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**Kurdistan Regional Government:
Internal Political Conflict as Factors of Failed
Referendum of Independence**

Master thesis

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Declaration of Authorship

1. I hereby declares that I have compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. I hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. I hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain any other academic title.

In Prague, August 2, 2022

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Abstract

Since 2003, Iraq went into a significant shift of political authority in which many political parties fighting for leadership failed to keep peace in the region; however, for many – like ruling parties in Kurdistan Region of Iraq – a golden compass was in the pot to gain more authority high political positions in the region. The new Iraqi Constitution recognized KRG as an autonomous entity of Iraq, and Kurdish politicians were taking high political positions within the new Iraqi government. Despite these achievements, the political instability post-Iraq War remained and was shaped by internal factors like security, economy, and unresolved issues over disputed territories. Regional and international interventions also had a hand in these internal conflicts. For Kurdistan Regional Government, the question of Kurdish statehood never dissipated. The internal political setting post-2010 provided an environment of possible Kurdish statehood – or at least as the Kurdish leaders anticipated. In 2017, the KRG went for an unsupported referendum of independence that soon shifted the political dynamic between Kurdish parties and Baghdad into a turmoil of power struggle. The thesis builds a comprehensive discussion of factors of internal conflict in the KRG and analyzes how these internal disputes affected instability in KRI that led to a failed referendum.

Keywords

Kurdistan Regional Government, De Facto States, Referendum of Independence, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KD), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Baghdad, Iraq

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Master Thesis Proposal

Institute of Political Studies – IEPS programme
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Proposed Topic:

Kurdistan Regional Government; Internal Constrains and Failed Quest for Independence

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Date of registration: 12.01.2020

Topic Characteristics / Research Question(s):

My thesis will focus on the following general research question:

How the internal constrains and sectarian struggle within KRG caused a failed attempt of quest for independence?

Since 2003, Iraq went into a major shift of authority in which the many political parties who fought for leadership failed to keep peace in the region, however, for many – like ruling parties in KRI – a golden compass was in the pot to gain more authority in the region. Apart from the recognition of KRG as an autonomous region in the ratified Iraqi Constitutional Law in 2005, the Kurdish parties succeeded to gain prominent roles in forming the Iraqi parliament and government – an elected Kurdish president of Iraq. However, the relationship between KRI and Iraqi government has been highly affected by the sectarianism of the KRI's two most powerful parties PUK and PDK and their association with non-state actors and neighboring countries. What fails the most to be determined is that KRI is not one united region but almost decentralized. I will try to show the differences between these two parties and their relationship with central government of Iraq as played on the ground rather than taking KRI as sole actor in talking about a de-facto state and its failed quest for independence. I will also focus on the external actors that play a major role in interfering with the political and economic ambitions of both parties leading to a more decentralized state. Additionally, I will try to show gaps between what's stated in the Iraqi law and constitution and how these laws are abided in real ground.

Working hypotheses (at least 3):

1. Kurdistan Regional Government is not a united entity in playing the political game for independence.
2. Territorial division in KRI is a threat to political conflict and instability.
3. KRG's relation and conflict with the parent state is a cause to instability in the region.

Methodology:

For my research, I will depend on existing academic literature reviews and case studies by using conceptual framework to understand and interpret my analysis. I will use primary and secondary sources as well as in-field data collection, in-person interviews, and media publication to analyze different factors having strong influence in the political and economic struggles of the region.

Outline:

- 1 Abstract
- 2 Executive Summary
- 3 Introduction
 - 1.1 De-facto states – a conceptual framework
 - 1.2 Research Question and Objective
 - 1.3 Methodology
- 4 KRG since 2003 – a Historical overview
 - 2.1 Internal conflicts within KRG
 - 2.1.1 PUK’s territorial authority and relationship with its economic allies (external powers)
 - 2.1.2 PDK’s territorial authority and relationship with its economic allies (external powers).
 - 2.2 Other external powers and influence in the region
 - 2.3 Relationship with the central government
 - 2.4 Recognition of an autonomous KRG in Iraqi Constitution (2005)
- 5 Oil Geopolitics and its power to the quest for Kurdish Independence
 - 5.1 Distribution of shared oil territories
 - 5.2 Conflict over oil revenues leading to conflict in annual budget distribution
- 6 External interested and influence in the region
 - 6.1 Iran
 - 6.2 Turkey
 - 6.3 Russia
 - 6.4 USA and the western powers
- 7 The fight against ISIS
 - 7.1 Kurdish forces as one of the major forces in the fight against ISIS
 - 7.2 Territorial gain of disputed regions
 - 7.3 Referendum for Independence 2017
 - 7.3.1 KDP and PUK’s conflict of interest
 - 7.3.2 Failure in gaining international recognition
- 8 KRG from 2017 onward
 - 8.1 Conflict with Iraqi government
 - 8.2 Losing authority in disputed territories
 - 8.3 The future of KRG in Iraq
 - 8.4 The future of KRG’s international relations
- 9 Conclusion

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

GCAD – Global Coalition Against Daesh

GOI – Government of Iraq

IKF – Iraqi Kurdistan Front

IS – Islamic State

ISF – Iraqi Security Forces

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party

KDPI – Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq

PJAK – The Kurdistan Free Life Party

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

PYD – Democratic Union Party

SOMO – State Oil Marketing Organization

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States of America

Table of Contents

<u>MASTER THESIS PROPOSAL</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</u>	<u>1</u>
1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVE	3
1.2 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS	4
1.3 METHODOLOGY.....	5
1.4 THE CONCEPT OF DE FACTO STATES	6
1.5 A BRIEF HISTORY OF IRAQI KURDISTAN (WWI UNTIL 1991)	8
1.5 POST-GULF WAR ERA – DE FACTO KURDISTAN (1991-2003).....	12
<u>CHAPTER 2: POST-IRAQ WAR ERA</u>	<u>15</u>
2.1 KRG INTERNAL RELATIONS:	15
2.1.1 AUTONOMOUS KRG AND CHANGES IN INTERNAL POLITICAL RELATIONS.....	15
2.1.2 SECURITY (PESHMERGA) SITUATION OF KRG AND FIGHT AGAINST IS	17
2.1.3 ECONOMIC SITUATION OF KRG.....	19
2.2 KRG’S RELATIONSHIP WITH BAGHDAD	21
2.2.1 ISSUES OVER DISPUTED TERRITORIES	23
2.3 EXTERNAL RELATIONS AND INFLUENCE	24
2.3.1 RELATIONS WITH TURKEY	25
2.3.2 RELATIONS WITH IRAN.....	27
2.3.3 RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES.....	29
<u>CHAPTER 3: POST-REFERENDUM ERA.....</u>	<u>30</u>
3.1 WHY 2017 KURDISH REFERENDUM FAILED?	30
3.2 STATUS OF KRG POST THE REFERENDUM.....	34
3.2.1 KRG’S INTERNAL RELATIONS	34
3.2.2 KRG-BAGHDAD RELATIONS	36
<u>4. CONCLUSION</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY:.....</u>	<u>42</u>

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Together with the emerging territorial non-state actors and failed states, the de facto states present the new face of geopolitics – more complex and arguably establishing new kind of world order”

– Berg, Riegl and Doboš

in “Unrecognized States and Secession in the 21st Century” 2017

According to international law, the right to self-governance is achieved when there is a democratic system that allows its people to express their wishes and choose to either be an independent sovereign state, or associate or integrate into another independent state (Hannum & Lillich, 1980). In the fight of self-rule and becoming a recognized independent state, lays an entity that enjoys a certain level of internal autonomy but lacks international recognition; academics calls these as “*de facto states*” (O’Driscoll & Baser, 2020). In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan post 1991, academics call it as a *de facto state* (Gunter, 1996) or *quasi state* (Natali, 2015).

Historically, the struggle for self-rule of the Kurdish people dates to a hundred years ago when the territories occupied by the Kurdish ethnic groups were divided between four countries, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The signed Treaty of Sevres in (1920) mentioned the possibility of an autonomous Kurdish state within a year of the treaty in practice, and if the Kurdish population call for independence, the request shall be granted. As the treaty of Sevres was never enforced, the Kurdish territories were divided between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey two years later at the Treaty of Lausanne, forming the current borders of the region (Yildiz, 2004, p. 12). To fight for an independent Kurdish state, Kurdish movements were formed throughout different parts of the countries throughout history. The sense of nationalism and preserving a Kurdish identity has become the strongest tie between the Kurdish tribes (Meho, 2001).

Denis Natali (2004), in a book critique of Ozoglu,¹ summarizes and highlights that the sense of nationalism among the Kurds did not exist during the reign of the Ottoman Empire, with the

¹ Ozoglu H. (2004). *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*. Albany: State University of New York Press. 192 pages.

Kurds remaining loyal to the empire. The author further mentions that this rise of nationalism among the Kurds after World War I was not only a response to the destruction of the Ottoman Empire but rather a response to the changing dynamics of an ethnically tolerant empire to a restrictive secular system during the Turkish independence movement of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Natali, 2004).

In defining the concept of nationalism, Anthony Smith (1996) tries to draw a line connecting ethnicity to the concept of nationalism. In defining ethnicity, he describes it as a group of people with shared ancestors, culture, and memories of a shared territory. In defining nationalism, he defines it as an “*ideological movement*” where the people of that ethnic group would want to gain autonomy and identity to be considered as a potential nation. In concluding these two concepts, the author ties the concept of ethnicity and nationalism as the basis for today’s nationalism when culture and ethnicity influence the formation of states (Smith, 1996).

In fact, the term nationalism is rather a recent phenomenon. Ernest Gellner (1987) defines the nineteenth century as the age of nationalism (Gellner, 1987, p. iiv). Michael Gunter (2013) defines it as “*contemporary*,” adding that people during the Ottoman Empire mostly identified themselves with a religion or the respective empire or their tribes, and this was no different in the Middle East up until WWI. Just like the Kurds, the Arabs, the Turks, and the Iranians developed a sense of nationalism about that same time (Gunter, 2013). Much like the Arab nationalism in Iraq, Kurdish nationalism grew out of becoming united and rebelling for independence (Kramer, 1993). Mohammed and Alrebh (2020) further add on that Kurdish ethnicity has historical origins, but the concept of Kurdish nationalism is a fairly modern idea, originating after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. According to the authors, Kurdish nationalism was a societal construct of following the modern concept of nationalism with people gaining citizenship and political and economic sovereignty (Mohammed & Alrebh, 2020).

To understand the Kurdish social and political structure; it is important to understand how the Kurds functioned throughout history. Many academics (Meho, 2001; Ross & Mohammadpur, 2018; Yildiz, 2004) identify the structure of Kurdish society as tribalism. Yildiz (2004, p. 7) compares the Kurdish origin of tribalism similar to the clan history of the Scots in the highlands. The author further mentions that these Kurdish tribes, during Ottoman and Persian Empires, were “considerably” autonomous with each tribe having its own territorial power.

This course of autonomy completely changed for the Kurds after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI. From this point onward, the Kurds shared one thing in common: Kurdish sentiment and self-rule. Although tribalism and territorial authority were still present within the Kurdish communities, this structure was weakened, and the sense of Kurdish nationalism became stronger after years of economic and political changes in the region (Meho, 2001).

“(…) the social and economic negligence of Kurdistan by the local governments and the protracted cultural and political repression exercised against Kurdish populations were decisive factors in fostering Kurdish nationalism rather than suppressing it as was hoped from the governments’ harsh policies.” (Meho, 2001, p. 5)

Authors Ross and Mohammadpur (2018) talk extensively about the Kurdish tribalism throughout history and how it affected the unity of the Kurds. One important factor commonly observed is that tribalism, as it has been predominant in many literature reviews on Kurdish political structure and fight for self-rule, has become an obstacle to building a Kurdish nation-state (Ross & Mohammadpur, 2018). Mohammed and Alrebh (2020) also mention that most of the Kurds were opposing the Kurdish fight for self-rule mainly because of “*tribal rivalry*.”

1.1 Research question and objective

I will try to answer the following research question: *What are the internal political conflicts within KRG, and how did they cause a failed quest of independence?*

Since 2003, Iraq went into a significant shift of authority in which many political parties who fought for leadership failed to keep peace in the region; however, for many – like ruling parties in KRI – a golden compass was in the pot to gain more authority in the region. Apart from the recognition of KRG as an autonomous region in the ratified Iraqi Constitutional Law in 2005, the Kurdish parties succeeded in gaining prominent roles in forming the Iraqi parliament and government – an elected Kurdish president of Iraq. However, the relationship between KRI and the Iraqi government has been highly affected by the internal conflicts of the KRI’s two most powerful parties, PUK and PDK. The thesis will focus on the political differences between these two parties and their relationship with the central government of Iraq as played on the ground rather than taking KRI as the sole actor in talking about its political status in Iraq

and its failed quest for independence. Additionally, gaps between what's stated in the Iraqi law and constitution and how these laws are abided on real ground will be discussed. In doing so, the hypothesis will, first, try to test that KRG's political system is not a united institution by discussing both parties' separate administration and political ideology. Secondly, I will try to explore and discuss that this division of power and territorial authority is a threat to KRI's stability and plans for an independent state. Lastly, I will further focus on and try to find out how this ideological and political division affects KRG's relationship with the central government in Baghdad and how it will cause conflict and instability within a democratic Iraq.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

In order to answer the research question of this thesis, the structure of the thesis will be outlined in three main chapters: introduction to the topic and post Gulf-War, post-Iraq War, and lastly post-referendum.

The first chapter covers the introduction to the topic, research question, and methodology used to answer the research question. It then follows the theoretical concept of de facto states covering the definition of states in general and de facto states in particular to give an understanding of the theory behind de facto states in international politics. Following on, another two subchapters introduce a brief political history of the Kurds in Iraq since WWI and then the formation of KRG as an unrecognized de facto entity of Iraq after Gulf War in 1991.

The second chapter of post-Iraq War covers the changes in internal Kurdish political structure that facilitated the recognition of the KRG as an official autonomous region of the new Iraq. It discusses the coalition of the Kurdish parties and their role in forming the new Iraqi government. Additionally, it covers KRG's economy and security, as well as international relationship. Furthermore, it will discuss issues over disputed territories, and how the relationship with Baghdad in this period changed the political dynamic towards the Kurdish referendum of independence.

The last chapter covers post-Kurdish referendum between 2017 up to 2020. The first subsection covers the factors leading to hold the referendum to its aftermath. Moreover, it will

include the status of KRG within the central government and the neighboring countries, and its economic/political stability in the region.

1.3 Methodology

The aspiration behind this research is to elaborate on the case of Iraqi Kurdistan's internal political system and gather a more in-depth understanding of KRG's status as an autonomous political entity in the region. The applied methodology of this research is a qualitative descriptive type of research which consists of using primary and secondary sources throughout the three chapters. In this way, the descriptive nature of the research will try to explore the internal factors of conflict leading to political instability in the KRG and Iraq. Additionally, it will briefly discuss external factors to understand their influence in shaping internal political dynamics. Lastly, I will try to discuss how these internal and external factors affected the failed referendum of independence.

With the concept of de facto states in international relations and political studies, the paper will try to understand Iraqi Kurdistan's de facto government and autonomy. To provide a qualitative discussion on this, books and articles from renowned scholars are used such as *Gareth Stansfield*, *Michael Gunter*, and *Denis Natali* who have conducted extensive studies and are specialized in Kurdish issues and Iraqi Kurdistan's political system and statehood. Additionally, the work of my supervisor *Bohumil Doboš* on *Unrecognized States and Secession in the 21st Century* is used in the chapters covering the concept of de facto states and the KRG's referendum of independence.

Other significant sources that are considered in this thesis are the works of *Nina Casperson*, who is an expert in the studies of unrecognized states, de facto states, and conflict resolution.

To arrive to a conclusion on KRG's future status in the region, I will incorporate forum discussions and policy papers by local and foreign experts on KRG's political and economic dynamics as well as its relationship with the central government.

As the study on de facto states is broadly debated in social sciences by experts, academics, and the international society, I do not try to further elaborate on this debate within the scope of this

research but rather describe the concept in a more general term to provide a theoretical basis for analyzing the case of Iraqi Kurdistan as a de facto state.

1.4 The concept of De Facto States

In post-colonial politics, modern states are defined as states in which security, human rights, and well-being of their citizens are provided to at least a minimum level of prosperity and having attained international recognition. When states fall short of providing these basic services, they are described as weak, fragile, collapsed, or failed states. Perhaps, there is no consistent definition of each of these state disorders. Many literature works tend to categorize and mix weak states, fragile states, and collapsing or failed states into states that lack political legitimacy and fail to provide for the wellbeing of their citizens. More visibly, they all share similar characteristics in losing political viability due to internal and external conflicts, losing control over their borders, and economic instability (Di John, 2010). A more specific definition of failed states describes that the level of the internal conflict does not define a failed state, it is rather the type and the root of the conflict. In such an example, Rotberg (2003, p. 5) states that: *“The civil wars that characterize failed states usually stem from or have roots in ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other intercommunal enmity.”* Kolstø (2006) adds that failed states are states that are internationally recognized but lack internal effective governance, thus they facilitate secession from internal groups who create quasi-states. The latter are internationally unrecognized; hence, they are considered as de facto states and the former state remains a parent state.

In defining de facto states, Nina Caspersen; a prominent researcher on unrecognized states and conflict resolutions, explains in her own words: *“De facto states are typically conceived of as territories that have gained de facto independence, often following warfare, but have failed to achieve (widespread) international recognition.”* Vincenc Kopeček concludes it as *“(…) a territorial entity which exists for a longer period of time (at least several years), controls most of the territory it lays claims to, and lacks but actively seeks wider international recognitions”* that are formed, in most cases, in response to conflicts and war crimes over ethnic and political differences between the de facto state and the parent state (Doboš & Riegl, 2017, pp. 11, 111). Scott Pegg (1998) adds: *“(…) a de facto state exists where there is an organized political leadership which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability”* (Pegg,

1998). The question of de facto states is fairly contemporary in international politics and is creating new challenges to the worldly geopolitical order (Doboš & Riegl, 2017, p. 2). The authors further argue how identity plays a significant role in de facto state formation and recognition.

Caspersen further adds that de facto states are not all formed and controlled by warlords and organized crimes as has been understood by academicians and politicians before. Still, some – or rather most – have managed to establish effective political institutions in their claimed territory, although remain unrecognized, and this lack of recognition plays a significant role in de facto states' attempts to establish a political system that functions effectively on the ground (Doboš & Riegl, 2017, pp. 11–12). Kolstø (2006) adds that “[*de facto states*] build up internal support from the local population through propaganda and identity-building; channel a disproportionately large part of their meager resources into military defense; and enjoy the support of a strong patron” (Kolstø, 2006). Additionally, De facto states strive to maintain their status quo of independence and want to gain international recognition mainly through gaining external support from patron states and establishing an effective political institution in their territory. The latter is crucial to gaining external support (Caspersen, 2009). Generally, the international actors respond to the formation of de facto states in three different ways: either to impose sanctions and embargos, or don't have any relations and engagement with them, or give them a “*limited acceptance*” of their existence (Pegg, 2019, p. 177). Caspersen (2009) adds that often, de facto states can only rely on gaining support from their patron states as the international sovereign states tend to ignore de facto states and “*condemn them to isolation.*” When de facto states succeed in establishing effective political institutions of their own, in most cases, they want to play the “*recognition game*” and demand their right to self-determination. For an independent state to exist, it needs to be independent of external support; and commonly, the de facto states cannot survive without external support, thus they “*find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place.*” Additionally, the dependence on external support is a “*double edged sword*” as the patron state might support recognition goals but simultaneously threaten the de facto independence (Caspersen, 2009). Although some de facto states survive(ed) for quite some decades, the possible scenarios of most de facto states are either independence or reintegration with the parent state. Caspersen calls this a “*transitory phenomenon*” (Doboš & Riegl, 2017, p. 12).

1.5 A brief history of Iraqi Kurdistan (WWI until 1991)

As this research paper will particularly focus on Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) and its political structure, it is crucial to briefly introduce the social and political structure of the Kurds in Iraq until the KRG was formed in 1991.

Much like in the past, the structure of Iraqi Kurdistan's political institutions and party conflict is rooted from the history of tribalism as discussed above in the introduction. Kurdish tribalism highly influenced the political and cultural ideology of Kurdish communities and Kurdish nationalism.

Since the division of the Kurdish territories in the 1920s, the Kurds in Iraq, like their counterparts in other parts, entered a period of revolution and rebellion against the British rules in Iraq and the Iraqi government (Meho, 2001). One of the prominent Kurdish leaders that emerged out of the chaos of the Iraqi revolution and leadership was the Barzani tribe led by Mala Mustafa Barzani, who formed Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1946. Although the Kurdish leadership was strong in fighting for its independence and the 1958 Iraqi revolution had given some false hopes of Kurdish autonomy becoming a reality, the Kurdish leadership started to have different opinions sometime around the early 1960. Later in 1975, a "rival" division emerged out of KDP by Jala Talabani and founded PUK in Damascus, Syria (Yildiz, 2004, pp. 16, 24). Michael Gunter (1996) argues that, at the foundation of KDP, the party lacked clear and planned economic and social components as the party's desire was mainly derived from the sense of nationalism and having an independent Kurdish state; he quotes an observer describing the KDP situation: *"(...) more of a social and cultural gathering than a well-defined political party"* (Gunter, 1996). The party struggled with having different opinions about supporting Kurdish leaders like Secretary-General Hamza Abdallah and Ibrahim Ahmad, the latter being characterized as a leftist nationalist and the head of the KDP branch of the Iranian KDP, whom Barzani himself disliked. Academics characterize this division in opinion and ideology in the party into one wing (Barzani himself) being conservative and tribal and the other wing (Ahmad and later Talabani, also referred to as party politburo) being Marxist. The year 1964 is perhaps the most prominent time when the split of political orientation in the party leadership marked the beginning of a new division. The rivalry between both wings intensified after Barzani signed the cease-fire accord, which did not mention an autonomous Kurdish state and limited Kurdish power in the region, with Baghdad

in 1964 without consulting with his party leadership, particularly the Ahmad-Talabani wing (Gunter, 1996; Stansfield, 2003). Another action of Barzani against the left wing was when he staged the party's 6th Congress, where he arrested the delegates of Ahmed and Talabani for "treason" against the party's leadership and were expelled from the party (Degli Esposti, 2022; Gunter, 1996; Stansfield, 2003). Up until the establishment of PUK, Talabani left and rejoined KDP several times while independently talking with Baghdad or Iran to back his plans. These independent attempts added up to Barzani taking other measures in return to overpower Talabani (Gunter, 1996). Later, on a march on the KDP headquarters in Mawat, Barzani took over the office and forced out Talabani and Ahmed and their followers to Iran (Degli Esposti, 2022; Stansfield, 2003, p. 72). On an interesting note, Stansfield further argues that it was unknown whether Barzani purposefully signed the accord in order to attack the Ahmad-Talabani wing. However, he adds that splitting the left wing off party leadership *was planned* as the actions of Barzani suggested so. For example, signing the cease-fire accord and becoming an alliance with the new Ba'ath regime by issuing a warning that any rebellion against the new regime meant war against the Barzani are enough excuses to justify pushing Talabani wing away from the party purposefully. Left-wing followers, such as Nawshirwan Mustafa, a prominent leader in PUK and later the founder of the Goran Movement in 2009, had said that the incidents of 1964 marked the beginning of "civil war" among the Kurdish movements (Stansfield, 2003, p. 73). Degli Esposti (2022) relates this split of ideology to the fact that Barzani did not have a clear political program except a true Kurdish nationalistic commitment. He further adds that "(...) *the changing cultural structure of the 1970s allowed for the emergence of an alternative nationalist project.*"

During this time, the Iraqi post-colonial revolutions struggled in maintaining their leadership. In 1968, the Ba'ath party staged a coup d'état against the regime at the time. The regime party was then led by Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr, who became the president. Although his first intentions were to respect the Kurdish demands, he preferred negotiations with the Ahmed-Talabani wing finding them "ideologically" similar as opposed to Barzani. However, Barzani's forces grew stronger and outpowered Ahmed-Talabani's, eventually making the Ba'ath party turn the table and start negotiations with Barzani (Gunter, 1996; Stansfield, 2003). In 1970, The Ba'ath party and KDP signed an agreement, the March Manifesto, which discussed Kurdish autonomy by including the recognition of the Kurdish language and culture; and that the Kurdish language can be taught in schools, Kurds can participate in the government, funds and pension would be provided to Kurdistan, and the vice-president of Iraq would be a Kurd

(Yildiz, 2004, p. 45). Stanfield concludes that the March agreement was “the best deal offered to the Kurds,” and one of the KDP leaders described the period between 1970 and 1974 as “*a start of a golden period*” of an autonomous Kurdistan. However, this trust between Baghdad and Barzani deteriorated – if ever was strong– very soon. As Barzani demanded the removal of Iraqi forces in the Kurdistan territories and the Iraqi government grew more suspicious of Barzani’s ambitions, Barzani appealed for assistance from the US. As Stanfield argues, the US did not side with Barzani as the US policy, up to now, has always been to “*keep the status quo*” (Stansfield, 2003, pp. 75–76). The manifesto was never really implemented, and the fight between Iraqi and Kurdish forces, the latter being supported by Iran and the US, resumed in 1975 when KDP was defeated, and Barzani surrendered (Gunter, 1996; Stansfield, 2003, p. 76). Barzani miscalculated Iran and US’s support as Iran stopped its military support after signing the Algiers Agreement with the Iraqi government in 1975 (Degli Esposti, 2022; Stansfield, 2003, pp. 76–77). Yildiz states that both the US and Iran “used the Kurds as a vehicle for their own regional designs” (Yildiz, 2004, p. 22). KDP’s defeat led to Barzani’s exile to Washington DC, where he died four years later. The party collapsed to several fractions until the ninth congress of KDP was held in Iran in 1979, where the two sons of Barzani, Masoud and Idris, shared the party leadership. Idris’s sudden death in 1987 left the KDP to be run solely by Masoud Barzani (Gunter, 1996).

After the collapse of KDP in 1975, Talabani formed and established PUK in the same year, 1975, in Damascus, Syria. The party returned to Iraq in 1976, and the headquarter was moved from Damascus to Sulaymaniyah (Gunter, 1996). Regarding the formation of PUK, Stanfield (2003) points out that the establishment of a new Kurdish political party was indeed not a “hasty” decision, and that it has been planned all along, especially since the split from KDP in 1964 as the party’s declaration statement also announced it:

“The formation of PUK was not a hasty and spontaneous action, as it is asserted by certain circles, on the contrary, it was very long-processed synthesis of a revolutionary and realistic idea about the nature of the liberation movement, that engulfs many democratic, progressive and leftist tendencies that cannot be assembled within the ranks of a single political party. The emergence of PUK was a result of a conscious awareness of the needs of a liberation movement of an oppressed nation.” (Stansfield, 2003, pp. 80–81)

As KDP felt threatened by PUK and its forces moving back to Iraq, a fight between the Peshmerga forces of both parties emerged, resulting in KDP's defeat. After the fall of the Shah of Iran and the revolution of Khomeini, the Algiers Agreement of 1975 between Iran and Iraq was withdrawn; hence, KDP strengthened its base in Iran again. At the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, KDP sided with Iran against the Iraqi regime, and PUK sided with Iraq to negotiate deals for the Kurds. Soon after, the relationship between KDP and PUK, as the author states: "*degenerated into open conflict*" until 1986, when PUK withdrew from its negotiations with Baghdad realizing that no negotiation could be reached. Here on, both KDP and PUK reconciled and created the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF) to fight the Iraqi regime and "*overthrow the Ba'ath party in Iraq to help build a democratic government of Iraq and federal Kurdistan.*" (Gunter, 1996)

On another note, it is essential to mention PUK's leadership and political conflicts during this period that later contributed to the discussion of party division. Stanfield (2003, p. 91) points out that the PUK faced some form of division during this period when members of the leadership wanted to shift its alliances with Iran mainly to support the KDP branch in Iran (KDP-I). However, alliances of an Islamic republic and a party that follows the leftist doctrine seemed to be complicated. Another factor was that some party leaders did not fully support the ongoing negotiations between the Iraqi government and PUK; the author refers to this by writing that "*(...) negotiations between the leadership of PUK and GOI created serious ideological tensions within the ranks of the party.*" The author further adds that the difference in ideology between party leaders roots back to Talabani favoring the pro-Kurdish line that was represented by Nawshirwan Mustafa; and Mulla Bakhtiyar siding the pro-Iraqi line. The latter later created a party named *Alay Shores* after the relationship between PUK and the Ba'ath party weakened. After a propaganda campaign of the party, PUK arrested Mulla Bakhtiyar while his "*compatriots*" managed to escape to Iran. It was only later in 1993 when Mulla Bakhtiyar could rejoin PUK. The author refers to this incident as a "*great damage*" to the party's position that was apparent throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

The reconciliation between KDP and PUK did not last very long. Interestingly, Gunter states: "*Old divisions can be very difficult to overcome,*" and both parties' dispute renewed from 1993 onward (Gunter, 1996). This will be further discussed in the following section.

1.5 Post-Gulf War era – De facto Kurdistan (1991-2003)

In the late 1980s, the Kurdish political parties formed the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF) in response to and to oppose the atrocities of the Iraqi government against the Kurds at the end of Iran-Iraq war. Anfal Campaign, “*spoils of war,*” killed 100,000 Kurds, as was estimated by humanitarian organizations and Human Rights Watch. Chemical attacks destroyed several thousand villages and gassing of towns caused high death tolls like the Chemical attack on Halabja, a small town on the border with Iran. Estimated death casualties were about 5000, along with more than 10,000 injured (Katzman, 2010). The Iraqi government’s excuse for these acts was to ensure that the Kurds and the Peshmerga forces were not receiving any support, specifically from Iran (Hassan, 2015, p. 191).

On the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991 and the great uprising of the Kurdish people, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a semi-autonomous region of northern Iraq, came to the brink of existence. Stanfield points out that the 1991 Gulf War created a good opportunity for the IKF to take advantage of the “geopolitical flux” and hold an uprising of the people against the Iraqi forces (Stansfield, 2003, p. 92). The withdrawal of Iraqi forces from the Kurdish cities and the central government’s claim of a Kurdish government as illegal, created a “*political vacuum*” within the Kurdish parties and thus the need for the first KRG parliamentary election (Yildiz, 2004, p. 46). The Kurdish parliament at the time claimed that they were aiming for a federal Kurdish region within a unified Iraq and that secession was not their direction. Barzani’s conditions on declaring independence would only be if the old policies against the Kurds will come into action again by the Iraqi government. The author, Hassan (2015), points out that Barzani and the KRG were content with a de facto Kurdistan by bringing Barzani’s quote at the time about a Kurdish independence question: “*What leads to partitioning Iraq is the use of chemical weapons, genocide campaigns, racial discrimination, and similar racist and chauvinistic (blind ethnic bigotry) measures*” (Hassan, 2015, p. 191). Although an independent Kurdish state has been the dream of every Kurd ever since fighting for freedom, Iraqi Kurdistan preferred political and economic autonomy from Baghdad at this stage to protect Kurdish identity and independence was put under the table. Hassan (2015), concludes this with a liberalism point of view on the conflict between Kurdistan and Baghdad with the argument that the Kurds desired to have a Kurdish leadership for its population with political and economic autonomy which Baghdad was not willing to deliver any meaningful political autonomy at this stage (Hassan, 2015, p. 185). In why the Kurds settled for only

autonomy but not independence, the author again tries to emphasize the liberal point of view where it assumes that *“political institutions and economic incentives influence actor’s behavior”* (Hassan, 2015, p. 24) in which in this case the Kurdish argument for autonomy has always been to exist within a united federal Iraq run under a proper political and economic institutions. The Kurdish demand for autonomy has been emphasized several times during their negotiations with the Iraqi government in the 1970s when the Kurdish parties stated that although independence is a Kurdish dream, it is not the objective of the Kurds and that they only demand autonomy from the oppressive policies against the Kurds by the Ba’ath party. All neighboring countries and the US were concerned with the emergence of a de facto Kurdish region in Iraq. The US in particular opposed an independent Kurdish state as US’s policy in Iraq and Kurdistan is towards a federal unified Iraq (Hassan, 2015).

The first Kurdish parliamentary election in 1992 resulted in an equal power-sharing agreement between both PUK and KDP. Stanfield points out that a stability created by these two powers would only last if both parties refrain from any conflict (Stansfield, 2003, p. 96). The conflict over power and leadership became most apparent after the elections, mainly because the results were not favored by the parties which lead to civil war from 1994 until 1998 (Radpey, 2014) and partly because of the economic sanctions imposed by both the Iraqi government on KRG and the UN sanctions on Iraq (Yildiz, 2004). Stanfield mentions that this period of political instability, influenced by the emergence of smaller parties and socio-economic conditions, put the de facto state at the edge of falling apart (Stansfield, 2003, p. 96). On an interesting note, Yildiz (2004) quotes Danielle Mitterrand on functioning of democracy in KRG and Iraq:

“...how a democracy can flourish in a country abandoned to the bombing of their Iranian and Turkish neighbors and to the destructive intrusions of the Iraqi army with all the exactions, the withdrawal of the currency, power cuts, deportation of the population living in the unprotected part of Kurdistan, the double embargo imposed by the Iraqi government, a complete lack of energy supplies, the burning of the crops, and the daily tragedy of anti-personnel mines.” (Yildiz, 2004, p. 48)

The Washington Agreement (1998) between the two parties supported by the US ended the civil war, dividing the region into two administrative territories of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah provinces. This ending of war certainly ended a period of what is called *“brotherhood war.”* Nevertheless, the region never became united. Both parties had different administrative and

political approaches regarding their relations with Baghdad and external powers. In the period between 1998 to 2003 until the Iraqi invasion, KDP maintained some relations with the government in Baghdad under Saddam's regime. Meanwhile PUK remained having no relationship, "*non-engagement policy*" with the regime under Saddam Hussein (Palani et al., 2020, p. 8; Radpey, 2014). This approach in policy toward the relationship with Baghdad roots back to the internal conflict between the two parties (Palani et al., 2020); and their geopolitical orientation (Doboš & Riegl, 2017). The authors call this territorial division "*clan cleavage*" and thus a "*direct threat to internal stability*" (Doboš & Riegl, 2017).

Skelton and Saleem (2020) refer to this internal division as a "*system of patronage*" that jeopardizes the structure of the KRG, which is only united on the surface. For example, ministries and administrative offices are divided between the two parties. The ministers, as well as director generals, are political appointees of the parties in which one is not able to obtain senior positions unless they are "blessed" by the political party heads. The authors tie this system of patronage and political power to "payroll politics", which is directly controlled by party heads, and thus to instill loyalty within the party followers, which is the majority of the population. This is most apparent during the elections when party supporters who are paid by either party are expected to vote for their respective party. Other aspects in which patronage took control are media organizations, youth clubs, and companies owned by party members. The authors further write: "*it is extremely difficult for any large business to operate without direct partnerships with party companies and proxies. A number of the party-affiliated businesses have become multi-billion-dollar operations, generating employment and revenue for party affiliates on a scale that rivals some of the major public sector institutions.*" (Skelton & Ali Saleem, 2020)

Chapter 2: Post-Iraq War era

2.1 KRG Internal relations:

The concept of autonomy in the international law refers to political autonomy of an entity that enjoys a level of internal self-governance meanwhile matters like security and foreign relations are under the authority of the central or national government. However, there are instances where the autonomous entity could enjoy a higher level of power to go into international economic negotiations – possibly without any consent from central government (Hannum & Lillich, 1980).

Denis Natali refers to KRG and its autonomy as a “*by-product of failed Iraqi state-building policies*” that was weak and unrecognized. However, it gradually built itself to become what she calls quasi-state that has internal autonomy and independence but lacks external sovereignty. Feeding off a weak central government in Baghdad post 2003, it was able to gain recognition as an autonomous region of Iraq and became economically and politically stable (Natali, 2015).

2.1.1 Autonomous KRG and changes in internal political relations

After the collapse of Saddam’s regime in 2003, the Iraqi government became fragile, and this worked as an advantage for the Kurdish parties to consolidate (Palani et al., 2021). The rise in oil prices and the 17% national revenues share to the Iraqi Kurdistan was one of the strong motives for consolidation between the two parties (Michiel, 2015, p. 163). To help strengthen their presence in Baghdad and with the powerful international political actors, leaders of both parties, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, entered into a power-sharing agreement. This eventually resulted in Talabani becoming the president of Iraq in 2005, an autonomous KRG was officially recognized in the new Iraqi Constitution, and Barzani became the president of KRG. This period of unity between the Kurdish parties and closer relations with the Iraqi government was strongly influenced by the US-led coalition to rebuilding a democratic Iraq. (Palani et al., 2020). Interestingly, Berg (2012, p. 1272), on *Parent States vs Secessionist Entities*, adds: “*power-sharing schemes help to maintain pseudo-statehood or to establish quasi-federations in post-conflict situations where the initial goal in terms of states territorial integrity remains unattainable.*”

The power-sharing agreement between the two parties and their united representation in the Iraqi parliament election as the “*Kurdistani list*” increased their influence on the formation of the Iraqi government and brought ‘*common interest*,’ as mentioned above, for the Kurdish parties on a national level until the formation of Goran “*Change*” movement out of PUK in 2009 deteriorated this joint relationship. The movement was formed in response to the corruption and lack of transparency in the budget distribution in KRG, as it was mainly controlled by the two parties rather than the KRG as one entity. Nawshirwan Mustafa, a former prominent PUK leader, led the Goran movement. Interestingly, Michiel (2015) concludes that the formation of Goran could be more of a ‘*fragmentation of the existing party-political system*’ rather than a *new political dynamic* as the leader himself was always the ‘*second man*’ in PUK leadership (Michiel, 2015, p. 164). The political approach of Goran became a concern to both ruling parties but significantly to KDP. In a series of events during 2015, KDP’s political tension with Goran resulted in banning the parliament speaker and members of parliament from Goran to enter Erbil and were removed from the cabinet (Abdullah, 2018). Although KRG created a stronger region compared to Iraq, corruption, unemployment, and basic services were still lagging behind, and this created more instability within the government with multiple severe demonstrations taking place during 2011, which also called for the resignation of Barzani as the president of Kurdistan (Gunter, 2011a). As multiple severe demonstrations were taking place in KRG during this period, Palani and authors further add: “(...) *popular dissatisfaction can also prove a threat to the stability of the entity*” (Palani et al., 2020). Despite these oppositions, both KDP and PUK agreed to extend the presidential term of Barzani in 2013 for another two years, although this was not mentioned anywhere in the constitution, nor it was a proper response to the political situation of the region at the time as the author claims (Michiel, 2015, pp. 164–165).

It is important to point out that at this time, the relationship between KDP and PUK was slowly going down the slope, especially after the fraction created by Goran (Palani et al., 2020). PUK’s weakness, due to internal disputes within its party leadership especially after the absence of Talabani from the leadership due to his health conditions and the fraction caused by Goran, worked as an advantage for KDP to take over the Kurdish leadership internally and externally and change KRG’s policy toward Baghdad. The lack of ‘*effective leadership*’ and losing the balance of power within PUK gave Barzani a dominating power within KRG to keep policies

of low engagement with Baghdad, increase international relations, and indicate his growing interest toward a de-jure state (International Crisis Group, 2015; Palani et al., 2020).

2.1.2 Security (Peshmerga) situation of KRG and fight against IS

KRG's representation in Baghdad during Al-Maliki's term was characterized by playing different roles and were often in conflict due to the factors discussed above but mainly regarding their security forces. The Peshmerga ministry in KRG has a unified representation; however, the forces are still divided between the parties, each one of them controlling their own forces outside of the other's administration (Gunter, 2011a). More specifically, the Peshmerga forces are divided into two divisions: divisions 70 and 80, each controlled by each party and have complete monopoly over their forces in their own zones, taking orders only from their respective political parties and not from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Additionally, they do not coordinate with each other which, as Helfont (2017) adds, it creates more challenges in determining gaps within the forces' capabilities as well as intensifying the political tension between the two parties. The author thinks that reforming Peshmerga is crucial for the KRG and its political reform (Helfont, 2017). For example, establishing nonpartisan recruitment of the security forces (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2016). However, security reform plans seem to have come short of implementation as the political uncertainty continues (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2016) and both parties still control party affiliates in the peshmerga forces; additionally, the lack of transparency in the reform procedures is another obstacle (Helfont, 2017). Tensions with Baghdad over disputed territories and the political uncertainty in the region are yet another excuse for the parties to resist reform (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2016).

In the fight against IS, a detailed report, (International Crisis Group, 2015), on arming the Kurdish forces by coalition claims how arming the Kurdish forces is threatening the stability of KRI and the unity of Iraq in general. For example, not only that it enabled the Kurdish forces to strengthen their presence in the oil fields in the disputed territories they claim, but it also created tension between Baghdad and KRG which is a threat to the unity of Iraq. Furthermore, the arrival of IS deepened the division between the two Kurdish parties and their forces; *"IS's arrival did little to bring the parties back together, much less revive the strategic agreement or encourage them to build institutions independent of their party-affiliated organs."* The

disagreements over the fight against IS and Barzani taking over the Kurdish leadership under his wing to call for Kurdish independence deepened even further to cause “criticism” and conflict within his own party (International Crisis Group, 2015).

One of the shortcomings of building a united government has been uniting the security forces of the KRG. Even after the power-sharing agreement, the security forces and intelligence services of both parties were falling short of becoming free from partisan control (International Crisis Group, 2015). Fumerton and van Wilgenbur add that (2016) although, on paper, there is a united Kurdish army under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs and Masoud Barzani is the chief commander of all the peshmerga forces, there is limited to no influence over each of the peshmerga groups belonging to each KDP and PUK. They further write that “*Partisan factionalism has proved to be a major stumbling block to unifying and integrating the peshmerga.... [and] has hindered the establishment of healthy and democratic civil-military relations in Iraqi Kurdistan.*” If these issues remain unresolved, it would be very unlikely for the KRI to become democratic and gain international recognition for independence. However, it seems unlikely for any of these issues to be consolidated anytime soon as the history of division goes back to the 1970s when fighting the former Iraqi regime, the KDP and PUK peshmergas were fighting against each other as well. Even during the fight against IS, the peshmerga forces were deployed along the Kurdish front lines and were divided into eight sectors where each party had an even split in their own zones. The operational procedures between the party peshmergas were conflicting and at odds many times, especially when it came to talks about disputed territories like the Kirkuk city (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2016). Or in the fight against IS, the decision-making mechanisms were more partisan-based rather than a military matter which weakens the stability of KRI (International Crisis Group, 2015). Lack of coordination and unity between the party forces has had serious impacts on the political situation of the KRI, such as the peshmerga withdrawal from Kirkuk in 2017, which caused losing control over 50% of the disputed territories to Iraq (Sosnowski, 2019).

This power personalization is highly influenced by the patronage system of KRG, where “*peshmerga units are used as vehicles for distributing economic services and resources in exchange for political support*” which also creates obstacles in security reform (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2016). Partisan control over the security forces had sparked dissatisfaction among some security officers thinking peshmerga forces should be recruited and deployed according to geography and population in those areas. However, the security forces are as

fragmented as the party leadership and the internal political conflicts between the parties, “*coordination ends when interests diverge,*” thus deteriorating the security situation of the KRI (International Crisis Group, 2015).

2.1.3 Economic situation of KRG

Iraqi economy and specifically KRG is described as a rentier economy that is heavily reliant on imports for almost all its consumables; and revenues come from exports of only one forms of natural resources: production and export of oil. Despite this reliance, the economy of the country and especially KRG was at its best after 2003, up to 2013 (Gunter, 2012; Sosnowski, 2019; Sumer & Joseph, 2018). For example, the economy returned revenues worth of \$3 billion in 2004 but, by 2013 the size of KRG’s economy was estimated to be \$26.5 billion. Additionally, the GDP in 2002 was estimated at \$800 and jumped to \$7000 in 2013 (Sumer & Joseph, 2018). On another note, Gunter sees the economic situation of KRG in two different images: one that is “*positive*” which describes that the region was receiving its annual revenue, up till 2013, both from the 17% national budget and from local exportation. By 2011, if KRG was an independent state, it would have owned one of the top oil reserves in the world which was estimated to have produced 45 billion barrels of oil in the same year. The other contrasting image of KRG’s economy is the “*negative image*”: which shows how the economy is reliant on imports from neighboring countries. Since the region lacks any agricultural and/or entrepreneurial industries apart from oil, public sector consumes 30% of the market, and has a high unemployment rate (Gunter, 2012). Additionally, there is a lack of transparency in the budget distribution, corruption, and nepotism in which most of the market is owned by party affiliates of KDP and PUK (Gunter, 2012; Sosnowski, 2019).

As detailed above, KRG’s economy between the period 2005-2013 grew drastically and the region was most prosperous in terms of economy and security. The main sources KRG’s economy came from the central government with a share of 17% of national budget dedicated to KRG as according to the constitution. It was estimated that 80% of KRG’s budget was coming from Baghdad while only 20% was from local oil exports and taxes (Sumer & Joseph, 2018). The strong economy during this period also boosted the security situation of the region making it politically much safer and peaceful compared to the rest of Iraq. This economic development of KRI and the relative peace and security of the region influenced foreign investment – particularly from neighboring countries like Turkey and Iran – to establish

investments in KRI (Sosnowski, 2019; Sumer & Joseph, 2018). Many of these companies were oil and gas companies in which they produced about 23.2% of revenues from this investment during 2006-2014. This growth from oil revenues made KRI's economy mainly reliant on the production and exportation of oil. The development of the oil pipeline in 2013 between KRI and Turkey directly from the oil fields in Kirkuk was one of the major sources of KRI's economy to become highly dependent on Turkey meanwhile Baghdad opposed this exportation arguing that the revenues should be handled through the central government. KRG's claim was that they had "constitutional right" for this exportation in which escalated conflict between the KRG and Baghdad (Sumer & Joseph, 2018). Article 115 from the Iraqi constitution states that regional laws have supremacy over federal laws; in which KRG used it as the excuse to exercise with local export of oil (Gunter, 2012). Contrary to this, Article 13 states that regional laws cannot supersede or contradict federal constitution (Abdullah, 2018). In response, the central government stopped sending the 17% revenue shares in 2014. Thus, the major source of economy of KRG was coming from the oil trade with Turkey which was not enough and the cut of 17% share from Baghdad was dramatically visible on KRG's economic situation. This, along with reliance on import of goods and services had put KRG in a weak economic position. Post 2014, along with drop in oil prices, the Islamic State (IS) occupation of northwest parts of Iraq, and the influx of IDPs and refugees to KRI, KRG found itself in a dire situation of accumulated local and external debt and budget deficit. Despite this flux of economy, the fight with IS along foreign military alliances helped with regaining control over IS occupied territories – Mosul and Kirkuk– which showed some signs of resolution over disputed territories between KRG and Baghdad. However, KRG's hope were higher by claiming the rights of referendum and this deteriorated KRG's relationship with Baghdad as well as the neighboring countries as they did not support the independence of Kurdistan. A Kurdish independent state means a vast collapse in its economy as its heavily dependent on the economy coming from parent state and neighbor investments. Additionally, their political relationship with Baghdad and their neighbors is dependent on how KRG addresses their concerns such as Baghdad losing one third of its oil reserves within disputed territories as well as the concerns of Turkey, Iran, and Syria over their Kurdish population. KRG's economic dependence and quest for independence is paradoxical as Sumer and Josef (2018) describe. This paradox will remain unresolved if KRG is economically dependent on the central government and the neighboring countries. The authors suggest that there are two possible scenarios where KRG could resolve this situation; either to have a "multistage" reform in their economic structure to be less dependent, or to gain political support from one or more regional and international

actors. A reform structure of KRG's economy would require "complex and prolonged reform" which is a long-term plan (Sumer & Joseph, 2018). Reform from a rentier economy requires diversification of sources of revenues and improving local production by introducing customs policy which enables competition from local products. Additionally, and more importantly, the development of public and private sector is crucial for the diversification of resources (Sosnowski, 2019).

2.2 KRG's relationship with Baghdad

In talking about the relationship between Iraqi Kurdistan (a de facto state) and the Iraqi government (the parent state), Palani and the authors (2020) relate it to the changing dynamics and rivalry between the two new centers of power (PUK and KDP) in Kurdistan. They write: "*[KRG's] internal governance and security forces remain deeply divided along party lines, challenging the status of the entity as a unitary actor... to formulate a uniform policy on participation in Iraqi politics and decision-making.*" Throughout history, there were high levels of mistrust between the Kurds and the Iraqi government, and they treated each other as "*the other.*" There was no unified engagement policy between KRG and the Iraqi government in the first period of the 1990s due to internal rivalries and conflict over power between both KDP and PUK. After the Washington Agreement in 1998 and the creation of the two separate administrations between KDP and PUK, both parties took two different directions of policy toward the central government. The authors mention that KDP kept some level of engagement with Baghdad until 2003 while PUK pursued a "*no-engagement policy*" towards Baghdad. Relations with Baghdad after 2003 were very much influenced by the new political status of KRG in the region – namely a recognized de facto autonomy.

After the US invasion of Iraq, the period between 2003 and 2006, both parties were united and created an alliance with the support of the US to present a unified Kurdish presence in Baghdad. The power-sharing agreement between KDP and PUK during this period resulted in establishing a strong, unified engagement policy toward Baghdad. This resulted in the recognition of the KRG as an autonomous government and region of Iraq within the Iraqi constitution as mentioned earlier. In this period, the Kurdish leadership kept their causes of independence under the table and were leaning toward rebuilding a federal democratic state of Iraq. This unified relationship and engagement policy did not last very long. While PUK's

position toward Kurdish independence had become an unrealistic dream, the KDP had always had a different approach and perceived Baghdad as a threat rather than a friend. KPD worked to strengthen KRG's position economically to be less dependent on the central government and rely on Turkey's economic development in the region. The 17% of the allocation of the national budget to KRG was still not considered as a gesture of "goodwill" from Baghdad but rather as more power over the Kurdish region. Throughout 2006-2014, the relationship and engagement policy between KRG and Baghdad deteriorated and after a series of events including the IS invasion in 2014, KRG kept a low-engagement profile with Baghdad, and it was then that Barzani instructed KRG's parliament to prepare for a referendum of independence (Palani et al., 2020).

Gunter (2011a) calls the relationship between KRG and Baghdad post-2006 as: "(...) *characterized by suspicion, animosity, and brinkmanship*" and further adds that this is one of the major factors threatening the integrity of Iraq as a state (Gunter, 2011a). Between 2005-2009, meanwhile, PUK's bigger role was to have and maintain a stronger relationship with Baghdad; Barzani strengthened its KDP influence and power in KRG by having most of the high administrative positions in the government dominated by KDP party affiliates. Barzani's main goal was to strengthen KRG as an autonomous state rather than building a strong relationship with Baghdad (Michiel, 2015, p. 166; Palani et al., 2020), which indeed brought about opposition from Baghdad, and especially from its Kurdish ally, PUK (Palani et al., 2020). The recognition of KRG as an autonomous entity brought much economic and security freedom to KRI, but the independence dream has never really "*dissipated*" (Sumer & Joseph, 2018). On the other hand, Talabani believed that an independent Kurdistan at the time was "the dream of poets." Meanwhile, Barzani was working to strengthen KRG's position within the international system, especially with Turkey. "(...) *KDP's strategic relationship with Turkey helped to reduce the need to cooperate with Baghdad in both economic and security sectors.*" The relationship between KRG and Baghdad weakened over years, particularly from 2010 onward. During Al-Maliki as the Iraqi PM, Baghdad and KRG entered into issues over revenue sharing, peshmerga forces and Iraqi military forces, disputed territories, and oil exportation. KRG, disregarding Baghdad, entered into an oil-pipeline exportation agreement with Turkey which resulted in deteriorating the de facto independence of KRG in the eyes of Baghdad and to be seen as a threat to the integrity of Iraq. This resulted in Maliki cutting KRG's national budget in response to KRG not delivering the "agreed-upon" oil revenues to Baghdad. During this period, with all the disagreements between Erbil and Baghdad and Barzani refusing to have

any negotiations with Baghdad, Barzani visited Baghdad only once (Palani et al., 2020). On the other hand, Degli Esposti (2021) argues that it was not only a dispute over oil revenues that deteriorated the relationship between KRG and Baghdad. During Al-Maliki's time, the Iraqi government was gradually leaning toward authoritarianism, threatening Kurdish autonomy (Degli Esposti, 2021). From this period onward, the “*radical political transformation*” of the Iraqi government and Maliki's actions affected KRG and made, at least KDP leadership, believe that a referendum for Kurdish independence is either now or never (Palani et al., 2020).

2.2.1 Issues over disputed territories

“Many new constitutional designs that have been adopted to accommodate centrifugal forces and which have been recognized by the international community are, in fact, dysfunctional because they are often externally imposed and have little legitimate value in the eyes of the conflicting parties”

Eiki Berg (2012)

on Parent states vs Secessionist Entities

Disputed territories lay along the southern Green Line borders of KRI, in which the Peshmerga forces took control over those territories which they claimed theirs after the withdrawal of the Iraqi forces of the former Ba'ath party in 1991. During the Ba'ath regime, in a process of Arabization, the demography of these territories changed when they moved in Arab population to have a higher concentration of Arab population over the Kurds and other minorities and thus obtain more power and control over the territories (Meier, 2020). The disputed territories, especially Kirkuk, are rich with oil reserves and ethnic minorities. The Kurds consider Kirkuk as ‘*Kurdish Jerusalem,*’ and Arabs call it ‘*Small Iraq,*’ meanwhile, the Turkmen believe it is the capital of the Turkmen (Hama & Abdulla, 2019). Kirkuk is also the second-largest oilfield in Iraq and is estimated to produce 500,000 barrels of crude oil by the year 2025. The Ba'ath regime's attempt at Arabization in this city was successful in changing its demography. The Arab to Kurd population changed dramatically between the years 1957 and 1997, from only 109,640 Arabs to 544,596 Arabs in Kirkuk, while the Kurdish population declined from 187,593 to 155,861 (Hama, 2019). With the new Iraqi Constitution in 2005, Article 140 talked about the fate of these disputed territories in rather a vague-to-interpret approach, much like other parts of the constitution (Jasim & Hama, 2017). The Article states three measures:

“normalization” of the Arabization process, which is to favor the return of those who were displaced during the Arabization process, a census, and giving the right to the people in the disputed territories to hold a referendum no later than December 31st, 2007 to determine the authority to rule them (Hama, 2019; Meier, 2020). Article 140 further mentions that KRG had “ultimate power” to share Iraqi revenues, recruit and mobilize security forces, and establish international relations without any interventions from Baghdad. However, the constitution was self-interpreted by all relevant political parties due to the “textual ambiguity” of the document, thus creating a conflict of interest and division between KRG and the central government. (Jasim & Hama, 2017). The disputed territories became a “*buffer zone*” between Peshmerga and Iraqi forces as both Baghdad and KRG deployed their forces in these territories to take control and have a “*system of dual sovereignty*” (Meier, 2020). The Dijla Operations Command was specifically formed to control disputed territories which created a “security dilemma” between KRG and Iraq (Hama, 2019).

During the fight against IS, Iraqi forces withdrew from the disputed territories, and Peshmerga took full control over Kirkuk, which was considered, by Barzani, that Article 140 was resolved since Baghdad had failed to address the issue as was mentioned in the constitution (Hama & Abdulla, 2019; Palani et al., 2019). Failure to implement Article 140 is believed to be that the agreement was ambiguous, there was mistrust between Baghdad and KRG, and “*lack of will*” from Baghdad to solve such an issue (Meier, 2020). Kurdish parliamentarians of the Iraqi parliament believed that Baghdad did not want to implement Article 140 because these disputed territories are essential to the Iraqi state. Baghdad sees losing these territories as an “existential threat” to Iraq’s economy and an “existential hazard” to Iraq’s unity. On the other hand, KRG believes that Kirkuk is an integral part of the Kurdish state to provide a strong economy which helps strengthen the peshmerga forces that is essential for Kurdish independence (Hama, 2019).

2.3 External relations and influence

Internal power struggles within KRG and its survival are as much influenced by external actors as the internal conflict of ideology. Margarita Balmaceda (2013) argues that de facto states are “*prone to outside influence*” because of their weaknesses and dependence on patron states’ economy. Natali (2013) adds that external patronage and a weak central government are key to KRG’s survival and to further its “*nationalist ambitions.*” Additionally, the geographical

situation of KRI as a landlocked region makes it dependent on regional support for its political system and economy to survive. However, these dependencies could also be a source of internal conflict (Natali, 2013).

The following section briefly discusses the relationship between KRG and the regional powers like Iran and Turkey as being the most influential “*patrons*” in shaping KRI’s political and economic dynamics. It will further cover the relationship between KRG and the US as an international actor that has had a significant influence over Iraqi Kurdistan throughout history. Seeking recognition from the US is imperative to the KRG and its existence as a recognized independent entity in the region.

The section does not cover relations with Syria and other actors in the region due to limited literature and to keep the research less broad in covering regional influence on Iraq in general. Indeed, the regional actors have much of complex relations and influence in Iraq and the KRI that it would require further detailed research.

2.3.1 Relations with Turkey

It is in no doubt that Turkey has had a substantial impact in shaping the KRG politics and Iraq in general. The post Saddam relations between Turkey and KRG were considerably affected by the economic progress of Iraqi Kurdistan. This relationship is further deepened by KRG’s connection and influence over/with non-state actors such as PKK in Turkish-Iraq border.

As discussed earlier, the peace and prosperity within KRG in the late 2000s attracted foreign investment which has shaped KRG’s economy to a large extent to be dependent on foreign export of oil and import of services. Turkey was particularly most attracted to invest in the KRG and entered into economic alliances with KRG (Gunter, 2018). One of the vital external patrons of KRG has been Turkey as it was the biggest importer of KRG’s oil, thus KRG become highly dependent on trade with Turkey for its economy. In 2011-2012, Turkey made an estimate of \$12 billion from oil trade with Iraq in which %70 of it was exported from KRI (Natali, 2013). Additionally, Turkey’s membership in NATO and being US’s favored partner in the region as well as Turkey’s Sunni influence were strong motives for the KRG to establish

strong relationship mainly after the withdrawal of US forces from the region (Yilmaz-Bozkus, 2017).

Natali (2013) further adds that the economic alliance between KRG and Turkey stabilized the border between them particularly regarding PKK's influence as their "*nationalistic tendencies*" are perceived as territorial threat to Turkey. Additionally, As PKK's influence on the PYD in Syria affects(ed) the stability on the Turkish border, Turkey depends(ed) on KRG for regulating these security situation on the border (Natali, 2013; Yilmaz-Bozkus, 2017). PKK and KRG's political parties have a long history of conflict of ideology much like the internal parties do within the KRG. In consequence, KRG – or particularly KDP – is better friends with Turkey than with its Kurdish counterparts (PKK) who has been in conflict with KDP for long over Kurdish leadership (Natali, 2013).

The progress in trade between Turkey and KRG has led to establishing a political relationship. As a result, Turkey opened its consulate in Erbil in 2009 which was considered as a sign of strong relationship between the two (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2016; Gunter, 2018). Furthermore, Turkey's plan was/is to enrich its energy security to become the "*energy hub*" for Europe by diversifying trade with its suppliers and become less reliant on Russia and Iran particularly since Turkey maintains a better relationship with the EU and the US. This incentive has made the energy trade advantageous for both KRG and Turkey (Yilmaz-Bozkus, 2017).

Nonetheless, Turkey's main reason to support KRG's economic independence was perceived to have been "*a mere tactic to win conservative Kurdish domestic support against the PKK*" but not backing Kurdish statehood. Additionally, Turkey did not support KRG's military when the IS attacked parts of Iraq. Interestingly, it is claimed that Turkey allowed the IS recruiters to pass through Turkey since they saw this as an opportunity to fight PKK's influence – the PYD – in northern Syria and Assad's regime (Gunter, 2018).

The Turkey-KRG relations, although economically and politically strong at the time, were becoming a source of encouraging conflict between KRG and Baghdad. This is because the relationship developed meanwhile Turkey's relations with Baghdad were deteriorating. Thus, KRG became an "implication" of Turkey's foreign policy which brought power struggles between KRG and Baghdad as Turkey used KRG to weaken Baghdad and its Shi'a influence during Al-Maliki's term (Natali, 2013). Additionally, the bilateral trade agreement between

KRG and Turkey was established despite Baghdad's opposition which increased tensions between Turkey and Baghdad and damaged the relationship. Baghdad believed that the agreement is illegal and their objection to trade partnership between KRG and Turkey was rooted from rising concerns on KRG's increasing influence on shaping Iraqi politics. Additionally, Baghdad has blamed Turkey for interfering with Iraqi politics and backing the Sunni political parties (Yilmaz-Bozkus, 2017).

On another note, the KRG-Turkey alliance has become another source of internal conflict and division between the Kurdish parties in the KRG. PUK's claim is that the alliance has empowered Barzani in Erbil and thus weakened PUK's influence in the area. Natali (2013) writes: "*These internal divisions have been manifested in distinct approaches to the KRG relationship with Baghdad, Syrian, and Kurdish hydrocarbons policy.*" KDP believes that the KRG's future is more tied to Turkey than Baghdad, while PUK and Goran think otherwise and are more inclined towards Baghdad.

2.3.2 Relations with Iran

Iran is considered as one of the key players of the balance of power in KRG and Iraq in general due to its political, economic, and security interest in the region. Historically, Iran was always closer to PUK, and even during the Kurdish civil war, they supported PUK against KDP meanwhile the latter was getting support from Turkey (Ali, 2017). There has been growing dislike and mistrust between Iran and KDP for several reasons. First, after Masoud Barzani's term expired in 2015 and protests erupted in Sulaymaniyah – dominated by PUK – Barzani blamed Iran for initiating the protests. Second, Iran considers Barzani as an obstacle to its "*orbit of dominating middle east.*" Lastly, Iran believes that Barzani is "*part of the Saudi-led axis of power*" against the Iranian Shi'a control of Iraq. Iran also believes that KDP are supplying KDPI with military means to fight against Iran especially after the KDPI attacked a number of Iranian border guards on the border with the KRG in 2015 (Ali, 2017) .

Economically, Iran is considered the second largest economic partner of the KRG (Ali, 2017; Natali, 2013) by having an open-border agreement for trading oil in return to controlling the other Iranian Kurdish parties by the KRG. KRG's export contributed to 65% of oil exports from Iraq to Iran only in 2013 (Natali, 2013). In the year 2000, the trade between Iran and KRG

amounted to only \$100 million, while in 2014 it increased to \$4 billion (Ali, 2017). Most of the Iranian imports to KRG are dominating the PUK areas that are closer to the Iranian border with a twin pipeline that transfers crude oil to Iran in exchange of refined oil (Ali, 2017). The support from Iran is particularly important to PUK as they share the border crossing (Natali, 2013) as well as having better relations throughout history than with KDP. Iran opened its first consulate in the KRI in 1988 which is mostly under the control of the PUK (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2016). The support from Iran was also influenced by relying on KRG to stop attacks from the PKK affiliated Kurdish party PJAK (Romano, 2015).

Iran and Turkey pose regional threats to each other, and as such, Iran often tries to shift KRG's interest from Turkey (Romano, 2015) to increase KRG's dependence on Iran (Ali, 2017). Thus, the Kurds in Iraq have "*partially turned into proxies of Turkey and Iran*" (Sinkaya, 2018). Additionally, although both Turkey and Iran have the same concerns over the Kurdish state ambitions of the KRG, they both also competed for enhancing their relationship with Kurdish parties to increase their influence in the region and make it more dependent on them. In doing so, both Turkey and Iran were keeping an eye on each other's activities in the region (Sinkaya, 2018). Additionally, in response to Turkey's wide presence in KRG and particularly in KDP areas like Erbil, Iran improved its political relations with PUK and increased logistical support. In the meantime, Turkey's concern over the Iranian-Kurdish Islamic party relationship increased as Turkey perceived it to be "*destabilizing*" Turkey's position in the KRG (Sinkaya, 2018).

Before the collapse of the Ba'ath government in Iraq, Iran was in better relations with the political parties in the KRI during Saddam's regime mainly due to sharing a common resentment against the Iraqi government. Additionally, it sought to "contain" the Iranian Kurdish party rebellions in this manner (Sinkaya, 2018). However, as the current government in Iraq is regarded as pro-Iran, thus Iran is more inclined towards improving relations within the government in Baghdad. This was more precisely influenced after growing concern of Barzani's independence plans whereas Iran claims that Kurdish state is a "*red line*" for them (Ali, 2017). Since the withdrawal of the US forces in Iraq, Iran has increased its influence in Iraq mainly through their influence over the Shi'a political parties in the Iraqi government. Additionally, Iran uses their relationship with the PUK and PYD in Syria to steer the balance of power in the Iraqi government as well as in the region (International Crisis Group, 2015). Ali (2017) quotes an Israeli scholar: "*The Kurdistan Region, and the de facto independent*

Kurds in Syria, sit at the heart of the Iranian/Shi'ite axis, and the last thing Tehran wants is for a Western ally threatening its growing hegemony in the region.”

2.3.3 Relations with the United States

Of the foreign influence, United States intervention in Iraq and the KRG has been the most dominant. The US Embassy in Iraq is the largest foreign diplomatic mission in the world. The presence of the US in the region is mainly for security reasons and is perceived as stabilizing element in the ongoing conflicts in Iraq in general. Issues over unresolved disputed territories in Iraq, as well as security, are the main concerns of the US to escalate tensions between the Iraqi government and the KRG (Laipson, 2010).

Historically, as Gunter (2011b) points out, US's position towards the KRG has been tactical and considered Turkey as a more “important” ally than the KRG. He writes: *“Although the United States had always paid lip service to the idea of Kurdish rights, whenever it was necessary to make a choice, the United States always backed its strategic NATO ally Turkey on the Kurdish issue”* (Gunter, 2011b, p. 100). However, this position more or less changed after the Gulf War and, more specifically, after the collapse of Saddam's government. It is argued that the KRG is a creation of the US after the Gulf War in 1991 (Gunter, 2011b). Gunter (2018) further adds on and refers to KRG as *“birthed”* from the US and American invasion of Iraq. Thus, the US has given more attention to the Kurds in Iraq and especially since the KRG's political parties were the major supporters to withdraw Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 meanwhile Turkey prevented the US forces to go through Turkish borders. Additionally, the US believes that KRG's cooperation in implementing the US-Iraq agreement on security and strategic framework is *“indispensable”* (Gunter, 2018; Sinkaya, 2018). However, the approach of Washington DC towards the KRG has been tactical and has been opposing Kurdish statehood largely due to destabilizing Iraq and threatening its unity (Gunter, 2015; Sinkaya, 2018). Additionally, the US did not support the independent trade contracts of KRG with energy companies – including US companies like ExxonMobil – in the fear of the KRG strengthening its economy and breaking away from Iraq (Sinkaya, 2018). Notwithstanding, the US's position of future relations with the KRG was assured to remain in good terms. For example, the US secretary of defense at the time, Robert Gates, said to the KRG: *“We recognized the concerns that you have about the future of your people and we will help you to*

ensure a prosperous and peaceful Iraq. We will not abandon you.” The US support for the KRG is mainly in regards to resolving issues of disputed territory between KRG and Iraq to be implemented according to the constitution and maintaining military as well as security support to Peshmerga along with the Iraqi Army (Gunter, 2011b, pp. 101–102). However, Bill Park (2014) argues that since the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq, the issues over disputed territories remain unresolved between KRG and Iraq. Additionally, the fast pace in change of the political dynamic in the region regarding Syrian Kurdish autonomy, Turkey’s increased interference and influence in Iraq and Syria, as well as Kurdish determination of Kurdish statehood, is leaving Washington behind. The United States’ concern over Turkey-KRG energy relations was furthered as Washington was concerned it would mean KRG’s independence from Baghdad and thus destabilizing Iraq and its territorial integrity.

Chapter 3: post-Referendum era

3.1 Why 2017 Kurdish referendum failed?

O’Driscoll and Baser (2020) argue that there are several reasons or rather purposes behind holding referendums. In different states and entities, referendums are held to end conflict and resolve divisions between different societies in the state, or to “*legitimize power-sharing.*” In other instances, referendums are a mean to “*determine the status of a given territory*” by which it would be to gain independence. Additionally, it can also be used as a tool to establish new states or achieve “*sub-autonomy.*” However, they further argue that referendums don’t always end with conflict resolution or peace. Interestingly, they write: “*As much as [referendum] has the potential to end conflicts, [it] can also trigger violence and create a vicious cycle of competition for power.*” (2020, p. 654)

In the case of the KRG’s 2017 Referendum of Independence, Doboš and Riegl (2017) point out that according to *normative aspects of secession*, KRG had all the justifications to have secession. They write: “*(...) it is obvious that KR meets conditions, which are generally accepted as a just cause for secession (history of oppression, democratic governance, the right to external self-determination as a last resort option, inability of the central government to protect security interests of the region, etc.)*” (Doboš & Riegl, 2017). Additionally, Jüde (2017, p. 849) mentioned how KRG *fulfills* the requirement for statehood according to how it was

defined in the Montevideo Convention of 1933: “(1) a permanent population, (2) a defined territory, (3) a government, and (4) the capacity to enter into relations with other states, together with the absence of international recognition, are the key shared properties identified by the growing literature on contested states.” Furthermore, Jüde points out that Baghdad has had the least power to govern and control KRG’s population and territory. KRG has all the power to govern its territory and is considered the safest most stable part of Iraq since the US invasion in 2003 (Jüde, 2017). Likewise, the inability of Baghdad to “maintain its territorial integrity and fulfil basic state functions” have determined the interest of KRG’s attempt for full independence. This is justified with parent state’s inability to function (Doboš & Riegl, 2017). Another fact is that KRG has been able to keep close relations with the international entities and have KRG representatives in foreign countries along with hosting more than 30 international offices in Erbil (Jüde, 2017). Doboš and Riegl further add that although the KRG’s institution is ‘far from perfect’, they have been able to establish a stronger government in comparison to its central government counterpart. Despite these justifications for succession, the authors add: “the outcome of succession is determined by external politics” and that gaining recognition is not based on fulfilling any criteria of de-jure state. However, this outcome is “largely determined by the superpower interventions.” Albeit all these factors, KRG failed to obtain international and national recognition for independence (Doboš & Riegl, 2017). On another perspective, O’Driscoll and Baser point out that “the conditions [for self-determination] were far from ripe... and the Kurds are now further from independence than any time since 2003.” In this article, O’Driscoll and Baser try to argue that the reasons for referendum at that time was more for the ruling party to re-gain its support and hold on to power; especially due to the expiration of the second presidency term of Barzani (O’Driscoll & Baser, 2020). Esposti (2022) adds that the plan for holding the referendum was lacking a political framework and was for the purpose of shifting away any attention on the economic and political crises of KRG at the time. O’Driscoll and Baser argue that, nowadays, referendums are just becoming popular in the world, and they quote Qvortrup²: “referendums are increasingly becoming vehicles for political change.” The writers’ argument is based on the fact that KRG’s referendum was a pure act of gaining more power over the internal political parties rather than gaining any independence or entering any negotiations with the parent state.

² Qvortrup, M. (2018). *Referendums Around the World*. Palgrave Macmillan London.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314703>

This is largely because the result of the referendum brought neither of the aforementioned results, but rather less autonomy and no future hopes for independence. In their analysis of Kurdish referendum, the writers mention several points to support their argument with regards to the timing and situation of the referendum:

“First, the referendum was not part of a negotiated settlement, and it was put forward unilaterally by the Kurdish side. Second, the referendum was not held ‘in good spirit’ with political battles between the KRG and Baghdad, Turkey, and Iran. Third, the KRG did not intend to declare independence straight away, but instead aimed to increase its bargaining power with the central government in Baghdad. Finally, the international community was not supportive of the referendum regardless of its non-binding result.... without consent from both regional and international actors, independence is an unattainable task.”
(O’Driscoll & Baser, 2020, p. 656)

On another perspective, from 2014 onward, following the withdrawal of Iraqi forces (ISF) against IS in the western and northern parts of Iraq and the Peshmerga’s victory in the disputed territories, the *“climate for independence appeared to be ripe.”* Furthermore, Peshmerga forces partnership with the Global Coalition Against Daesh (GCAD) created military cooperation with the US, UK, Germany and France (Palani et al., 2020).

Arguably, Hama and Jasim add that KRG had *“most of the characteristics of an independent state”* before 2017. Those characteristics include an independent parliament and a security force independent from Baghdad, although divided internally among party lines (Jasim & Hama, 2017). On another note, Hama (2019) argues that KRG had strong motives to call for a referendum of independence which was Baghdad’s failure to implement Article 140 to settle the disputed territories issue. However, the author further discusses that in such cases, KRG, by law, should have filed a complaint against Baghdad to the Federal Supreme Court to help settle the issue. The inadequacy of KRG to ignore such a step was based on the fear that they would lose the case of including the disputed territories into KRG’s authority.

Internally, most of the Kurdish political parties refused to have a referendum at the time. Goran and other Islamic parties like Komal, along with several PUK MPs, boycotted the parliamentary meeting in September 2017. Goran leaders like Yousif Mohammed – the parliament speaker at the time – claimed that the calling for the referendum was not according to *“correct procedures”* as it was decided through an executive order. Despite internal

opposition, the referendum took place in September 2017 (Park et al., 2017). Hama concludes that there were two motivations behind Barzani's call for a referendum at the time: public and private motives. In the first one, Barzani – as discussed before – used the excuse of Baghdad's failure in implementing Article 140 as well as to gain greater autonomy than Baghdad. The private motive behind Barzani's claim was to extend his presidency of KRG and maintain *KDP's hegemony* in the KRI, as well as to instill nationalism among the population and shift the debate away from the economic and political crises toward a Kurdish Independent state (Hama, 2020). Three narratives were concluded to analyze the referendum and the Kurdish political parties' responses. One narrative is "*failed partnership right time*," which revolves around the failed partnership between KRG and Baghdad, especially regarding issues over the disputed territories. The second narrative, "*not a proper referendum*," is based on the idea that the decision was made by a president whose term ended two years back, thus the decision was not based on a legal basis and that the referendum was to be used as "*a means to provide an illegitimate president with status*." The third narrative, "*no right to partitioning*," argues that the KRG had no constitutional right – according to the Iraqi Constitution – to conduct a referendum. Furthermore, the authors argue that the referendum escalated internal divisions; writing: "*the referendum thus unleashed an internal power struggle within and between parties*" (Park et al., 2017).

On the argument of the failed referendum, the Kurdish political parties played a blame game against each other. For example, KDP blamed PUK for betrayal as they did not hold their position to defend the disputed territories including Kirkuk when the Iraqi forces took control over the areas. They believed that if Peshmerga forces had defended the city, the Iraqi government and even foreign powers like the US would have "*respected*" and recognized the referendum for independence. However, Hama and Abdulla (2019) conclude that the withdrawal from Kirkuk was the right decision as PUK believed they did not want casualties and bloodshed. Furthermore, the authors believe that the Peshmerga forces were not militarily equipped enough to fight against the Iraqi Forces, who outnumbered the Peshmerga forces and were better armed with modern weapons (Hama & Abdulla, 2019). KRG "*miscalculated*" their potential to hold a referendum, and peshmergas will hold their positions tight in the disputed territories as the region was already going through economic and political crises. On the other hand, they miscalculated foreign support and regional actors for their claim. The previous strong economic deal between KRG and Turkey – similarly with Iran – did not persuade Turkey and Iran to support Barzani's claim of an independent state. Both Iran and Turkey perceive

Kurdish state as a threat to the stability of the Kurdish population in their countries (Klain & Hintz, 2017).

The withdrawal from Kirkuk and losing control over disputed territories was posing serious threats to KRG's economy and political situation. Losing control over the oilfields of Kirkuk constituted 50% of KRG's revenues. KRG has become weak in the eyes of Baghdad (Hama & Abdulla, 2019). As Baghdad pose a ban on international flights from KRI and the regional actors like Iran and Turkey closed their trade borders with KRI, the political and economic instability deteriorated further (Shamsi, 2020). Additionally, the internal relations between KDP and PUK was damaged and was considered to have reached the bottom since the civil war of the 1990s (Hama & Abdulla, 2019), and the relationship with Baghdad turned to its worst (Abdullah, 2018; Palani et al., 2019).

3.2 Status of KRG post the referendum

After the referendum, Kurdish leaders realized that independence goal is unattainable, and lack of support or, in fact, opposition to independence from patron and international actors – namely Turkey, Iran, and the US – challenged KRG's status. Accordingly, getting back to Baghdad as a united entity was perceived to be KRG's best choice to maintain its de facto autonomy. The subsections below will discuss KRG's attempt to unite its political parties through political and economic reform plans and improve relations with Baghdad by reconciliation and possible power-sharing over disputed territories.

3.2.1 KRG's internal relations

Fumerton and van Wilgenburg (2016) call KRG's political system a "*flawed democracy*." For example, partisan control and making political deals outside of the parliament is against "*the will of the people*."

Authors Mohammed and Alrebh (2020) refer to the KRG government as "*multileveled*" and one that "*...lacks a unified vision, ideology, and central leadership...*," and they further add that the 2017 referendum deepened this division between the Kurdish government parties (Mohammed & Alrebh, 2020). Between 2015 and 2017, the conflicts and rivalry between the Kurdish political parties were related to conflicting views on how the government should be

constituted: whether parliamentary – favored by PUK, Goran, Komal, and Kurdistan Islamic Union – or presidential – favored by KDP (Abdullah, 2018; Hama, 2020). This form of leadership and political structure of KRG has been the stressing factor in causing instability in the region. Precisely, the political structure of both parties could be categorized into two types: centralized and decentralized. The centralized one is the one that is tribal, and the other has no tribal leadership to control the policies in the party; however, the latter is still strongly influenced by the party founder(s). Such a political system of the parties can be considered “*undemocratic*,” which also makes space for corruption and nepotism (Abdullah, 2018). However, as new faces of party leaders came into play after the 2018 KRG elections, the political dynamic of KRG was coming to a new balance. In this, KPD did a better job in maintaining its “*internal coherence*” and control rivalries between Nechrivan Barzani – the current KRG president – and Masrour Barzani – the current KRG prime minister. On the other hand, PUK and Goran were facing internal fragments and rivalries over who would take party leadership (Shamsi, 2020).

As further discussed below, Kurdish political parties realized that they needed to get back to Baghdad united to keep a stronghold of their pre-referendum position (Shamsi, 2020). The formation of the new KRG cabinet created a “*common ground*” between the Kurdish parties (Wahab, 2019), in which the international partners support a united Kurdish front in negotiations with Baghdad more “*effectively*” (Knights, 2020). Shamsi quotes a comment of a KDP member of parliament: “*Kurds should take steps that can yield direct results for them, not think of how things ought to be, or how they are ideally. We need to reach agreements with those with real power in Baghdad*” (Shamsi, 2020). The new cabinet believes that a strong KRG-Baghdad relationship is crucial for the KRG’s reform plans in order to fight corruption and improve the economy, security, and governance in the KRI (Wahab, 2019). However, Shamsi argues that there is no indication if the reform plans would be able to tackle corruption, partisan control, and a rentier economy (Shamsi, 2020). Additionally, Wahab adds on that there are two challenges facing Masrour Barzani regarding his reform plans for the government; one challenge is the “*partisan nature of the cabinet*,” which is hard to avoid and could delay implementations of reform plans. The second challenge is related to the prime minister’s past experience in the security sector rather than forming and managing a new government of totally new ministers (Wahab, 2019). What could be noticed so far is the Peshmerga reform plan that has seen some progress with the help from the US, UK, and Germany. The main challenges of the security reform are related to partisan control over the security sector, which is essential for

empowering the economic and political aspects of the parties (Shamsi, 2020). Indeed, Kurdish political elites are the major obstacles to the reform plans being implemented properly as these political elites “*rely on the political affiliation of Peshmerga units to consolidate and maintain power*” (Borsari, 2019). Thus, a committed institutional reform is an essential key for reform to be implemented. Interestingly, Shamsi comments that “*new faces have not masked the old structures and might be set to maintain the status quo*” (Shamsi, 2020). Salam (2019) also adds that for any political and economic reform to take place in KRG, there should be a political system reform that overpowers the party rule of KDP and PUK.

3.2.2 KRG-Baghdad relations

The KRG-Baghdad relationship came to terms and was normalized after KRG decided to return to Baghdad with peace and work toward the Iraqi constitution rather than secession (Hama & Abdulla, 2019). After Baghdad’s response to the referendum and the political instability KRG found itself trapped in, it was clear to the Kurdish politicians that they didn’t have much choice other than to reengage with Baghdad and come into a consolidation with no agenda for Kurdish independence (Palani, 2021). During the Iraqi elections in 2018, the KRG’s main purpose was inclined toward establishing a relationship with Baghdad and respecting the Iraqi constitution, including discussions over Article 140 and disputed territories (Shamsi, 2020). At this stage, KRG’s pragmatic approach enabled it to have a compromise with Baghdad to allow the Iraqi government to audit KRG’s employees if Baghdad could protect KRG according to the constitution. Additionally, although Baghdad had control over the airports in KRI up until 2018, KRG was able to keep its separate visa regime, in which Palani (2021) calls it a “*symbol of de facto power.*” The author further discusses that KDP was the primary factor in trying to reestablish the relationship between Baghdad and KRG in order to become a “*major player*” when forming the Iraqi government. He writes: “*Erbil has thus not just turned towards Baghdad, but it has embraced it with open arms.*” Baghdad’s fragmented political situation worked as an advantage for the KRG to form alliances with Iraqi political parties. The period of 2018-2021 was considered to have been the *golden years* of the relationship between Baghdad and KRG as there was a “*good degree of understanding,*” and this strengthened KRG’s relationship with Baghdad. The improvement in the Baghdad-KRG relationship shows a new balance of power and works towards a new political framework which could also allow

discussions over disputed territories, managing KRG's budget, and control over the borders (Palani, 2021).

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen (2020) argues that politics in Iraq is personal; thus, *"improvements and deteriorations in the [Baghdad-KRG] relationship have largely been dictated by interpersonal dynamics."* For example, during Adel Abdul Mahdi's term in 2018, KRG was able to reestablish relations and negotiations with Baghdad due to the prime minister's personal good relations with the KRG leaders (Ala'Aldeen, 2020). Although the personal relations may not be enough to *"iron out"* deep-rooted disputes (Al-Rubaie, 2019), KRG and Baghdad are dependent on each other. Therefore, a good relationship between the two is imperative for their good governance and reform plans. Furthermore, Wahab (2017) writes that *"KRG's survival is crucial for the stability of Iraq and the wider region"* since a fragmented KRG enables the regional actors to interfere in Iraqi politics (Wahab, 2017), and this feeds instability (Wahab, 2019). Thus, Baghdad needs Kurdish leaders in its government to help stabilize and *"govern effectively"* (Wahab, 2017). Interestingly, Wahab further argues how Baghdad-KRG survival is intertwined as he writes:

"Perhaps most important, the KRG's existence is enshrined in the Iraqi constitution, so the recent calls for dividing it and exerting federal control over its three Kurdish governorates are contrary to the laws of the land. Just as it was wrong for KRG leaders to extend their independence referendum to disputed territories, so is it wrong for Baghdad to sidestep the constitution and all pretense of negotiating disputes just because the balance of power is currently in its favor." (Wahab, 2017)

The New Baghdad-KRG agreement included resuming sending 12.67% of the federal budget to the KRG in return of 250,000 barrels of oil per day from the KRG through the State Oil Marketing Company of Iraq (SOMO) (Ala'Aldeen, 2020; Al-Rubaie, 2019), and reactivating the Joint Coordination Committee in the disputed territories between Peshmerga forces and ISF to establish a proper coordination again (Borsari, 2019). The KRG came short of the agreement with regards to sending oil to Baghdad and instead was exporting 500,000 barrels per day to Turkey (Al-Rubaie, 2019) which furthered pressure from the Shi'a political parties on the Iraqi PM to cut the national budget to the KRG. Cutting the national budget to the KRG was implemented shortly before the PM Abdul-Mahdi resigned from his position and was resumed by Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. Again, in electing Mustafa Al-Khadhimi as the new Iraqi prime minister in 2020, the Kurdish political parties were very supportive of his nomination

due to personal and good working relations between Al-Kadhimi and leaders of the KRG. KRG believed that such support would work as an advantage to improving the KRG-Baghdad relationship and future negotiations as Al-Kadhimi “vowed” to resolve issues with KRG. Importantly, the author adds that one prime minister’s ability is not enough to resolve these issues due to the complex nature of Iraq-KRG political relations (Ala’Aldeen, 2020). Interestingly, Knights (2020) adds that “(...) *politics trump economics....., the solution is political and numbers and formulas get fudged to fit the required compromise.*” Additionally, although it is not impossible for Baghdad and the KRG to resolve their issues, “*the future can be unpredictable,*” and negotiations may fail, especially if different political parties pressure Baghdad and/or KRG for different political and economic plans that could be more advantageous to them (Ala’Aldeen, 2020). Furthermore, the negotiations and agreements between Baghdad and the KRG are “*short-lived*” and “*fragile*” and any sudden changes in political dynamic as well as interferences from international actors like tensions between the US and Iran over rocket attacks and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani– a major general and military commander of Iran – could easily harm or break the relationship (Shamsi, 2020). However, the mutual challenges between Baghdad and KRG, including KRG’s dependence on the national budget and the threat of IS return, mainly to the disputed territories, could be advantageous for both governments to come to a resolution (Ala’Aldeen, 2020).

4. Conclusion

For many decades, Kurds in Iraq lived in a limbo of internal political conflict and the fight for autonomy and Kurdish statehood. The very existence of this rivalry is rooted in struggles between leadership ideologies and tribal connections among the Kurds. The difference in leadership ideologies mirrored the political reality in Kurdistan. This, with predominant foreign intervention, formed a complex dynamic of political relations and competition that no political leadership could untie the knot.

To answer the research question of this thesis – *What are the internal political conflicts within KRG, and how did they cause a failed quest of independence?* – the structure followed three timelines; post-Gulf War, post-Iraq War, and post-Referendum to identify factors of conflict within KRG and between ruling parties – KDP and PUK. These factors include conflicting differences in political ideology between the Kurdish parties which is displayed in divisions of

security forces, disputes over revenues shared, and different approaches of engagement with Baghdad and regional powers. Additionally, the internal conflict is influenced by parties' relations with different regional powers with conflict of interest. To answer the second part of the research question, these internal conflicts were embodied in KRG's approach towards the referendum by not having a united agreement to hold the referendum. However, internal conflict might have had less impact in comparison to KRG not being ready, economically and militarily, to hold a referendum at a time of war and when all regional and international community opposed it.

The first timeline covers the post-Gulf War era when KRG became a de facto entity of Iraq but remained unrecognized. Thus, relations with the parent state – Baghdad – remained exclusive. The post-Gulf War political stalemate in Iraqi Kurdistan ended with a power struggle between KDP and PUK, which resulted in a civil war "*brotherhood war.*" Only in 1998, did the Washington Agreement put an end to the battle, and the governance of KRI was equally divided between the two administrative powers of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah provinces. Territorial division and clan cleavage created a system of patronage that up to now has dominated the region's security sector and stability.

Following the second timeline, the post-Iraq War era, KRG's political parties worked together to rebuild a democratic Iraq and strengthen KRG's position in the region. Soon after, much like in the past, the rivalries over revenue shares and budget distribution created more opposition within party leaderships and formed fragments in the political structure hence breaking the unity and deteriorating political stability. As discussed in detail, internal rivalries are rooted from different political orientations of the party leadership as well as their association with external actors.

In terms of the political system, KDP's centralized structure supports a presidential government. Meanwhile, PUK is decentralized and supports a parliamentary government. Failing to reach a consensus on this resulted in failing to select the president of KRI after Barzani's term expired in 2013. Later, Barzani's term was extended twice for two years each time even though there is no such provision in the Iraqi Constitution. Opposition parties perceived this as illegitimate; thus, the political conflict deteriorated further.

The internal conflicts were further deepened when it came to control and coordination of the security forces. As each party has its own security forces separate from the other party's control. Partisan control over the security forces originated from the system of patronage that's crucial for parties' political support.

Internal conflicts between the parties also affected KRG's relationship with Baghdad as they could not have a unified engagement policy with the central government. Historically, PUK was more inclined toward a relationship with Baghdad, while KDP often kept a low profile and worked to strengthen KRG by establishing relationships with foreign governments without consulting with Baghdad. The mistrust and suspicion between Kurdish and Iraqi governments further threatened the political stability and integrity of KRG and Iraq.

Issues over unresolved disputed territories was (is) causing political conflict in Kurdistan and Iraq. The Kurds always believed that the disputed territories belong to the Kurds and consider the oil-rich Kirkuk as "Kurdish Jerusalem," while the Arabs consider it "small Iraq." The ambiguity of the new Iraqi Constitution made all conflicting parties interpret Article 140 of disputed territories to their interest and fail to follow it. As Eiki Berg (2012) argued, new constitutions that are executed by external actors are flawed, and conflicting parties don't follow them.

External influence is yet another factor that affects(ed) KRG's political dynamic. Each party was (is) influenced by the neighboring country's interests. Historically, KDP was better friends with Turkey while PUK was more inclined towards Iran. Geographical distribution and separate party territorial control during the 1990s made it easier for each party to go into negotiations with the closest neighbor. Turkish border lies along the northern borders of Duhok provinces – an area under KDP's control – while Iran borders Sulaymaniyah province under PUK's administration. The conflicting interest of Iran and Turkey in the region put KRG in a "*proxy of Turkey and Iran.*" This external influence has yet become more complex due to United States' presence in the region as both Iran and the US have their own conflict unleashed in the region, especially since the US is better friends with Turkey and has a long been an ally to the Kurds.

The third era follows the factors leading to holding the referendum and the post-referendum status of KRG. The deteriorated relationship between Baghdad and Erbil, and Barzani's

expiration of the presidential term were enough factors for Barzani to call on the referendum despite opposition from multiple Kurdish parties, the central government, regional powers, and the international society. According to the Iraqi Constitution, KRG did not have the right to hold a referendum in the disputed territories. Therefore, the referendum further escalated the internal conflict and relations with Baghdad.

Indeed, KRG miscalculated its potential to hold an unsupported referendum. The fight against IS provided a political setting for the KRG to be motivated to hold a referendum of independence. Misjudging the situation resulted in Iraqi forces retaking full control over the disputed territories as the Peshmerga forces were not militarily strong enough to fight their position. Internally, the blame game between the Kurdish parties increased the political tension in the region, and KRG failed to form a new KRG cabinet until 2019. Eventually, the Kurdish parties realized going back to Baghdad as a united entity is the only option for KRG's survival.

Moreover, KRG and Baghdad's survival is intertwined and crucial for the stability of the region. As discussed, internal political disputes and foreign interventions caused much of the instability. Both governments realizing their dependence on each other might be a good factor in establishing a better relationship; however, as Ala'Aldeen (2020) said, "*politics in Iraq is personal*," and this relationship is prone to deteriorate and break with a minimum external intervention or change in political leadership.

Referring back to Caspersen's (2017) argument about the future of de facto states as either full independence or reintegration with the parent state, KRG might be something in between – in a "*transitory phenomenon*." This would open another topic of research for the future to understand the status and future of de facto states in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan.

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