veen, “The Fragmentation.”

⁶⁰ Nader, Hanauer, Allen, and Scotten, “Regional Implications.”

⁶¹ Zadeh and Kirmanj, “The Para-Diplomacy,” 597-606.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Zadeh and Kirmanj, “The Para-Diplomacy,” 597-606.

The issue of who governs and controls the oil fields in Iraq is the largest point of contention between Baghdad and Erbil. Particularly in regards to Kirkuk, the disputed territories in Northern Iraq are the catalysts to whether the Kurds or Iraqis hold more power in the state. The Kurds believe that Northern Iraq was originally their land, and therefore they have claim to the oil fields and their subsequent profit. The Iraqi Central Government has manipulated borders to profit off of these oil fields causing unavoidable conflict with the Kurds. President Barzani said on the topic of oil fields, “The Iraqi state was founded with the oil from Kirkuk which belongs to the Kurds. The oil profit was used to buy artillery and tanks to annihilate Kurds.”⁶⁴ Despite decades of negotiation, the “solutions to the perennial issues of Kirkuk and the sharing of oil revenues prove elusive,” particularly during the al-Maliki administration until 2018.⁶⁵ The topic of oil in the Kurdish question of autonomy is monumental and further research is warranted to create the full image of this geopolitical and economic factor in regards to Kurdish independence.

Baghdad’s influence over the Kurdish Region is limited to the power delegated in the Iraqi Constitution and no longer to legitimate power through action.⁶⁶ Additionally, in an interview with Al Jazeera in 2017, President Barzani said that “The [Iraqi] constitution means real partnership but that principle is now badly undermined. There must be a guarantee of real partnership until the people decide their own fate.”⁶⁷ The Iraqi Constitution was drafted in 2005 with Kurdish interests in mind, however the distribution of power intended was not fulfilled in the coming years and the Constitution failed to resolve issues of oil revenue and territorial lines.

⁶⁴ Barzani, interview.

⁶⁵ Michael M Gunter “The Kurdish Spring.”

⁶⁶ Filip Sommer, “Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan: A Role of External and Internal Actors in Kurdish Issue,” *Charles University*, (2021).

⁶⁷ Barzani, interview.

Thus, the split between Iraq and the Kurds caused by the Hussein regime failed to be mended. The foundation that the Constitution built for diplomacy between the KRG and Baghdad is crumbling, causing greater tensions between the two governments that have been developing for decades.

As a result of the crimes against humanity that the Kurds endured at the hands of the Iraqi Central Government, the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad is rooted in distrust: “horizontally, between Iraqi and ethnic Kurdish communities, and vertically between Kurdish communities and the Iraqi government.”⁶⁸ The autonomous KRI operates with little support from Baghdad as the cooperation between the two is limited and potentially futile. After the referendum, the disputed territories of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala, and Salahaddin were subjected to undefined leadership as the KRG and Baghdad did not discuss who was supposed to control these regions, resulting in “very limited administrative, security and political cooperation between Baghdad and Erbil in these areas, with the pro-Iranian armed groups dominating the security landscape,”⁶⁹ thus contributing to the worsening of living conditions and instability in Iraq that the region fears.

It is this already present instability that is the leading cause of international opposition to Kurdish independence; Iraq is a fragile state susceptible to outside influence and if the KRG were to secede, Iraq would lose the economic support of the Kurdish oil industry and its territorial integrity. The state would likely fall to the control of Iran, or be dissolved into a rogue state that would attract the development of terrorist groups. On the international level, opposition to Kurdish independence is almost solely attributed to this concern. For example, in 2017

⁶⁸ “The Kurdish Genocide: Achieving Justice through EU Recognition.”

⁶⁹ Kamaran Palani, “The Kurds could be kingmakers in Iraq's new government,” Al Jazeera, (2021), <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/12/15/the-kurds-could-be-kingmakers-in-iraqs-new-government>.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan opposed the referendum as “a threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq.”⁷⁰ Until Iraq is stable enough to support its own economy and borders, the KRG will not have the regional and international support that it needs for its own state.

Before the KRG released the Independence Referendum, the government used the threat to secede against Iraqi President, al-Maliki, when he was uncooperative in the power sharing aspirations of the KRG. Author Michael Gunter summarizes the backlash against these tactics stating, “it would be far better for the Iraqi Kurds to be seen as doing their utmost to keep Iraq united,” rather than using their fight for independence to further the chasm between governments.⁷¹ Before attempting to secede, the KRG may consider extending some of its economic resources from the oil industry to aid Iraq and build up the state so that it will not collapse without the KRG in its borders.

Kurdish Regional Government Instability

Along with Baghdad, the Kurdish Region of Iraq is wrought with instability that stems from the nepotism and corruption of two dominating political families: the Barzanis and the Talabanis. Mustafa Barzani founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1946 and has since become the most popular political party in the KRI, founding and dominating the KRG.⁷² After the 1974-1975 war, when the KDP was defeated by the Iraqi Army led by Sadaam Hussein, Mustafa Barzani fled Northern Iraq to Iran. In the abandoned Kurdish region, Jalal Talabani formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This party is the leftist, socialist counterpart to the KDP’s conservative and tribal foundation.⁷³

⁷⁰ Zadeh and Kirmanj, “The Para-Diplomacy,” 597-606.

⁷¹ Michael M Gunter “The Kurdish Spring.”

⁷² “Learn About Kurdish Nationalism,” The Kurdish Project, <https://thekurdishproject.org/history-and-culture/kurdish-nationalism/>.

⁷³ The Kurdish Project, “Learn About.”

The two parties have disagreed since the foundation of the PUK, often fighting over how to govern the KRG and in 1994, the power sharing between them dissolved into the Kurdish Civil War. In 1998, the US negotiated Washington Agreement was signed by Masoud Barzani, then President of the KRG, and Jalal Talabani which established two separate administrations of the KRG coalition government: the KDP led governorate in Erbil, and the PUK led governorate in the southern city of Sulaymaniyah.⁷⁴ Rather than a leadership coalition, the two-family system has been described as a “power-sharing arrangement between the two political dynasties.”⁷⁵

Since the Washington Agreement, the two parties have been tolerant of one another but still greatly disagree about how to run Kurdistan. In 2008, the Joint Administration split up governing responsibilities but did not agree on which party should control the Peshmerga, the interior ministry of security and intelligence services, or the finance and justice ministry.⁷⁶ This dual-party control system has splintered the unity of the region. This is described as the “fundamental problem for the KRI ... under which different Peshmerga, intelligence, security and governing units are controlled by varying party and family-affiliated factions.”⁷⁷ The two political parties' failure to agree on how to coordinate critical infrastructure of the region is a major limiting factor to the stability of a future Kurdish state.

The escalating factor of this political polarization is that the power of both parties is deeply ingrained in the Barzanis and the Talabanis respectively. Of the current KRG government, the President is the KDP's Nechirvan Barzani (who was previously Prime Minister under Masoud Barzani), the Prime Minister is the KDP's Masrour Barzani, the Deputy Prime

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Hakeem D. Qaradaghi, “The dark side of democracy in Kurdistan: The rule of two clans – Culturico,” *Culturico*, (February 2016).

⁷⁶ Qaradaghi, “The dark side.”

⁷⁷ Bekir Aydoğan and Mehmet Alaca, “A Family Affair: Rifts in the Talabani Family Highlight the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's Political Weaknesses,” *The Washington Institute*, (August 2021).

Minister is the PUK's Qubad Talabani, and the Speaker of the Parliament is the Movement for Change's Yousif Muhammed.⁷⁸ The Movement for Change, or Gorran, was founded as an anti-nepotism and anti-corruption political party to target the Barzani and Talabani hold on Kurdistan. Gorran has made progress with earning seats in the Parliament and now has the majority in the Sulaymaniyah Governorate.⁷⁹ The newly earned representation of Gorran in the KRG represents an increasing Kurdish "...deep anger against the Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK family domination over society and government."⁸⁰ This corruption is increasing the divide between domestic Kurdish political parties in Iraq, which would contribute to an unstable nation if the Kurds secede.

In addition to the most powerful political positions in the KRG, the Barzani's hold most other influential roles and so the KDP has been described for such reasons as a "family [of] clans, operating very much like a mafia organization."⁸¹ Their claim to a democratic government is a stretch, as elections are often replaced by familial appointments and even President Masoud Barzani has refused to transfer power on two occasions, extending his term limit twice and silencing any opposition to his authority.⁸² Masoud Barzani retained his presidency throughout the fight with ISIS, and eventually transferred his power to Masrour Barzani in 2019.

Under Masrour Barzani, the internal corruption has worsened. Human rights in Kurdistan has declined as, under his leadership, there is now "zero tolerance to critical voices and decent people who are fighting against corruption, nepotism, repression and social injustice in the region."⁸³ Protesters are jailed or shot, as nine people were in the December 2020 protests

⁷⁸ The Kurdish Project, "Learn About."

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Michael M Gunter "The Kurdish Spring."

⁸¹ The Kurdish Project, "Learn About."

⁸² Qaradaghi, "The dark side."

⁸³ Ibid.

against the progressive dictatorship.⁸⁴ Since the 2017 Independence referendum, the Kurdish region has been in steady economic decline due to Baghdad limiting Kurdish trade and taking Kirkuk, declining oil prices, increasing influxes of refugees, and attacks from ISIS.⁸⁵ The salaries of Kurdish public servants have decreased by 50 percent since 2016, and some PUK lawmakers have attributed this to the “incomes go[ing] into the officials’ pockets” and other reports claiming that the Barzanis have “monopolized most commercial activities in the region, amassing a huge fortune.”⁸⁶ Now, within a declining Iraqi statehood, Iraqi Kurds suffer under an oppressive regional government.

The Talabanis are alike in the Barzanis’ stretch to power. After Jalal Talabani died in February of 2020, the PUK appointed cousins Bafel Talabani and Lahur Talabani as co-leaders, whose goal was to offset the success of the KDP. Recently, a leadership crisis has developed as Bafel Talabani has ousted Lahur Talabani and any of his supporters from leadership duties, raiding pro-Lahur Talabani media outlets and expelling his cousin, who refused to leave Sulaymaniyah.⁸⁷ Bafel Talabani maintains control regardless and has the support of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament. This partial coup is indicative of the greater instability in the PUK: distrust within the party disaligns the priorities from securing the independence of the KRI. As the PUK aims to gain more control of the KRG, the “internecine fighting within the PUK only further complicates an already unstable political situation in the KRI” and decreases the legitimacy of the PUK as viable leadership for a Kurdish state.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Qaradaghi, “The dark side.”

⁸⁵ *The Economist*, “Why Kurds.”

⁸⁶ Qaradaghi, “The dark side.”

⁸⁷ Qaradaghi, “The dark side.”

⁸⁸ Aydoğan and Alaca, “A Family.”

Aside from the issues within each family respectively, the PUK and the KDP have an active rivalry. Both parties are trying to undermine the other's authority and ultimately consolidate the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah governorates under one party. With the Talabani leadership scandal, the KDP has tried to gain greater credibility among their Kurdish constituents in comparison and in 2018, the PUK accused the KDP of violating the electronic voting process and tampering with election results.⁸⁹ As long as the two dominant parties are more focused on ascending to power and dominating the other, rather than governing the Kurds, an independent state or even a diplomatic relationship with Baghdad, is impossible. Peace between the two governments is unlikely as the ability to cooperate partially "depend[s] on the ability of the main Kurdish parties to keep a united front in talks, which would mean overcoming their internal fragmentation and rivalries."⁹⁰ This divide will have to be overcome before any legitimate claims to independence can be made.

The KRG will not receive international support as long as the "disunity, infighting, and accusations of betrayal between the PUK and the KDP" continue to develop instability in the region.⁹¹ In the report entitled, *The Para-Diplomacy of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and the Kurdish Statehood Enterprise*, the authors summarize the KRG likelihood of a state as, "It is obvious that Kurds yearn for independence, but the real test for the KRG's para-diplomacy will be whether it has the strength to carry it out."⁹² If the KRG is unable to govern themselves while still being supported by Baghdad, then the prospective Kurdish state would be far less prepared for the responsibilities that come with sovereignty.

⁸⁹ Qaradaghi, "The dark side."

⁹⁰ Palani, "The Kurds could be kingmakers in Iraq's new government."

⁹¹ Aydođan and Alaca, "A Family."

⁹² Zadeh and Kirmanj, "The Para-Diplomacy," 597-606.

Kurdish Transnational Disunity

Outside of the polarization within the KRI, Kurdish political parties over border lines are wrought with disunity and disagreement over a common Kurdish goal. With the violence by the PKK, which has been condemned by other Kurdish parties, and the alliance between the PKK and the PYD, there has been a transnational split between Kurdish political parties and the methods that should be used to fight oppression. In addition to the condemnation of the PKK as discussed earlier in this article, the PYD militias have “committed war crimes against civilians under the guise of fighting ISIS,” and been described by Amnesty International as having committed war crimes against humanity.⁹³ Additionally, one tactic for Kurdish diaspora groups to gain momentum in their home countries is “by gaining sympathy... influenc[ing] the policies of their host states.”⁹⁴ If the popular image of the Kurds is of a violent organization that is at war with Turkey and armed against civilians, then the Kurdish movement will not be able to gain international empathy and advocacy for their cause.

As the prevailing Kurdish party in Syria, the violence used by the PYD has fractured its relationship with the KRG and united it in the eyes of Turkey with the PKK. This is detrimental to any Kurdish movement to independence, regardless if the party seeking independence is not participating in violence, as a disjointed Kurdish front will be unable to lead a state that can satisfy all Kurds desires. This is primarily why as the KRG attempts to secede to form its own state, the government is not attempting to form that transnational Kurdistan that was described in the 20th century as spanning Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

⁹³ Mohannad Al-Kati, “The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study.”

⁹⁴ Curtis, “Nationalism in the Diaspora: A Study of the Kurdish Movement.”

As Turkey's influence in the region grows, its animosity towards the PKK affects how Turkey views the Syrian Kurds, and how Turkey interacts with the KRG. Largely against separatist movements, Turkey is concerned that with increasing prevalence of the Syrian Kurds in their semi-autonomous region on the Turkish border, that Syrian Kurds will serve as “an unwanted model for Turkey’s own disaffected Kurds and the PKK.”⁹⁵ The fear that other Kurdish independence movements will embolden domestic separatists in Turkey is not a new claim, but with the close political ideological ties between the PKK and the PYD, Turkey is especially resistant to Syrian Kurds, typically in the form of military force. In early April 2022, Turkish airstrikes into Northern Syria targeting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) killed one member and injured two more. Additionally, the Turkish militia kidnapped three Kurds in the Jandris and Rajo districts of Syria, just after almost a week of releasing previously kidnapped Kurds.⁹⁶ These actions are motivated by the Turkish perception of the SDF as “a security threat because of its links to a Kurdish guerrilla movement that has been fighting an insurgency against the Turkish state for decades:” the PKK.⁹⁷ Until Turkey is able to remedy the relationship between Ankara and the PKK, potentially accepting the PKK as a “legitimate negotiating partner,”⁹⁸ the transnational attacks against other Kurdish movements and PKK affiliated groups will not cease.

As a result of the KRG’s economic ties to Turkey, the KRG is in a position of favor with the state and any support of the PKK would jeopardize the KRG’s relationship with Turkey. The KDP is thus torn between ethnic loyalties and regional alliances while, “ Turkey pressures [the

⁹⁵ Michael M Gunter “The Kurdish Spring.”

⁹⁶ “Kurdistan's Weekly Brief April 5, 2021,” Washington Kurdish Institute, (2022), <https://dckurd.org/2022/04/05/kurdistans-weekly-brief-april-5-2021/>.

⁹⁷ Jane Arraf, “Syria's Kurds Wanted Autonomy. They Got an Endless War.”

⁹⁸ Michael M Gunter “The Kurdish Spring.”

KDP] to take a clearer position against the PKK, the PKK criticizes it for betraying Kurds through its cooperation with Ankara.”⁹⁹ Therefore, despite the KDP and the PKK being Kurdish political parties, the KDP has had to turn its back on the struggles of the PKK, renounce its violent tactics, and ally itself with Turkey to advance the Iraqi Kurds position. Consequently, as the PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK, the Kurdish Regional Government, as led by President Barzani, is also allied with Turkey in its fight against the Syrian Kurdish guerrilla group.

In December of 2021, Iraqi Kurds closed off the Fishkhabour-Semalka border between Northeast Syria and Northern Iraq, which is the “only transport link between Northeast Syria and the rest of the world.”¹⁰⁰ This caused a humanitarian crisis for Syrian Kurds as they were unable to access necessary resources including “essential life-saving health supplies.”¹⁰¹ This closure has prompted PKK violence against the KRG border headquarters on behalf of the PYD who “blamed Turkish pressure for the Iraqis’ closure of the border, which included stopping exports of oil sold by the Kurdish-led region in Syria to Iraqi Kurds — a main source of revenue.”¹⁰² The relationship between the KRG and the PYD, and by extension the PKK as well, is deteriorating.

President Barzani’s efforts to form an independent Kurdistan while the KDP’s relationship with Kurds in Turkey and Syria is unstable, speaks to Barzani’s desire for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, one that does not include transnational Kurds. Despite the theoretical Kurdistan that was absorbed during the Treaty of Lausanne, the KRG is not focused on regaining the land of all Kurds. This suggests that a sovereign Kurdistan may turn its back on

⁹⁹ Nader, Hanauer, Allen, and Scotten, “Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan.”

¹⁰⁰ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Closure of vital Syria border crossing disrupts aid to 1.8 million in need,” Middle East Eye, (2022), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-iraq-kurdistan-fishkhabour-semalka-border-crossing-closure>.

¹⁰¹ Wilgenburg, “Closure of vital Syria border crossing disrupts aid to 1.8 million in need,” Middle East Eye. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-iraq-kurdistan-fishkhabour-semalka-border-crossing-closure>.

¹⁰² Jane Arraf, “Syria’s Kurds Wanted Autonomy. They Got an Endless War.”

the struggles of related ethnic parties in favor of developing economic ties with the international world through the oil reserves that Iraq would no longer have access to. Thus, a Kurdish state formed from the KRI may participate in the regional manipulation that for so long has harmed the Kurds, as seen through the actions of neighboring countries and international superpowers. This gives rise to concern that the KRG's motivation for independence is rooted less in a desire to avenge the plight of the Kurds and protect an ethnic minority and more so in a desire to achieve regional and political power, at the expense of Iraq and other Kurds.

External Influence

Iran

In addition to the internal disarray of the Kurdish region, the KRG's increasing instability has left northern Iraq vulnerable to external, often misguided, influence. Iran's power in the region is tremendous and the state has consciously tried to increase its influence in Iraq and the KRG. Iran has strategically implemented Shi'a ideas into the Kurdish and Iraqi government, formed security and economic alliances with the KRG, supported Kurdistan in the vacuum of the US leaving the region, and formed close ties with the PUK.

Iran's position on Kurdish independence, along with Syria and Turkey, was decided upon in 1992 when the three countries gathered to vow to not support an independent Kurdish State.¹⁰³ Since then, Syria has fallen into instability and is therefore unable to affect any substantial resistance, and Turkey has opposed independence but has significant economic ties with Kurdistan and will not be as active in opposition. Iran therefore, is left with ensuring that Kurdistan remains a part of Iraq with the motivation to keep Iraq intact for the sake of regional stability.¹⁰⁴ In 2017, Iran was not blatantly against the independence referendum for the sake of

¹⁰³ Mohammad Salih Mustafa, "Iran's Role in the Kurdistan Region | مركز الجزيرة للدراسات," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, (April 2016).

¹⁰⁴ Mustafa, "Iran's Role."

maintaining positive relations with the KRG. However, the referendum has been referred as a “conspiracy,” as said by cleric Ahmad Khatami, who is a member of the Iranian Assembly of Experts, and that regardless of the support given to the KRG to keep Iraq stable, “the explicit policy of Iran towards any Kurdish hope of independence is a negative one.”¹⁰⁵

Iranian politics is dominated by Shi’a politics, which is a branch of Islamic rule. Iran has taken on a role of influence in the Iraqi government by supporting Kurdish and Iraqi Shi’a politicians, which has led to Baghdad being a Shi’a dominated government.¹⁰⁶ It is Iran’s goal to increase the Shi’a influence in the region despite the Kurdish Sunni Muslim opposition.¹⁰⁷ This motivation for regional influence is not explicit, but Iran hopes to gain access to Syria through the Kurdish Region in Iraq¹⁰⁸ and to isolate the KRG from Turkish influence as Turkey is resistant towards Iranian power.¹⁰⁹ Iran is not explicitly involving its own ideas, but through use of political proxy, Iran is promoting Shia sectarianism and gaining support for Iranian aid in Baghdad and the KRG.

Since the failed independence referendum, the KDP has accused the PUK of collaborating with Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and the Baghdad government.¹¹⁰ Ala Talabani, a Kurdish official with the PUK, said, “I don’t deny that Qassem Suleimani and our neighbor Iran have a hand in much of what goes on in the region. They play a positive role by providing us counsel and advice.”¹¹¹ During the Iraqi invasion on Kuwait, harsh sanctions were

¹⁰⁵ Mustafa, “Iran’s Role.”

¹⁰⁶ Nader, Hanauer, Allen, and Scotten, “Regional Implications.”

¹⁰⁷ Mustafa, “Iran’s Role.”

¹⁰⁸ Mehmet Alaca and Bilgay Duman, “Turkey and the Kurdish Factor in the Middle East,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States* (May 2021).

¹⁰⁹ Mustafa, “Iran’s Role.”

¹¹⁰ Aydoğan and Alaca, “A Family.”

¹¹¹ Jeremy Hodge and William Astore, “Iran’s—and Russia’s—Influence Is Growing in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *The Nation*. (October 2017).

placed on Iraq as repercussions for its actions. Iran, although prohibited to do so, acted independently and supplied Iraq with necessary goods by smuggling trails through the Kurdish region, demonstrating more political involvement than just “counsel and advice.”¹¹² This aid, provided when no other country would help Iraq, began the development of the relationship that Talabani speaks of above; thus, as Iraq began to fall into instability, Iran chose to work through the comparatively stable KRG.

I have observed that even though Iran has been one of the first to assist the KRG, the country has played a role in causing the issues that Kirkuk needs aid with. For example, on February 15, 2021, there were rocket strikes on the city of Erbil, meant to be a threat to the KRG, Iraqi Central Government, and foreign actors involved in the Kurdish Region.¹¹³ It was the group Awliya al-Dam, loosely connected with the Iranian Shiites militia, who claimed responsibility. The attack was generally understood to be conducted with Iranian support and by Iran “blurring lines of accountability, resistance militias can continue to pressure Baghdad and Washington through intimidating attacks and take cover with plausible deniability, ultimately blaming the attacks on ‘rogue elements’ only loosely associated with established Shiite militias.”¹¹⁴ By Iran threatening the KRG through proxies that cannot be confirmed to be traced back to them, Iran can “[force] the KRG to seek Tehran’s help in halting attacks,” as they were through the Peshmerga of the PUK after ISIS took control of Kirkuk.¹¹⁵ This tactic is hard power disguised as soft power, as Iranian supported groups attacked Erbil, Iran was threatening the KRG with the

¹¹² Mustafa, “Iran’s Role.”

¹¹³ Caroline Rose and Rasha Al Aqeedi, “Iran Using Iraqi Kurdistan Against the US and Turkey,” Newlines Institute, (February 19, 2021), <https://newlinesinstitute.org/iran/iran-using-iraqi-kurdistan-against-the-u-s-and-turkey/>.

¹¹⁴ Rose and Al Aqeedi, “Iran Using Iraqi Kurdistan Against the US and Turkey.”

¹¹⁵ Rose and Al Aqeedi, “Iran Using Iraqi Kurdistan Against the US and Turkey.”

magnitude of force in their arsenal, with the intent to persuade the KRG to ask for help from Iran and integrate the state into Kurdish politics.

Additionally, Iran's support for the Kurdish movement is insincere as the current Iranian government is engaged in human rights violations against its own Kurdish population. In April 2022, the city of Oshnavieh's Islamic Revolutionary Court "handed down prison sentences ranging from nine months to eight years to ten Kurds for "membership of Kurdish parties" and prior participation in anti-government protests."¹¹⁶ If Iran's support of the KRG were genuine with no motivation to serve itself, then the government may be more supportive of Iranian Kurds and the issue of Kurdish nationalism within domestic politics.

Turkey

Turkey is like Iran in its regional power as the stability of the state guarantees Turkey the credibility and leverage to act over other nations, including Iraq, Syria, and inevitably the Kurds. As Turkey has forged a stronger economic connection to the KRG through mutual oil deals, their political alliance has strengthened. As the number one exporter of KRG oil, the economic partnership is also mutually beneficial. To establish its economic foundation separate from opposing political ideologies, "Turkey needs the KRG's oil to become more independent of Russia's and Iran's imports."¹¹⁷ Additionally, KRG oil exports are reliant on Turkish oil pipelines to transport their oil out of the KRI. This relationship has benefitted both countries by increasing both economies and forming an increasingly dependable alliance between Turkey and the KRG.

As seen by the tensions between the PYD and the KDP as a result of this Turkish alliance, Turkey has selectively chosen which Kurdish movements to support, favoring only

¹¹⁶ "Kurdistan's Weekly Brief April 5, 2021."

¹¹⁷ Jane Arraf, "Syria's Kurds Wanted Autonomy. They Got an Endless War."

those Kurdish political parties that reject the PKK. This has caused Turkey to support the KRG's independence plea, if only through its economic dependency rather than full support for Kurdish nationalism. Turkey's former staunch rejection of a Kurdish state has transformed "because of its economic interests in Iraqi Kurdistan and its own internal reforms, driven in part by its EU accession hopes."¹¹⁸ This is demonstrative again of how outside support of Kurdish movements is largely dependent on how an Iraqi Kurdistan would benefit an already established state. In Turkey's case, the state would become an economic partner that would elevate its status in European affairs to potentially become an EU member.

The Superpowers

The KRG attracts international attention as the region is a large oil supplier and therefore a fruitful Middle Eastern ally for global superpowers such as China, Russia, and the United States. Although there are economic benefits for ties with Kurdistan for the superpowers, the motivation for China, Russia, and the US seems to be largely driven by their own competition for global power. Whichever country has the most influence in the Middle East will have that region's economic and political power attached to their own, forming a pseudo-alliance that can be leveraged against the other two. In this regard, it is as if Iraq, and specifically the developing Kurdistan, is a chessboard for global actors with the KRG and the Iraqi Central Government as the pawns. When the US withdrew its troops in 2011, it created a "global power vacuum" that the surrounding countries competed to fill.

The US is not looked favorably upon by the KRG because, despite the security alliance against ISIS in 2017, it did not support the independence referendum. As a result of the past twenty years of unwelcome invasions, "US or western ground troops will always be seen as

¹¹⁸ Michael M Gunter "The Kurdish Spring."

foreign invaders in the Middle East, even if their objectives are humanitarian in nature.”¹¹⁹ As a result of failed US foreign policy, the goal of China and Russia is to undermine the US hegemony by becoming the ally to the Middle East that the US could not be and gaining influence in regions where the US has failed to achieve its agenda.

During the peak fight against ISIS, the United States formed an alliance with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is the military force that presides in and under control of the Kurdish autonomous region in northeastern Syria. On January 20, 2022, ISIS forces attacked a prison in the city of Hasaka with the aim to free the approximately 4,000 ISIS fighters that had been held by Syrian forces. The SDF fought to regain control of the city with aid from the United States who referred to the SDF as “essential partners” in the fight against ISIS.¹²⁰ However, because of the unreliable nature of US support in the Middle East as well as the lack of support the US displayed to the Iraqi Kurds after the 2017 Referendum, “the Syrian Kurds are under little illusion though that they can count on the U.S. to protect them in the long run.”¹²¹ International support for the Kurds in any country is therefore contentious and inconsistent, at will of other powerful nations' political agenda.

One example of how the Middle Eastern Region is a battlefield for international superpowers is in Syria during the revolutions against the Assad Regime. The leadership has split the international world into alliances that ripple away from the Middle East. Russia and China are allied with the Assad regime because the states do not want to create an “unfortunate precedent for the international community to intervene some day in their domestic affairs for

¹¹⁹ Filip Sommer, “Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan: A Role of External and Internal Actors in Kurdish Issue.”

¹²⁰ Jane Arraf, “Syria's Kurds Wanted Autonomy. They Got an Endless War.”

¹²¹ Jane Arraf, “Syria's Kurds Wanted Autonomy. They Got an Endless War.”

human rights violations.”¹²² Concurrently, US troops are in Northern Syria at the request of the SDF to protect the region from the increasing Turkish attacks, which are again caused by the Syrian Kurdish PYD sect’s alliance with the PKK.¹²³ These involvements relate back to the Kurdish issue by demonstrating that each superpower has a hand in domestic Middle Eastern politics motivated by each country's hegemonic pursuits.

China is developing a relationship with the KRG through energy trade. As the largest oil importer in the world, China’s purchasing of KRG oil would be economically beneficial for the financially unstable region.¹²⁴ China did not support the 2017 independence referendum because of traditional opposition to separatism and “adhering to a policy of non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs.”¹²⁵ Regardless, China is filling the region vacated by the US with “developmental peace” support for the Middle East as opposed to “democratic peace” as imposed by the West. As the US has made enemies by pushing democracy and intervention rather than supporting the KRG’s independence referendum, Kurdistan is now looking to China as a “new possible strategic partner.”¹²⁶

Russia is in a similar situation as China following the decrease of American presence in the region. In pursuit of global hegemony as well, Russia is practicing foreign opportunistic policy; Russia will not take an overt stance on the side of any one issue so as not to make enemies. As a result, Russia has energy deals with both the KRI and Baghdad that allow the Russian energy company Rosneft to profit off of the weakening economy. Russia’s motivation for this has less to do with supporting the KRG economy and instead demonstrates its attempts to

¹²² Michael M Gunter “The Kurdish Spring.”

¹²³ Jane Arraf, “Syria's Kurds Wanted Autonomy. They Got an Endless War.”

¹²⁴ Sommer, “Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan: A Role of External and Internal Actors in Kurdish Issue.”

¹²⁵ Sardar Aziz, “Navigating a Growing Chinese Influence in Iraqi Kurdistan,” The Washington Institute, (July 27, 2020) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-growing-chinese-influence-iraqi-kurdistan>.

¹²⁶ Sommer, “Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan: A Role of External and Internal Actors in Kurdish Issue.”

“build a monopoly on the European gas market, which is approaching thanks to the agreements with the KRG.”¹²⁷ Russia, China, and the US, are exerting their power over the KRG as leverage against other countries as indirect tools of competition for global power.

The actions of these three countries demonstrate the economic leverage that they are exerting on the vulnerable KRG. After the failed independence referendum, Baghdad reduced the share of the federal budget that was allocated to KRI, thus leaving the KRG in economic disparity and looking for outside financial support. As China and Russia built economic relations just after the US left, they entered into a position of control over the KRG by holding the resource that it needs the most: money. Iran is acting similarly as it is increasing economic ties with the KRG. Kurdistan will then be dependent on China, Russia, and Iran for economic prosperity and international support, becoming vulnerable to political pressures from the undemocratic systems of governance. As the KRG becomes reliant on outside actors, the decision of its sovereignty will be dependent on if its independence will benefit these actors.

Conclusion

In this paper, I aimed to analyze the limiting factors of the KRI gaining an independent state. I have concluded that despite the Kurds being deserving of sovereignty, the future of a Kurdish state is unlikely as long as the current political conditions persist. If the KRI were to leave Iraq, Iraq would likely lose territorial integrity, struggle financially without Kurdish oil money, and have administrative holes from Kurdish officials leaving Baghdad. The KRG's current state of fragility will be crippling if it cannot develop its infrastructure and economy. Additionally, the political divide and nepotism in the KRI would cause the newly minted state to

¹²⁷ Sommer, “Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan: A Role of External and Internal Actors in Kurdish Issue.”

fail before establishment as the PUK and the KDP would be unable to collaborate on nation-building, in addition to being too corrupt to serve Kurdish citizens.

With the combination of internal and external pressures on Kurdistan, a Kurdish state will only be a possibility if the new state is strong enough to sustain the regional pressures. Where the KRG stands now, a Kurdish state would not be a stable addition to the Middle East. The emergence of such a weakened state would be more easily manipulated than the current KRG, susceptible to Iranian, Turkish, Russian, Chinese, or American influence and ideas. Before it attempts independence, Kurdistan must be strengthened to prevent the inevitable failure of the KRG in its current state from leading a new state to failure.

The Kurdish issue can serve the international community as an example to better understand the complexities and hurdles that a separatist nation endures. From the factors above that are prohibiting the Kurds from achieving their own state, a criteria of prerequisites for a separatist nation to secede can be synthesized. First, in order to avoid unnecessary and potentially violent conflict during the process of obtaining independence, a separatist nation should have at least diplomatic relations with the host country. This would allow both nations to compromise during the process of secession while ensuring that both the host state and the new state are supported during the split. This condition is contingent on a generous understanding of the separatists goals on the part of the host state and unfortunately unlikely due to the prevailing principles of sovereignty, specifically related to the refusal to surrender land possession.

Second, if a nation is attempting to earn its own independent state, then the nation must present a unified political front. If there is any political fragmentation within the domestic movement, or transnationally, the separatist nation will not have the self-sufficiency and internal stability necessary to form a new state. The political divide would crumble under the pressures of

designing a country and may potentially exclude or polarize a population of the nation. Similarly, the separatist government must have a solid economy and infrastructure that is able to withstand without support from the host nation. Without this, the state would fail to enter the international economy and would not be able to provide for its citizens. If this was achieved, then the new state would be able to enjoy the international privileges of sovereignty without being susceptible to external manipulation by more powerful states.

Through my research, I believe that the Kurds deserve a state. The generations of Kurds across the Middle East that endured trauma are owed their own state. It is my hope that Kurdistan will be able to strategically and diplomatically achieve a state that would serve all Kurds across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. If the Kurds, and specifically the Kurdish Regional Government, amend their current course of action then sovereignty may be possible in the future. If the Kurds allow their current trajectory to continue, then a Kurdish state will not be a possibility and the plight of the Kurds will persist indefinitely.